

# Riders' Perceptions of Equestrian Communication in Sports Dressage

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to enhance the understanding of how sport dressage riders describe rider-horse communication when riding, and to relate these descriptions to current research on human-horse communication. Interviews with 15 amateur dressage riders were analyzed using a qualitative approach. The study shows that the interviewed riders describe the communication with the horses partly in a behavioristic way, applying concepts based on learning theory, which deviate from the description of riders as lacking understanding of these concepts put forth by some researchers. The riders connect the timing of their aids to equestrian feel, which they describe as the most difficult yet the most awarding aspect of the interspecies communication that riding is. Simultaneously, they acknowledge that horses are fully capable of choosing to listen to and cooperate with their requests.

## Keywords

dressage – human-horse communication – practical knowledge – learning theory – equestrian feel

## Introduction

Horse riding is an activity that essentially depends on interspecies communication, where good communication is considered the foundation for good

outcomes, regardless of whether the outcome is evaluated in terms of rider satisfaction, horse welfare, or competition results. Put in other words, in riding with horses, successful communication is both the means and the goal of the interspecies activity.

The focus of this article is *equestrian communication*, a term we introduce here in order to emphasize that it is “communication-when-riding,” not human-horse communication in general, that is our main concern. The word equestrianism is defined as “the art or practice of riding on horseback” in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2016).

Human-horse relations are sometimes compared with relations between humans and other non-human animals who are primarily kept as companions, especially cats and dogs (Haraway, 2003; Birke, 2009), but “the status of the equine animals in human society is unlike that of most other domesticated species” (Lawrence, 1988, p. 223). In contrast to dogs and cats, horses are large-sized prey animals who are tuned to fleeing at any sign of danger (Dashper, 2016; Keaveney, 2008). Furthermore, horses are used in ways in which most cats and dogs are not. Although many of them are used for leisure activities, many are also doing the “work” of different kinds, as riding horses in stables where riding lessons are offered to paying clients and as equine athletes, that is, horses trained and ridden by professional riders for competitive purposes.

The study reported in this article is one of several connected to a project concerning horses and humans in these kinds of activities, with a focus on sport dressage didactics, or the teaching and learning of sports dressage riding<sup>1</sup> called “Developing Dressage Didactics.” In this project, we analyze the interaction between riders, trainers, and horses in order to improve the understanding of this communicative activity type<sup>2</sup> (Linell, 2009). The project further rests on the assumption that riding is based on “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi, 1958), that is, knowledge that deters the kind of explicit codification and transferring that explicit knowledge lends itself to, that it is acquired through practical experience and that it is context dependent, personal, and embodied. Applied to riding, this means that the knowledge of riding is situated in the rider’s body

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1 In this article, we use the expressions “sports dressage” and “competitive dressage,” which should not be confused with “classical dressage” as described by Smith (2014). Sports dressage or competitive dressage is one of three equestrian Olympic sports (the others are show jumping and eventing).

2 A communicative activity type (or a CAT) is related to a specific social situation, is normally referred to with a conventionalized name that is meaningful at least to its participants (in this case “a training,” as it is referred to by riders), and is framed by specific expectations and purposes (Linell, 2009, p. 201 ff).

and experience and therefore is difficult to express in words (Schön, 1983; Zetterqvist, 2000). According to Schön (1983), the competent rider exhibits a kind of “knowing-in-practice,” meaning that she often has the capacity to react spontaneously and use her intuitive knowing in the midst of the action. An experienced rider is for instance able to intuitively communicate with the horse without being able to explain exactly what she is doing. In this article, we explore accounts of equestrian communication provided by experienced sports dressage riders in order to make it possible for practitioners of sports dressage and other equestrian cultures to reflect on their practices and possibly work to improve them, for the benefit of horses and humans alike.

### Research on Equestrian Communication

According to previous research, several factors contribute to the quality of the equestrian communication, for instance, the rider's experience; education; balance; motor skills; and personality, but also the horse's level of education; motor skills; and temperament (Visser, van Reenen, Zetterqvist, Morgan & Blokhuis, 2003; Meyners, 2004; Andersson et al., 2010; Thompson & Birke, 2014). Much of the communication is dependent on the body-to-body interfaces of the horse's back, sides, and mouth; and the rider's seat (seat bones and crutch); legs; and hands, respectively, which are instantly activated when horse and rider engage in mutual movement (Game, 2001; Birke, 2009; Dashper, 2016). In equestrian communication, both horse and rider respond primarily to movements in different parts of the other's body (Keaveney, 2008; Wolfram, 2014).

