

THE CLASSICAL TRAINING JOURNEY

An Introduction to The Classical Riding Roadmap



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— *From Way of the Centaur* —

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This guide is intended for educational purposes only. It is not a substitute for individualized instruction, veterinary care, medical advice, saddle-fitting evaluation, or other professional assessment. Horses, riders, and training situations vary, and the ideas presented here should be applied with judgment and adapted to the needs of the individual horse and rider. Sudden, significant, or unexplained changes in behavior, movement, comfort, or performance should be investigated before being treated primarily as training issues.

Why I Created *The Classical Riding Roadmap*

After decades of training horses and teaching students, I find myself returning to the same dilemma time and again: before meaningful training can begin, I must help riders and owners understand **where they are in the larger developmental journey of classical training**.

Clients often ask, *How long will this take?* Unfortunately, this question is not that helpful.

The real questions needing to be asked are: What phase of development are we currently in and what is next? What qualities need to be present before a new movement or greater demand can be asked? What must be developed **first** so that later work strengthens the horse rather than diminishes him, and develops the rider rather than simply teaching a collection of techniques?

I wanted a way to describe training that accounted for the whole partnership. The horse should become stronger, more balanced, more capable, and more confident through training. The rider should develop skill, perception, judgment, and eventually mastery. And the relationship between them should become clearer, more refined, and more enjoyable—not something gradually lost beneath pressure, frustration, or the endless pursuit of the next exercise.

That raised another question for me: **how can the traditions of classical riding remain relevant and accessible to the modern rider?**

Classical training contains enormous depth, but much of the literature surrounding it can be highly technical, intellectual, or difficult to translate into the daily experience of working with a horse. I wanted to preserve that depth without making the system remote or inaccessible.

At the same time, training asks for something modern life does not always encourage: **patience**. Development takes time. Strength takes time. Understanding takes time. The most important qualities in horse and rider are cultivated slowly, often through revisiting the same fundamental questions at increasingly sophisticated levels.

So how could I help riders understand the necessity of that time without making the journey feel discouraging or endless? How could I keep people curious and excited about

learning while still asking them to proceed slowly, deliberately, and with respect for the horse's development?

***The Classical Riding Roadmap* grew out of those questions.**

It is a way of organizing the complexity of classical training into a developmental system that riders can enter from wherever they are. A person beginning the education of a horse can use it for orientation. A developing rider can locate the qualities that are already present and identify those that still need attention. An experienced rider can return to the same framework as the work becomes more demanding and more refined.

The Roadmap is therefore not based primarily on hierarchical levels or on the completion of particular movements. While the achievement of advanced skills is reflected in the progression of the phases, the map is primarily organized around the **essential qualities of development**—the qualities that allow horse and rider to continue progressing toward greater balance, understanding, skill, refinement, and mastery.

Its purpose is not simply to show riders how to move forward.

It is to help them understand **what must be developed so that moving forward remains possible.**

The Classical Training Journey

The Classical Riding Roadmap is an ongoing book and training project that brings these ideas together into a complete developmental system. This guide offers a **first look** at that foundational structure, providing an orientation to the Roadmap without attempting to reproduce the full system.

Classical riding is not simply the pursuit of movements.

It is an education.

The horse develops balance, strength, coordination, understanding, and confidence. The rider develops perception, balance, timing, judgment, restraint, and the ability to

influence without overwhelming. Between them, a relationship develops: a shared language built through clarity, trust, responsiveness, and increasingly subtle communication.

That development is rarely linear.

A horse may be physically capable of one thing but uncertain in another. A rider may understand an exercise intellectually but lack the balance or timing to use it well. A partnership may appear advanced in one area while still needing to revisit something more fundamental.

For that reason, classical training is better understood not as a ladder of exercises, but as a journey of development.

The Classical Riding Roadmap was created to make that journey easier to see.

It organizes the education of horse and rider through six phases:

Contract — Dance — Mirror — Flame — Whisper — Centaur

Each phase represents a different emphasis in the development of horse, rider, and relationship. Each introduces a different developmental question and asks something of the horse, something of the rider, and something of the relationship between them.

Together, the phases provide a way of seeing the larger landscape of classical training: what qualities make later work possible, what may need attention when training becomes difficult, and how seemingly separate problems can belong to a larger developmental pattern.

