

THE JAW FLEXION

The Master Key of Riding in Lightness

By Manuel Trigo, Classical Dressage Trainer
 Photos by Living Images by Carol Walker
 & Cheri Prill

I like to say that the Jaw Flexion is almost "Magic" so many are the benefit on the horse, on his training, on his balance and on his behavior. So, why don't trainers use this technique?

With the exception of competitive dressage, who since the decade of the 50's removed Jaw Flexion from the rules manual, the rest of the disciplines, classical dressage, gaited horses, Alta Escuela, reining etc. will all benefit from this precious tool. Please, allow me to introduce you gradually to the concept and technique of the Jaw Flexion.

Jaw Flexion, or the yielding of the jaw as sometimes translated in English from the French, is a maneuver performed by the horse on a delicate request of his rider. This mobilization of the jaw, a corollary of lightness, is not only the guarantor and the witness of an esthetic and correct equitation; it seems to give the horse real comfort and improve functionality, even constituting therapeutic benefits. This is the master



key of riding in lightness and maybe the biggest opposing concept of competitive dressage. The Jaw Flexion is also the way to complete the Self-Carriage, because when a horse is really in Self-Carriage, there cannot remain any tension in the reins, the horse is in contact only with the "weight of the reins."

The Jaw Flexion was formulated and described by the French Master Francois Baucher (1796-1873), in his book "Méthode d'équitation basée sur de nouveaux principes" which had 12 editions. However, since La Gueriniere (1688-1751) a century earlier, many other masters were describing a maneuver of the horse's mouth which all of them were striving for, proof of the lightness of their horses. But none of them will really give a methodology or a process to get it, until Francois Baucher (second manner).

When the horse gets tense in his mind or body, regardless the reason, he locks the TMJ (Temporo-Mandibular Joint) located on the head, around 2 inches behind the eye, locking also his lower jaw.



This joint is the union between the lower jaw, poll and sternum. When the TMJ is locked, the three connected areas are also tense and will offer many resistances to the rider. The horse also cannot move freely any longer with good coordination and balance. The Jaw Flexion is the means to erase any resistance of force from the horse. A resistance of force is when the horse instinctively or voluntarily resists or fights against the bit. When riding, every time we will feel a resistance of force, we

will at the same time request the horse for a Jaw Flexion. After the Jaw Flexion, the horse will be light, balanced and relaxed until the next time a new resistance appears. This will be done first during the introductory phase at the halt and then as soon as possible in the movement. The Jaw Flexion will be requested only by the rider's hands, respecting the separation of the aids, one of the principles of riding in lightness.

The Jaw Flexion consists of a slight opening of the mouth, followed by an upward movement of the tongue and the swallowing of saliva, followed by a downward movement of the tongue and the soft shutting of the mouth. Just after the horse swallows his saliva, he releases the bit falling in his mouth and producing, when bitted in double bridle or with a curb having some movement, the CLANG OF THE BIT(S). Precious and delicate noise so well described by the old masters. Do not confuse this with the chomping of the bit which could be the expression of stress, nervousness or irritation. After a Jaw Flexion, the horse savors and enjoys his bit in a slightly open mouth. This is a light murmur.

"...the rider cannot be mistaken; he or she has the impression that the horse's mouth literally melts in his or her fingers."
 -JC Racinet

The Jaw Flexion has only one problem in my opinion: it is not used enough. Nowadays, very few people in the world can teach correctly the Jaw Flexion, very few people have been initiated to this technique, and even less are the ones that really use it the way it should be used. In many countries with a strong



ABOVE: By using the jaw flexion method, Manuel gets an excited Paso Fino show mare to walk relaxed. (photo by Cheri Prill)



ABOVE: Manuel works with students to get their Paso Fino horses walking relaxed and without reins. (photo by Cheri Prill)

Manuel Trigo is originally from Badajoz, Extremadura, located in the South of Spain, the North of Seville. Sr. Trigo's academic pursuits led him to Switzerland. Fluent in Spanish and French, Manuel became well versed in the French Classical Masters studying and practicing the Equitation Francaise de legerete (French equitation of lightness). This has become his passion - this quest for lightness is his daily task performed in the arena with his horses. His goals as trainer are to make the horse enjoyable, light and easy to ride, to level his interest and enjoyment with his job and overall to be a happy horse, to improve the horse's behavior, attitude and appearance, to enhance his qualities and hide his faults. Manuel trains and teaches internationally in USA, Costa Rica and Mexico.



Spanish heritage such as in Central and South America, sometimes trainers, without knowing anything about "Jaw Flexion," use it. Knowledge most of the time passed on from father to son and is more known as "the horse giving his mouth." Horses are in some countries initiated to this technique all night long during a full moon, where the trainer will perform hundreds of flexions, the horse's bits wrapped with tobacco leaves or covered with honey or anything tasty that will make the bit more acceptable to the horse. But if those trainers strive to get this precious Jaw Flexion, they unfortunately too often mix up Jaw Flexion and Poll Flexion, letting their horse perform an immediate Poll Flexion, lowering the fore-head at the vertical just after the Jaw Flexion. This is a big issue, as the horse will then associate the Jaw Flexion with a Poll Flexion and he will perform both together, which will put the horse behind the vertical if more than one Jaw Flexion is requested or performed. A horse behind the vertical is a horse somewhat on the forehand and has nothing to see with lightness, even if the horse is not pulling on the reins.

The benefits of the Jaw Flexion are very numerous; both trainer and horses have to be progressively initiated and sensitized to this maneuver. It is very important that the rider or student is initiated by a master. The Jaw Flexion will give you the whole horse, the "mise en main" (bringing in hand) and collection in a relaxed state.

The horse will be gradually introduced to the Jaw Flexion with the rider on the ground, standing in front of the horse and then on both sides of the horse. After this first step, the rider will continue his work in the saddle, first at the halt, then slowly at the walk, trot and finally at the canter.

Also to make the horse more comfortable, we will do the first level of the Jaw Flexion on the top of the corner of the horse's lips without restraining his tongue. Then when the horse is initiated to this first level, we will proceed more directly on his tongue. Remember that the tongue is an extremely sensitive organ of the horse's mouth and by respect for the horse, we should strive to avoid producing pain and to keep the horse as relaxed as possible on his mouth. Just put yourself for few seconds in his shoes and remember how painful it was the last time you accidentally chewed your tongue. Will you be happy to work with such pressure and pain on your tongue as most of the bits produce due to the rider's hands? So for me, the horse's mouth is holy ground and requires respect, knowledge and technique. It is here where a good hand, which by the way could be a very interesting subject for a future article, and the Jaw Flexion could do as huge a difference as day and night.

How do you introduce your horse to the Jaw Flexion and perform the Jaw Flexion? I will give you more details in our next issue of the magazine.

AO OF THE YEAR NOMINATIONS