Miscommunication between the rider and horse is common and influence the welfare of the horse negatively. It can even lead to accidents with both parties involved (Keeling, Blomberg & Ladewig, 1999; Savvides, 2012; Dashper, 2016). Mistakes like, for instance, failure to release rein tension during riding or conflicting signals from the rider (for instance, urging the horse forward with the legs while restraining through the bit in the horse's mouth) could have a negative impact on the horse's welfare and may lead to frustration for the horse (Hausberger, Gautier, Biquand, Lunel, & Jégo, 2009).

During the last fifteen years, the interest in equestrian communication has been on the rise in several research traditions, not the least within the humanities and social sciences (see for instance, Brandt, 2004; Brown, 2007; Birke, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010; Argent, 2012; Maurstad, Davis & Cole, 2013; Birke & Hockenull, 2015; Thompson & Nesci, 2016; Dashper, 2016). Many of these qualitatively oriented studies are oriented towards Human–Animal Studies (HAS), but equestrian communication has also been studied within a research

area referred to as Equitation Science (ES). To some extent, the dialogue between these two perspectives is hampered by their different theoretical and methodological origins. While HAS departs from an anthropological and sociological perspective where communication is understood as meaning making rather than signal transmission, ES, with its roots in ethology and veterinary science, departs from a behavioristic understanding of learning and thus favors the signal-transmission metaphor for communication.

In HAS of human–horse communication, with its interest in the qualities of interspecies dialogue, the focus of the analyses is normally the interaction between horses and humans, as reported in interview data. This interaction is described as being encoded in a “language,” a set of cues that both rider and horse are taught when first learning to act with the other species in the activity of riding (Brandt, 2004). Brandt (2004) calls this language a “third language” (p. 313), native neither to rider nor horse. The signs of this third language are primarily based on pressure and release as expressed through the saddle, the sides of the horse/the legs of the rider, and the reins connecting the horse’s mouth and the rider’s hands.

Other researchers within this tradition use metaphors from music theory, describing the communication in terms of harmony, synchronization, and accentuation. Evans and Franklin (2010) describe “floating harmony” between rider and horse as moments where rider and horse are in rhythmic synchronization with each other. Similarly, Maurstad, Davis, and Cowles (2013) describe horse and human as “co-beings” who move in synchronization. Sometimes riders describe that they can experience, and look for, “a centaur feeling” of the two bodies moving as one. Game (2001) describes this rider and horse coming to “inhabit riding through rhythm as a musician inhabits a piece of music” (p. 8). However, riding is not always as smooth as this idealized description suggests. Smith (2015) points to the “possibility of fussing, flailing, falling and failing in moments of resistance, evasion and contrariness” (p. 41), describing “the off beats, syncopations and arrhythmias of shortened steps, speed changes, false bends, and stiffened gaits” (p. 47). These difficulties are also acknowledged by other researchers. However, writers such as Wipper (2000), Maurstad, Davis, and Coles (2013), and Thompson and Nesci (2016), conclude that the relation between a human and a horse grows continuously as they interact over time: both rider and horse change and adapt to each other, as they learn to understand each other and thus improve their equestrian communication.

In ES, the theoretical perspective is distinctly different, departing from a behavioristic perspective on learning and a focus on equine welfare, which are both highly valued in ethology and veterinary science. In ES, the behavioristic

perspective on learning leads to a firm belief in that if humans learn to accurately time their contributions (initiatives as well as responses to the horses' responses, or lack of responses) in the interaction with the horse, the communication will run smoother and unnecessary force can thus be avoided. Studies are based on quantitative methods, and an explicit aim is to "remove anthropomorphism and emotiveness" (see the introductory statements on the official website of the International Society for Equitation Science, ISES, 2016). Here, horses are seen more as objects responding to humans' initiatives than subjects interacting with humans, and communication is viewed from a monological rather than dialogical perspective (Linell, 1998). It is important to recognize that this is not so much a moral stance as a result of the history of this tradition and the research disciplines from which Equitation Science has sprung. Since ES was born out of a wish to contribute to improved welfare for horses, it is natural that many studies oriented to the ES tradition can be described as normative rather than descriptive in their approach.