The phases form a progression, but they are not rigid levels to be completed and left behind. What is learned in **Contract** remains necessary in **Dance**. What is revealed in **Mirror** shapes the work of **Flame**. The refinement of **Whisper** depends upon everything that came before. Even at the highest levels of training, earlier qualities are revisited, tested, and deepened.

This introduction is designed to help you understand that landscape before you begin navigating it in greater detail. It will show you:

- the basic structure of the six phases

- the central developmental questions within each phase
- the qualities each phase seeks to cultivate
- how the phases build upon and remain present within one another
- examples of the kinds of exercises that may support the work within each phase

The exercises included here are offered as examples, not as prescriptions. The same exercise may serve very different purposes depending upon the horse, rider, and stage of development, and no exercise belongs exclusively to a single phase.

At the end of this introduction, you will also see one example of how the Roadmap can be applied to a common training problem. The purpose is not to provide a complete diagnosis or correction, but to demonstrate how a visible problem can be traced back through the developmental questions of the Roadmap.

The deeper application of this process belongs to the larger *Classical Riding Roadmap* and, more immediately, to *The Roadmap Starter Guide*, which uses practical decision keys to explore common training questions in greater detail.

The larger aim of classical training is the development of a partnership in which increasing skill, balance, understanding, and refinement can function together as a coherent whole.

Classical riding has long held an image for that possibility: the centaur.

Not because horse and rider cease to be distinct, but because through education and training they can become increasingly capable of moving, responding, and adapting as an integrated whole.

For now, the purpose of this introduction is to give you a map of the territory—and a first glimpse of how that map can be used.

The Structure of the Journey

The six phases of the Roadmap are not meant to function as rigid levels. They describe recurring developmental demands within classical training.

A horse and rider may move forward in one area while returning to an earlier question in another. Greater energy may reveal a weakness in balance. More difficult lateral work may expose uncertainty in communication. A rider may understand what is happening yet still lack the timing or physical organization to influence it well.

For that reason, the phases should be understood as **layers of development**. Each one introduces qualities that remain necessary in everything that follows:

Contract establishes the conditions for learning.

Dance organizes movement.

Mirror reveals what that movement is telling us.

Flame develops energy, capacity, and responsible influence.

Whisper refines timing and reduces the need for overt aid.

Centaur integrates the whole.

The movement through the Roadmap is therefore not simply forward. It is also inward and recursive.

As horse and rider become more capable, earlier questions return at a deeper level.

The quality of **Contract** is tested under greater pressure. **Dance** becomes more demanding as balance changes. **Mirror** becomes more precise. **Flame** becomes more powerful and therefore requires greater responsibility. **Whisper** becomes subtler. **Centaur** depends upon the continued presence of all that came before.

The purpose of the Roadmap is **not to label** where horse and rider “are.”

It is to help identify what the work is asking for now.

The Six Phases

Each phase of the Roadmap represents a different developmental emphasis in the education of horse and rider. The questions change as the work develops, but the earlier qualities do not disappear. Each becomes part of what makes the next possible.



THE CONTRACT



Conditions for Learning

Essential Questions:

Will you work with me?

Am I ready to learn?

Contract is the beginning of the journey because before horse and rider can develop greater skill, they must first establish the conditions that make learning possible—an agreement to work together.

For the horse, this means understanding boundaries, expectations, and the basic language of communication. For the rider, it means developing humility, consistency, attention, and the willingness to observe before assuming. Between them, **Contract** begins to create a relationship in which clarity and trust can coexist.

The word **Contract** is not meant in a legal sense. It refers to the implicit agreement that makes education possible: the rider will seek clarity without domination, and the horse will be asked to participate without having his trust betrayed.

This phase asks both horse and rider to become receptive to learning. It establishes the ground on which everything else depends.

In the horse, **Contract** asks for **forwardness, trust** and **relaxation**.

In the rider, it asks for **observation, awareness** and **foundational boundaries**.

Exercises and training in the Contract emphasize: groundwork, longeing, gymnastic exercises for the rider and foundational horsemanship skills.

The Contract develops: clarity • boundaries • receptivity • trust

THE DANCE



Organization of Movement

Essential Questions:

Can we move together?

Can I join the movement without interfering with it?

