

## From Phryso Translations

## BEHIND THE BIT: A DUTCH PHENOMENON?

Obedience, light-footedness and being relaxed are all aspects of a harmonious development of a dressage horse. But it does not look very relaxed when a horse is behind the bit (neck too short) or below the bit (too deep). It has happened to me more than once at competitions that acquaintances who are not particularly knowledgeable about horses draw my attention to the incorrect carriage of certain horses. Even a layman immediately notices such unnatural carriage.

In the Netherlands there are many quality horses and also riders in the lower classes often have good horses at their disposal. However, this does not only bring with it advantages. Better class horses move easily and usually are eager to work and energetic. Some riders find it difficult to control that energy. They take part in competitions every week, want to make a good impression in the test and then tend to put too much strain on their horses. Especially when working on two tracks, this is accompanied with a lot of pushing and pulling. At such a moment a rider tends to overuse the hand.

A horse may be below the bit (too deep) to a greater or lesser extent depending on the measure of rise. Being below the bit mainly is an impulse and balance problem and is easier to solve than being behind the bit (neck too short). A horse that is having problems keeping his balance will look for support from the rider's hand and feels safest in his natural balance: on the forehand. In competitions it frequently occurs that a horse begins with the correct carriage and then gradually gets too deep. He has no drive left and does not have the energy to place the hindlegs far enough under his body. Being below the bit becomes a more serious fault as the measure of collection requested increases. In a B or L horse we cannot speak of any rise worth mentioning. His carriage is more or less horizontal. At the moment collection is requested, the horse must put the hindlegs further forward and at the same time not to put too much weight on the forehand. A higher level of rise is required. A combination in the B or L category would perhaps obtain a 5 or 6 score for a particular element because the horse is below the bit (coming too deep), at the grand prix level such a horse would no doubt fail the test.

#### Behind the bit (too short in the neck)

Being behind the bit usually is a basic fault, at least when displayed all the time. I'm not talking about occasional instances. It is often seen in the lower categories among riders making forced efforts to get their horse on the bit as good as possible. Usually, it can be attributed to the rider having a rigid hand, with insufficient opening. At such a moment, there is too much strain on the horse, preventing it to react relaxed and naturally. A horse that is behind the bit often begins moving too stiff and is tighter in the back. Being behind the bit gives the horse a forced carriage. In a competition such a situation may grow from bad to worse. Especially a horse with a good commit-

ment to work is kept tighter and tighter during the test, with an increasingly overbent neck. Being behind the bit is a bigger fault than being below the bit. It is also more difficult to correct. I have the impression that this phenomenon is on the increase. After all, one tends to look at the riders in the top league. If they are also seen in the higher classes, it will be more difficult to find fault with them at the lower levels. Some horses may have a natural disposition to develop such incorrect carriage. But also for horses that have a short neck in terms of conformation it is possible to keep the neck at the right length. For a jury member it is impossible to take into account the natural disposition of a horse. It would be beyond reason awarding higher marks to a horse because it's doing his best. As a jury member your starting point in judging is the standard in combination with your view.

#### Mirror

In the comments in the jury reports the rider reads unambiguous remarks such as 'too deep' or 'neck too short'. I often repeat this remark to make clear why a figure has been awarded which may be lower than the rider had expected. If a horse ignores a rein-back, the rider is aware of it, but if he has made a faultless test, he thinks the title is his. Which is not the case, if in this faultless test the horse was behind the bit (too short in the neck) or below the bit (too deep). So, I have to explain it in the comments on the individual elements as well as in the final assessment.

If you want to do something about these two problems, it is important for you to know what's going on. If it is not pointed out to you by your instructor, there are various means to check for yourself what your horse's carriage should be. For example, making a video recording will give you a good idea of the situation. Looking into a mirror from time to time also works. Check whether the ears and the crest form the highest point of your horse, because that's the way it should be.

Another trick and at the same time an excellent exercise is stretching the neck. When you loosen the reins, the horse should follow the hand and properly stretch his neck forwards/downwards. Allowing the horse to stretch his neck, however, does not mean that he should do so at his own initiative. Firmly hold the reins at all times. Stretching the neck is a good means to check whether the horse is well on the bit.



Taken from 'De Hoefslag', issue 23  
January 1997

Text: Diana van Tienen  
interviews Mariette van  
Gansewinkel