According to ES, a rider who wishes to communicate successfully with the horse, needs basic knowledge in learning theory to be able to handle different aspects of the interaction. According to ES, signals (aids) to the horse should be given in a consistent form and should be timed correctly. Horses learn to respond to these signals/aids from the rider through the principles of negative and positive reinforcement. *Positive* reinforcement is the addition of a pleasant stimulus to reward the desired response and thus makes this response more likely in the future, while *negative* reinforcement is the subtraction of something aversive (such as pressure) to reward the desired response. Training horses is mainly based upon the use of negative reinforcement (McGreevy & McLean, 2010; Egenwall, Eisersjö, & Roepstorff, 2012). Specific pressure from the rider signals to the horse that a specific response is required, while it is the removal of pressure from the rein or leg that reinforces the response. The timing of release of the pressure in relation to the response is critical, and poor timing can cause behavioral problems in the ridden horse. It is important to train the horse to respond to light signals to avoid damages and insensitivity (McGreevy & McLean, 2010, 2011). McGreevy and McLean (2010), who are the founding fathers of ES, note that lacking knowledge about learning theory jeopardizes the welfare of the ridden horse (McGreevy & McLean, 2010).

These two research traditions, HAS and ES, can be seen as mirroring two fundamentally different understandings of the role of the horse in equestrian communication. HAS-oriented researchers emphasize the sharedness of riding and the qualities of interspecies relation (like, for instance, Maurstad, Davis, & Cowles, 2013). Researchers oriented toward the ES paradigm instead tend to discuss riding more as the transfer of signals from the rider to the horse, and

the horse as a being who can be successfully or less successfully manipulated to behave in the intended way (ISES, 2016).

Just as most riding manuals describe a perfect rider and a perfect horse, and do not address the individual differences in temperament of horses or individual differences in personality of riders, the ES literature (see, for instance, McGreevy & McLean, 2010) does not address the riders' need to adapt their aids to the horses' temperament—even if it does declare that educating the horse can take different amounts of time depending on the horses' ability to learn. Thompson and Birke (2014) report that show-jumping riders stress the importance of “match” between the rider and horse. The temperament of horses varies, and some horses are more sensitive to the rider's aids than other (Visser et al., 2008).

### Sports Dressage

Sports dressage, or competitive dressage, can be described as an Olympic discipline where horse and rider perform certain sets of movements in specific gaits and tempos, while being evaluated by appointed referees. But it can also be described as a set of norms to which riders can relate in their everyday riding, without entertaining any thoughts of ever qualifying for the Olympics, indeed without wanting to compete in the discipline at any level at all. This is especially true in the cultural context of Sweden, where so-called public riding schools (*allmänna ridskolor* in Swedish) provide group-riding lessons for everyone (but especially children) who are interested in riding. These establishments receive considerable subsidies from the local authorities as well as the government, which has resulted in riding being the second largest sports among Swedish girls (after football) and the third largest overall (after football and ice hockey). The instructors are normally educated within the system of the Swedish Equestrian Federation.

Sports dressage is governed by the set of rules presented by the FEI (*Fédération Equestre Internationale*). The FEI rules state that dressage is about making the horse “calm, supple, loose and flexible but also confident, attentive and keen thus achieving perfect understanding with the athlete [the rider]” (FEI, 2014). For the first part of the twentieth century, Olympic equestrian competitions were limited to military riders, originating as it does from a mix of military tradition and discipline (Dashper, 2014; Thorell & Hedenborg, 2015).

Modern sports dressage is described in a large number of technical manuals explaining a system of cues or signals (referred to as “aids”) that the rider

uses to receive specific responses from the horse (Smith, 2014). Today, one of the most well-known manuals on riding is probably the one by the German National Equestrian Foundation (1997). According to the German manual, as well as several other military-riding manuals, all aids must be coordinated and consist of combined actions of weight, leg, and rein aids. This means that even if one specific response is requested, the rein aids should only be given in conjunction with leg and weight aids. However, different equestrian authorities do not concur on this very basic aspect of equestrian communication. For instance, McGreevy and McLean (2010) stress that in training, when both rein and leg signals are applied simultaneously, the horse gets confused, and it may lead to decreased responses to the individual signals, acute stress, or conflict behavior; therefore, it is important to give signals singularly.