Dance begins once the basic conditions for learning are in place. Horse and rider now turn toward movement itself: rhythm, direction, balance, coordination, and the first real shaping of the body through the aids.

The rider begins to influence how the horse moves rather than simply where he goes. The horse learns to respond to clearer patterns of guidance through transitions, bending, changes of direction, work in hand, and the early lateral exercises that help organize the shoulders, ribcage, and hindquarters.

This phase is called the **Dance** because movement becomes increasingly reciprocal. The rider must learn not only to give an aid, but to feel the response, adjust, and remain part of the motion. The horse, in turn, learns to coordinate his body within that conversation.

The aim is not performance for its own sake, but a body that can be increasingly organized without losing rhythm, willingness, or flow.

In the horse, **Dance** asks for **rhythm, carriage, and transitions**.

In the rider, it asks for **organizing and timing of aids, balance and patience**.

Exercises and training in the Dance emphasize: basic figures and transitions, more advanced longeing and work in hand, better balance and coordination from the rider, consistency in work.

The Dance develops: rhythm • coordination • balance • movement • communication

THE MIRROR



Perception and Alignment

Essential Questions:

What am I creating?

What is the movement telling me?

The Mirror begins when horse and rider have enough organization in motion for patterns to become visible.

Crookedness, imbalance, asymmetry, uneven contact, loss of bend, and compensations are no longer treated simply as mistakes to correct. They become information. The rider learns to distinguish what is happening from what appears to be happening, and to recognize how the horse's body, the rider's body, and the relationship between them contribute to the pattern.

This phase develops observation before intervention. The rider becomes more precise in seeing alignment, balance, and asymmetry, while the horse develops greater straightness and a more even use of the body.

Mirror is where perception begins to become agency: once the pattern can be seen clearly, it can be understood and changed with greater accuracy.

In the horse, **Mirror** asks for **suppleness, straightness** and **biomechanical correctness**.

In the rider, it asks for **symmetry, alignment in position** and **honesty**.

Exercises and training in the Mirror emphasize: precision in figures and transitions, lateral movements, correct work over the back and on the bit, better contact from both horse and rider, better symmetry and refinement in rider's position and willingness to look honestly in the mirror.

The Mirror develops: perception • alignment • straightness • discernment • self-awareness

THE FLAME



Energy and Capacity

Essential Questions:

How do I direct the power we are developing?

Can I become worthy of the horse's greater capacity?

The Flame begins when horse and rider have enough organization and awareness to work with greater power.

The horse must develop the strength, confidence, and physical capacity to produce more energy without becoming hurried, tense, or disconnected. The rider must learn to create, contain, and direct that energy with increasing responsibility. Greater influence is not simply the ability to ask for more; it requires the self-command to know how much is needed, when to act, and when not to.

This phase is about transforming energy into useful expression. Power that escapes through crookedness, tension, or excessive speed is not yet available for higher work. As alignment and strength improve, that energy can be carried, shaped, and eventually expressed with greater lightness.

Flame therefore develops both capacity and responsibility. The more horse and rider are capable of doing, the more carefully that power must be governed.

In the horse, Flame asks for **energy, engagement** and **carrying power**.

In the rider, it asks for **influence, regulation** and **courage**.

Exercises and training in the Flame emphasize: collection and extension, greater engagement, movements that require more carrying power, rider's ability to regulate energy, fearlessness and subtlety in the use of energy.

The Flame develops: energy • strength • capacity • influence • self-command

THE WHISPER



Timing and Refinement

Essential Questions:

How little is enough?

Can I remain attentive without interfering?

The Whisper begins when strength, balance, and communication have developed enough that the rider can ask for less without losing clarity.

The horse becomes increasingly responsive to smaller changes in the rider's balance, seat, leg, and hand. The rider, in turn, must refine timing, feel, and restraint—learning not only when to give an aid, but when to soften, release, and allow the horse to carry the response forward.

This phase is where influence becomes quieter. The French classical ideas of *descente de main* and *descente de jambe* belong here: the aid should not remain when the response can continue without it.

As the horse and rider develop true lightness, the horse becomes more responsible; the rider appears to do nothing.

Whisper is not the absence of influence. It is influence refined to the point that communication becomes increasingly subtle, economical, and precise.

