



UNDERSTANDING THE SCALE OF TRAINING PART 3: CONNECTION AND HARMONY

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In this third article looking at the scale of training, we will be digging down into the true meaning of contact. As before, to truly understand “contact” we have to translate, interpret and understand the original German and look into the meaning behind the words. In the immortal words of Albus Dumbledore in Harry Potter; “Words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic”. Our understanding and use of words is essential to the application and authenticity of the training of horses.

The original German term “Anlehnung” has more implications than the simplified single English word “contact”. When you translate and look a little further three main terms and ideas pop out; support, dependence and following. When contact is only thought of as the connection between the reins and the hands it diminishes what should be a full-body interaction. In this vein, it seems ludicrous that contact would only be concerned with one of the smallest parts connected with the horse, the rider's hands. Through our evolution, over dependence on the hands to the exclusion of other assets seems to be a very digressive process. This hand obsession reduces the options available to us as riders, understanding the other parts for true horse connection is imperative.

CONNECTION WITH THE HORSE

While simplicity of terminology is useful, the true sense and meaning must not be disturbed or disfigured. When you look at some of the top partnerships in the world there is always an undeniable “**connection**” that transcends language into a much deeper level of shared emotion and purpose. The start of this connection in our sport at the most basic level is seat, legs and rein in that order. The purpose of the seat is the centre of the communication system something like the gearbox in a car. Without a gearbox you essentially have a car that is of no use whatsoever, you can rev the engine as much as you like but the car cannot go! Remember that your seat still has influence even if it is not in direct contact with the horse's back. Secondly in the contact system is legs which both help rev the engine and assist in offering the lateral and steadying aids. It is important to understand that there is a distinct difference in getting horses to “move forward” versus horses that “go away”, but that is an article all on its own! Finally in the contact stakes, and probably least important is the hand. Due to our evolved dependence on the hand, it is critical that we use great restraint using what has the potential to be our most abusive tool. The late head of the Spanish riding school used to say of young horses “Once a bud is crushed it will never

blossom”. This referred to the importance of light and soft hands, something not overly prioritised today where performance and ribbons sometimes come ahead of welfare.

UNDERSTANDING OUR ROLE IN THE PROCESS

It is long established that communication is a two-way street. But as humans, we are better talkers than listeners. As we work through the translation from the original German it gives a clear scaffolding for progressing our horse's training. First, especially with young horses, our most important role in the process is to **support** them in finding their connection with us. For there to be support there is a necessity for understanding, that is the gap for many of us. As we move forward in time there has been a juxtaposition in the way the world works. You used to decide what career you would have and work towards it. Now you identify your strengths and create your narrative and career around that. Even 20 years ago would being a professional YouTuber be a job? The world of good coaching and training is all about knowing when to support and when to allow errors to be made to facilitate learning. Remember as a rider you are the horse's coach in every stage, you have to facilitate their development not force them to comply.

WORKING IN HARMONY

One of the most undervalued concepts in the training scale is that of harmony. Unfortunately it is conspicuous as an implied term rather than expressed one included only by those with a broad view of contact. Once again in parsing down the original German translation we find **dependence** and **following**. The first stage in harmony with the horse is moving with the horse rather than against him which is a great speed bump for many of us. The difficulty is that horses are horizontal animals and we are vertical animals. This interaction is difficult and requires commitment and crossover understanding. Our key role in harmony is to fit our movement into the horses so that they can understand our cues. When we watch the true greats like the masters of our time like Carl Hester FBHS it is obvious to see their commitment to harmonious interaction with the horse. Harmony is not a passive action but an active process needing constant attention. To close I am again drawn to a quote I have used here many times; “The horse does not volunteer for the job, we put him to it”, Dr. Andrew McLean. We have to understand them and connect so they understand not the reverse.