A highly treasured yet elusive concept of dressage riding is "equestrian feel." Feel is considered one of the most important requirements for a rider to be successful but is difficult to define (Zetterqvist, 2000; Meyners, 2004; Lundesjö Kwart, 2013; Dashper, 2016). Dashper (2016) stresses that a rider having feel is able to both speak to and listen to the horse when riding. According to the German National Equestrian Federation (1997), the rider's feel is essential for a harmonious, confident, and effective relationship between the rider and horse. The rider's sense of feel has sometimes been compared to the musician's sense of hearing (Podhajsky, 1965). Also, ES advocates noted that the timing of the aids is dependent on a rider who can combine the correct technique (e.g., positioning of the leg and hand) with equestrian feel (McGreevy & McLean, 2010).

### Aim of the Study

Given the growing interest in equestrian communication on behalf of researchers in various traditions, it would be interesting to investigate the practically based knowledge and understanding of such communication, as expressed by experienced riders. The aim of this study is thus to examine how the riders participating in the Developing Dressage Didactics project describe their communication with the horses they ride. This aim is operationalized in three research questions:

- (1) How do riders describe equestrian communication?
- (2) How do riders describe the horse's response (or lack of response) to their aids?
- (3) How do riders act when the horse does not respond as they had intended?

## Materials and Methods

As mentioned in the introduction, the study reported here was conducted as a part of a larger project. In this larger project, fifteen riders, fifteen horses, and five trainers participated. Their trainings were video-recorded at the riding establishments where they normally train, and during the field work at these sites, field notes were written. During the field work, we also interviewed the participating riders and instructors. The study reported here is based on verbatim transcriptions of the interviews with the riders.

The fifteen riders (all women aged 17-61 years) participating in the study describe themselves as amateur riders (as opposed to professional riders) mainly interested in sports dressage, with at least five years of riding experience. Most of them had been riding since they were children, although some had had several breaks throughout their riding trajectories. Twelve of the riders were riding their own horses. The remaining were riding horses they did not own but were riding on a very regular basis. All horses were Swedish Warm bloods. The majority were participating in competitions at the elementary to medium level, as described by the Swedish Equestrian Federation, although this did not necessarily mean that they identified themselves as competitive riders. Instead, the majority described themselves as leisure riders, participating in a couple of competitions each season as a way of setting goals for the everyday training.

The aim of the video-recorded trainings was mainly for the rider to get the horse supple, balanced, and moving with self-carriage<sup>3</sup> using subtle aids, although some trainings were more specifically targeting certain movements or aspects of an upcoming competition test.

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the riders were conducted directly after each training session we recorded. A brief section of the recording was shown to each participant in the beginning of the interview. This technique, called "stimulated recall" is used to enhance the cognitive process and the respondents' recall of the event (Lyle, 2003). Each interview lasted between 20 and 45 min. The interviews were carried out in Swedish (the riders' native language) by the same person, and they were all audio-recorded. When all interviews had been conducted, they were transcribed verbatim by the interviewer.

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3 Self-carriage is the horse's ability to properly "carry herself" on her own. When moving in self-carriage, the horse is responsible for her own body position and does not rely on the rider keeping the horse in a proper position with his/her hands.

The resulting data were analyzed in the original language. The quotations used in this article were translated for the purpose of the publication.

Based on the fundamentals of traditions such as ethnography and anthropology, a qualitative analysis of the transcribed interviews was undertaken. The riders' accounts of how they understand the communication with the horse and how they interact with the horse were categorized according to themes emergent in the data. The categories were thus not determined beforehand, but were developed over time. The various descriptions were then compared to identify similarities as well as differences between the accounts.

All relevant ethical questions were considered, following the guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (Codex, 2016). All human participants gave their written consent to the participation in the project.

## Results

It is worth noting that the stimulated recall interview method is meant to help the respondents to focus their descriptions, so that even if they are interviewed regarding a recurring activity that they have participated in over a long period of time, the interview is focused on the instance of that activity in which they just participated. The interviewed riders thus describe the training they have just participated in, while providing many details about the horse they have just been riding. They describe this horse's "personality" and temperament, as well as "the mood" (the physical and mental status) the horse was in this particular day.