In the horse, **Whisper** asks for **self-carriage, independence** and **lightness**.

In the rider, it asks for **presence, listening** and **restraint**.

Exercises and training in the Whisper emphasize: refinement in the execution of more advanced movements such as piaffer and passage, self-carriage, timing and restraint in rider's aids, greater presence and listening, invisible communication between horse and rider.

The Whisper develops: timing • feel • release • subtlety • refinement

THE CENTAUR



Integration and Coherence

Essential Questions:

Can two become one?

Can we remain coherent as everything changes?

The Centaur is the phase in which the qualities developed throughout the Roadmap begin to function together as an integrated whole.

The horse brings greater balance, strength, responsiveness, and self-carriage. The rider brings clearer perception, more refined timing, greater restraint, and a deeper ability to influence without disrupting. The relationship becomes increasingly capable of adapting to changes in movement, energy, balance, and difficulty without losing its underlying coherence.

The image of the centaur represents this integration. Horse and rider do not cease to be distinct; rather, they become increasingly able to act together with such clarity and harmony that the boundary between intention and response becomes less visible. The riding now becomes so integrated it enters the realm of art.

Centaur is not an endpoint. It is the ongoing practice of maintaining integration as the work becomes more demanding, more subtle, and more expressive.

In the horse, **Centauro** asks for **adaptability, expressiveness** and **true partnership**.

In the rider, it asks for **judgment, wisdom** and **mastery**.

Exercises and training in the Centauro emphasize: revisiting all phases when necessary, novel demands that test adaptability and coherence, exercises and movements, simple and complex, that transcend technique and become expressions of art, beauty, and harmony.

The Centauro develops: integration • coherence • adaptability • partnership • harmony

Where Is the Training Asking for Attention?

The Roadmap is not meant to tell you what level you have reached.

Its purpose is to help you see more clearly what the work is asking for now.

As you think about your horse, yourself, and the relationship between you, consider:

- **Contract**— Are the conditions for learning clear and trustworthy?
- **Dance**— Can movement be organized without losing rhythm or flow?
- **Mirror**— Can I see accurately what the movement is revealing?
- **Flame**— Is there enough strength and energy, and can it be directed responsibly?
- **Whisper**— Can I use less without losing clarity?
- **Centaur**— Can we remain coherent as the work becomes more demanding?

You may recognize several of these questions at once. That is expected. The phases are not boxes to check off, but lenses through which to understand development.

The question is not simply: **Where am I on the Roadmap?**

It is: **What does the training need from us now?**

That question becomes especially useful when something in the training is not working.

A rider rarely begins by thinking, *This is a **Contract** problem* or *This belongs in **Flame***. More often, the starting point is something immediate and practical:

My horse will not go forward.

The canter transition falls apart.

One direction is much harder than the other.

The contact becomes heavy.

Everything changes when the work becomes more difficult.

The Roadmap provides a way to work backward from what you can observe and ask which developmental quality may need attention first.

The same outward problem can arise for very different reasons. A horse that will not go forward, for example, may not fully understand the request. He may lose organization

when more energy is asked for. He may be struggling with asymmetry, strength, or capacity. Or he may have learned to respond only when the rider continues pushing.

The symptom may look the same.

The question is **where to look first**. The result of the key is not a diagnosis or a permanent label. It identifies the developmental area that may be most useful to examine **first**. More than one phase may ultimately be involved.

This keeps the rider/trainer from jumping straight to--a stronger leg.

A stronger aid may create a larger reaction, but it does not necessarily tell you why forwardness was missing.

Instead ask:

What is preventing the forward response from becoming clear, organized, sustainable, and increasingly independent of the aid?

A Sample Roadmap Key

Why Won't My Horse Go Forward?

This is the kind of question explored more fully in *The Roadmap Starter Guide*, which uses practical decision keys to trace a visible training problem back through the developmental questions of the Roadmap.

Begin with what you can actually observe and follow the questions without assuming you already know the answer.

A horse that will not go forward may appear to present a simple problem: the horse needs more “leg.” But the same outward symptom can arise for very different reasons. The horse may not fully understand the request, may lose organization when more energy is asked for, may be compensating for asymmetry, may lack sufficient strength or capacity, or may have become dependent upon increasingly strong aids.

The purpose of the key is to help identify **where to look first**.