According to the interviewed riders, their horses are very different from each other, ranging from those who are "ambitious" to those who are not all that focused on the work at hand, at least not this particular day. Not only they as riders, but also the horses, "have days and days," as one of the respondents puts it. One horse can be unusually stiff during this particular training, while another can be very supple. In the interviews, the riders described their practices of dealing with the horses' individual traits as they, at the time of the interview, just occurred in situ, rather than talking about general solutions to general problems. They also described how they check the status of the horse they ride:

Before the actual training starts, I warm him up and I do some stop and go, halts and walk, just to see how he is, then some trotting, to see if he is between leg and hand, and if he wants to go low already from the

beginning then I think 'okay, so today it's gonna be easier' because I know that he has a good day.

Riders describe the communication with their horse in terms of the goal of the communication, stating that "the goal [for rider and horse] is to be present in the same reality." The riders also state that equestrian communication is a collaborative project, where the horse has to want to participate in the activity: "if the horse doesn't want to, then it's impossible ... you can't just say 'do as I tell you' [laughs]."

The following presentation of the results is organized around five central themes, which emerged in the data during the analysis: *The responsibilities of the rider and self-blame*, *Equestrian communication is signal based*, *When the horse does not listen*, *Equestrian feel*, and *Giving positive feedback*.

### *The Responsibilities of the Rider and Self-Blame*

Interestingly, *self-blame* is one of the stronger themes that emerged when the riders reflected on equestrian communication and the division of responsibilities. Many riders repeatedly mentioned the word blame, and all but one stated how important it is to not blame the horse and instead take the blame themselves if the communication does not work out as the rider intended:

If the horse does not respond to my aids, I try to go to myself, and be clearer because it does not help to blame her.

If I do something wrong, then he does not understand me, and even if I do right and he does not understand me, then I did something wrong anyhow.

I have a horse who is very sensitive, really sensitive to what I do.... And often when we have misunderstandings, I think 'this is my fault.'

The interviewed riders all seemed to take for granted that the human participants are responsible for taking the initiative during the trainings, thus deciding what should be done and how. To some extent, this is also the defining feature of a training; it is initiated by the humans for specific purposes. The riders describe these purposes using terms from the German educational program (for instance, that the horse should be relaxed when working) and/or in terms from specific activities such as training gait changes or specific movements such as pirouettes. The horses are not described as initiators of the activities, as opposed to how they are described during hacking (riding outdoors in the fields or the forest), when the horse may take the initiative to "increase

the speed and be allowed to do it," as one rider put it. But in the riding hall, the humans take the initiative.

All interviewed riders, except one, clearly stated that the rider is the one who is responsible for the outcome of the training in terms of the rider's satisfaction, horse welfare, and the results (to what extent the goals for the specific training as a whole were reached, as well as whether the execution of the exercises carried out as part of the training were successful). The trainer is responsible for the overall organization of the training, but the rider is responsible for the outcome.

### *Equestrian Communication is Signal Based*

The primary method to make the horse understand what the riders want them to do is, according to the riders, to "give them clear aids," a concept that correlates well with how advocates of Equitation science describe the optimal communication from horse to rider:

You cannot sit and use the legs all the time. I try to give a signal with my legs once and then wait a while and then give another aid with my legs. If I use my legs all the time, she will become 'dead' for my leg aids and then we don't get any good communication.

I need to give very clear signals and I must know what I want and not do too much.

The interviewed riders are thus clearly oriented toward an understanding of the equestrian communication as being signal based. Several interviewees talked about the importance of avoiding using more than one aid at a time and some also mentioned that it is important to be consistent in the composition and timeframe when giving their aids (cues):

You need to be consistent in the giving of the aids. I think that all horses get as responsive as you want them to be, but you need to be responsive in return.

The interviewees indicated that the timing of the aids is difficult but at the same time essential for a successful interaction with the horse. About half of the riders pointed out the importance of the rider being quick enough when giving the aids. Some also perceived that they were often too late when giving the signals. One rider reported:

Timing is very difficult! This timing and that you need to be so quick. Also, to feel immediately what reaction you get and maybe follow up with another aid.