Before You Continue

Is this a new, sudden, or significant change in your horse's willingness or ability to go forward?

YES → Consider discomfort, soundness, tack fit, fatigue, footing, or another physical cause before treating it primarily as a training problem.

NO → Continue to 1.

1. Does the horse clearly understand the aids for forward movement and respond willingly to them?

NO → CONTRACT

Begin with clarity. Before increasing the strength of the aid, consider whether the horse understands the request and whether the expected response has been

established consistently. This is where groundwork is critical. Longeing that establishes a clear, willing response to “forward” should be in place before the same question is addressed under saddle.

YES → Go to 2

2. When the horse does go forward, can he maintain rhythm and basic organization?

NO → DANCE

The problem may not be willingness to move forward, but the ability to organize movement once more energy is created. Is the gait correct? Does the horse maintain the gait consistently? Is there an issue with transitions? Look at rhythm, balance, coordination, and the quality of the transition into greater forwardness.

YES → Go to 3

3. Is the difficulty noticeably different in one direction, on one rein, or from one side of the body? OR Does the forward issue show up only under saddle?

YES → MIRROR

Look at asymmetry and alignment. The horse may be less able to produce, organize, or transmit energy through one side of the body. Are physical asymmetries or restrictions in function affecting basic forward movement? Is the alignment of the body conducive to forward movement? Also consider whether the rider is sitting or weighting the two sides differently, or blocking forward movement through tension, imbalance, or fear.

NO → Go to 4

4. Does the horse understand the request and remain reasonably organized, but struggle to sustain greater energy or effort?

YES → FLAME

Look at strength, fitness, confidence, and physical capacity. More pressure cannot substitute for the ability to produce, contain, and carry greater energy.

NO → Go to 5

5. Does the horse go forward only while you continue squeezing, kicking, or driving?

YES → WHISPER

The horse may have become dependent upon the aid rather than responsive to it. Look at timing, release, and whether the aid stops when the horse answers. Precision and correctness in the aids are addressed here.

NO → Go to 6

6. Does forwardness disappear mainly when another demand is added—such as bend, lateral work, collection, transitions, or greater difficulty?

YES → CENTAUR

The individual pieces may be present, but horse and rider may not yet be able to integrate them while maintaining forward energy. Discernment is now required to determine which earlier quality needs attention: is energy being lost through the transition (**Dance**), through misalignment (**Mirror**), through insufficient strength or capacity (**Flame**), or through ineffective or excessive use of the aids (**Whisper**)?

What the Key Reveals

The purpose of the key is not to assign a horse and rider permanently to a phase, nor to suggest that every training problem has a single cause.

Its purpose is to change the way we look at the problem.

“Won’t go forward” describes what the rider experiences, but it does not explain why it is happening. The answer may lie in clarity and understanding, organization of movement, asymmetry and alignment, physical capacity, the use and release of the aids, or the ability to integrate these qualities as the work becomes more demanding.

This is why simply correcting the symptom can be misleading. A stronger leg may produce more forward movement, but it may also create a different problem or obscure the question that needs to be asked.

The Roadmap asks us to look beneath the immediate problem and consider:

What quality of the training needs attention first?

The answer may lead us back to an earlier phase. It may reveal several phases working together. And as the horse and rider develop, the answer may change.

That is not a failure to progress.

It is the nature of development.

The Roadmap is intended to provide orientation within that process—to help riders recognize what they are seeing, understand where to look, and make more deliberate choices about what comes next.

Continue the Journey

If this way of looking at training is useful to you, there are two ways to continue exploring the Roadmap.

The Roadmap Starter Guide

A Practical Companion to The Classical Riding Roadmap

Currently in development—Coming Soon

The Starter Guide takes the next practical step. It applies the framework to common training problems through a series of decision keys designed to help you move from an observable difficulty to the developmental area that may need attention first.

Rather than beginning with a correction, the keys begin with a question.

The Classical Riding Roadmap:

A System for Developing Horse and Rider

Currently in development

The full Roadmap is the larger book and training system from which this introductory guide has developed. It explores the six phases in depth, including the knowledge, skills, judgment, challenges, exercises, and developmental principles that shape the classical education and training of horse and rider.

The goal is not to provide a formula for training.

It is to provide a way of seeing the whole.