The concept of timing, both in terms of accurately timing their own response to things the horses do and the sequencing of several aids that riders have to master in order to achieve more complex exercises, was mentioned by many of the interviewees as something crucial (and difficult) in riding.

### *When the Horse Does Not Listen*

The riders also described the outcome of an initiative from their side as related to whether the horse listens to them. Horses can display evasive behavior, and the riders sometimes described this as a result of the horse *not listening*, revealing an underlying assumption that horses can choose to listen (or not listen):

When we do the kind of work like we did today, he pushes against my right leg aid. He should not be afraid but he must respect my right leg aid.

The horse is thus expected not only to pay attention to the rider, but also to accept the rider's leadership. Another rider reasoned about the fact that her horse sometimes kicked with one of his hind legs when she used her leg aids instead of "listening," claiming that:

He is very clear, if he does not listen to my leg aids he generally kicks.

So far, in the more technical side of riding, the riders are responsible for organizing instructions to the horse in a coherent manner and the horse is responsible for carrying out the intended actions connected to these instructions, or indicating that she did not listen or does not understand, thus giving the rider a new chance to give the aid again or to otherwise adapt to the horse not doing as expected.

### *Equestrian Feel*

But what about equestrian feel? How do the interviewed riders describe this somewhat esoteric aspect of equestrian communication? Let us start with how the riders perceive the signals from the horse when they do "listen" and when they respond in the way the rider intended. It turns out that impressions both from the body of the horse and the rider's own body can reveal the horse's response:

For me, it is very clear when my horse responds, because then I can feel it in his whole body.

When the horse softens in his neck, then he has listened to my aids, and then I will get a soft hand.

One of the riders used a metaphor to describe how she felt when she experienced that the communication with the horse worked well. This rider referred to the feeling of being “one with the horse,” being in the same rhythm as the horse and her horse reading her thoughts:

It is like sitting in the middle of a cloud, you feel like you are in the same rhythm and having the same thoughts as the horse. When you give a signal, the horse responds directly when you give the signal or even when you just plan to give the signal.

The quotation above is in line with the description of the “centaur feeling” when the rider and horse “merge as one,” as described by Podhajsky (1965) and Game (2001). This is also what Despret (2004) describes when talking about how humans and horses affect each other’s bodies and horses can “read the mind of the rider through the pressure of the bit” (Despret, 2004, p. 114). The interesting thing here is that it seems as if the riders’ percept of the boundary between their own bodies and the body of the horse is somewhat fuzzy. The changes in the horse’s body can be perceived both *through* one’s own body and *in* one’s own body, something that certainly evokes the notions of transcendence and co-being, as well as the use of the centaur metaphor, prevalent in much of the literature in the HAS tradition (Game, 2001; Argent, 2012; Maurstad, Davis & Cowles, 2013). This ambiguity is a recurring theme in the interviews, and would be very interesting to analyze further.

### *Giving Positive Feedback*

When the horses responded correctly to the aids, riders talked about “becoming one with the horse,” and also described the importance of letting the horse know that they are satisfied. All riders described how they praise the horse either using their voice or by patting, and they also discuss how they give positive feedback to the horse by removing pressure (from a leg or the reins):

When I am satisfied, I lighten the pressure or pat him, I try to be really consequent with lightening the pressure when he is doing the right thing.

Some of the riders, in addition to these main ways of giving positive feedback, described how they could initiate an activity they think the horse perceives as positive:

I can give with my hand a little, pat him or I say 'good boy.' If he's doing something really good, then I can change to forward seat for a while and like 'come on, let's have some fun' as a kind of reward.

The riders participating in this study demonstrated a good knowledge of the basic principles of learning theory. Not only the concept of negative reinforcement, but also the concept of positive reinforcement, to lighten the pressure or to praise, is well understood by the interviewees. The initiation of a "fun" activity, or "doing a bit of mischief," as another rider put it, clearly indicates that some of the riders perceive their horses as companions in the activity of riding, rather than as objects they try to manipulate in various ways.

### Discussion

As the transcriptions of the interviews were in the first round of analysis considered as one set of data, a rider may in one instance (one part of the interview) describe the importance of timing the aids in order to achieve the goal of a specific exercise, while later (in another part of the interview) describe how she thinks that her horse enjoys their interaction as much as she does, and how she can "feel that he wants to do it right." The first description fits the understanding of horses as being objects that we manipulate quite well, while the other indicates that the rider thinks of her horse as a subject with intentions and feelings not second to her own. When the data were re-examined as individual interviews, it became clear that many riders seemed to report somewhat inconsistent views on their interactions with the horse, like in the example above.

When given the chance, like in the interviews, riders reflect on their communication with the horses they ride, and that they are well aware of both their own and the horses' attempts at communicating with the other across the division of the two species. Being horse people ourselves, we were not all that surprised about this, in spite of equestrian communication being based to a great extent on tacit knowledge (Schön, 1983; Zetterqvist, 2000). The riders' willingness and ability to discuss these questions correlate with our own experiences as riders: riders do reflect on and discuss their communication with

their horses both with their peers and their trainers, as they intuitively understand that interspecies communication is at the very core of riding.

The most important result of this study is thus that the riders' own understanding of equestrian communication cannot be reduced to them thinking of their horses either as automats responding (or not responding) in the desired way, depending on how well the riders succeed in the timely transmission of the correct signal (giving the correct aid at the right time), or as the kind of self-aware, competent agents as portrayed in the tradition of HAS and other qualitative traditions. Almost all riders gave examples of both kinds of understanding. It thus seems that the interviewed riders perceive their horses as competent individuals, with a certain degree of agency, yet largely dependent on the riders taking the prime responsibility for the communication process and the outcome of this process.

However, most riders seem to actively position themselves as the ones who are responsible for the communication (and thus also the miscommunication), clearly demonstrating that they perceive themselves to be the dominant party in the activity. The riders seem to view themselves as the party requesting certain actions from the other party, and they argue that as such they must accept that any mistakes on behalf of the horse have their roots in mistakes of the rider.

Somewhat to our surprise, the riders all showed that they were well aware of the basic principles of learning theory, mentioning for instance that it is important to release the pressure once the horse responds to a given aid. This is in contrast with McGreevy and McLean's (2010) statement that riders generally lack basic knowledge of learning theory. Even though the riders in this study did not use the exact terminology, they were familiar with and could explain the essence of the learning principles and describe how to use them in the practical communication with their horses. Riders also seemed aware that if the rider is not consistent when giving his/her aids, there is a risk that the horse will get confused and maybe start to show unwanted behaviors or stress reactions.

The early introduction into riding in Sweden, via the public riding schools, is often used as an explanation for the (relative to the number of riders in Sweden) international success Sweden has had in all Olympic equestrian disciplines. We also believe that the system with public riding schools may be one of the driving forces behind Swedish riders' familiarity with some of the basic concepts of learning theory. In Sweden, a behavioristic understanding of learning has been the dominant paradigm of horse training for a long time, and is, together with the basic aids as they are explained in the German Equestrian

Federation's manual for riding, the fundament upon which riding technique has been taught in Swedish riding schools. However, as more modern views on learning, teaching, and understanding interspecies communication are making their way into the curriculum of riding instructors and trainers, this may change. But until very recently, teaching riding in Europe in general and in Sweden in particular, was still influenced by the military tradition and focused on riding technique rather than on equestrian feel (Zetterqvist, 2000; Lundesjö Kwart, 2013; Thorell & Hedenborg, 2015).

Most riding manuals describe a perfect rider and a perfect horse, and do not address the individual differences in the temperaments of horses or individual differences in the personalities of the riders. The interviewed riders described the mental and physical states of both horse and rider as dynamic, and both horses and riders as having "days and days." They also described how they, during the beginning or before the training session, check the status of their horse in various ways. This perspective is lacking in recent literature; for example, McGreevy and McLean (2010) did not address the riders' need to adapt their aids to the horses' temperament, even though they declared that educating the horse can take different amounts of time depending on the horses' ability to learn. Thompson and Birke (2014) reported that show-jumping riders stress the importance of "match" between rider and horse. This perspective appears to also be very clear to the riders we interviewed.

Given that this study is based on a quite limited number of riders from a specific discipline and a specific part of the world, it would be very interesting to investigate how riders in other disciplines, and/or belonging to other nationalities or cultural spheres, describe equestrian communication.

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