

# Echoes of Black Beauty:

*A message still valid despite the passage of time*

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Images scanned from an edition published by Dorling Kindersley in their Eyewitness Classics series

During the Victorian era many people had little empathy for their beasts of burden, but all that changed when 'Black Beauty' was published in 1877. This was the first book to be written specifically to encourage people to stop deliberate cruelty to horses.

Author Anna Sewell managed to connect emotionally with the reader via the animal's mind. The story narrates the life of Black Beauty himself, from foal to working horse, to retirement. Along the way the horse has a range of experiences where he and other horses are treated with kindness, indifference, and cruelty by humans. The viewpoint lets readers share the possible feelings and emotions of a horse.

The narration of the story through the mouth of a horse was exceptionally effective. In fact, this is where the phrase 'straight from the horse's mouth' originates. The book remains in the top ten best selling English language books.

Anna's popular novel is credited with fuelling the UK animal welfare movements by making people consider an animal's perspective. Feelings of empathy for fellow sentient beings gradually spread throughout the western world for various reasons.

Presently, genuine interest in aspects of the welfare of Australia's equines has finally reached a stage where it is a mainstream issue. To name a few, jumps racing, the racing of two year olds, whip use, the treatment of Melbourne's carriage horses and brumby management have all experienced media attention in recent years.

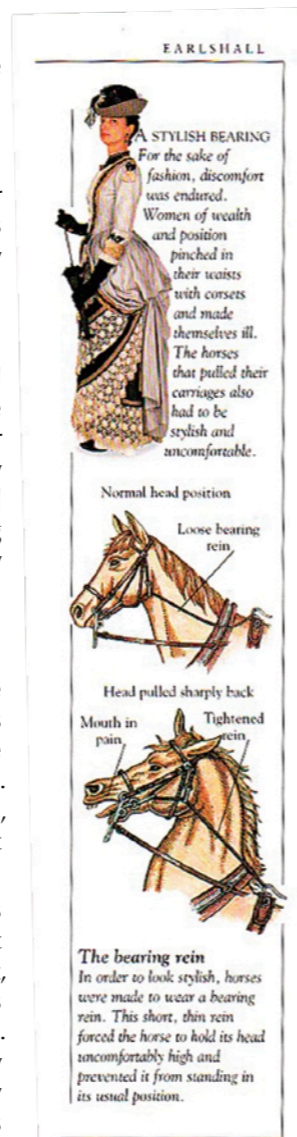
The number of horse welfare and protection groups has risen dramatically in the past decade, with most people in the horse industry realising that such organisations exist. Segments of the fragmented Australian horse industry are becoming aware that there are significant welfare issues relating to the way we use and train

horses, as well as how in many cases, we discard and dispose of "unwanted" animals.

In the last couple of decades of the 20th century we witnessed the rise of natural horsemanship, a training system which for the first time attempted to interpret the horse's ethogram (natural behaviours, or the way they view and interact with the world). Then in 2002 we saw the appearance of Equitation Science, and the First International Equitation Science Symposium which was inaugurated in August 2005 when proceedings were conducted at the Australian Equine Behaviour Centre in Victoria, Australia. This new scientific branch uses an evidence based understanding of animal psychology, learning theory and horse behaviour to explain how horses learn and how training systems can be optimised to optimise outcomes for both horses and humans.

We have come a long way, but there are still many aspects of the treatment of horses in Australia and Worldwide that range from questionable to extremely disturbing. Perspectives on these issues are always varied, passionately defended, and usually fraught with controversy.

The way people train and manage horses is changing in some spheres, and when it truly has the welfare of the horse foremost, these changes result in more effective riders and trainers, happier and healthier horses. Realistically however, and even though many organisations and individuals vehemently state that "the welfare of the horse is



paramount", in all disciplines there will be times, many times in some cases, when those become empty words, and humans will do what they see fit to get a result.

One example of a controversial training technique that may have negative welfare implications for the horse, but continues to be used by riders and is endorsed by the official governing bodies, is that of hyperflexion, commonly known as rollkur, and now officially named LDR (low deep and round), a warm-up technique made famous by dressage riders (although it is common in many other disciplines).

The different terms all refer to the practice of flexing the horse's neck and poll laterally and longitudinally using bit pressure. The flexion can range from behind the vertical to extreme (where vision and respiration are restricted), and although showjumping riders had been practicing it for a long time (usually with the aid of draw reins), in the international dressage warm up arena it was first seen being used by Nicole Uphoff, the rider of Rembrandt, who caused something of a "revolution in the dressage world" and who won with world record scores at the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

The technique first received negative media attention back in 1993 when the German dressage magazine St Georg, coined the name "rollkur" and suggested it was unsightly and possibly cruel. Since then the practice has been officially renamed twice (first hyperflexion and now LDR or low, deep and round), but continues to cause passionate debate, the most recent as a result of the "blue tongue World Cup" YouTube video posted by Epona tv of a Danish stallion being ridden for 120 mins in varying degrees of hyperflexion, and showing a limp tongue that appeared to be blue at one stage.

Dressage has somewhat unfairly received most of the attention, probably because it is recognised as the pinnacle of equestrian achievement, where the highly educated horse and rider become one. The FEI (International Equestrian Federation) is the governing body of all Olympic and WEG disciplines, including dressage, and first tried to mitigate welfare concerns in this discipline by adding to the rules the notion of the "happy athlete"

Despite the public concern and peer reviewed evidence (see the reference list below) that points to hyperflexion compromising welfare and being unethical, horses trained in this way are winning medals and even achieve record scores – are the official governing bodies putting results before welfare?

The FEI is slow to respond. Since 1993 it has conducted two reviews on the practice. The result of the first in 2006 was a change of name from rollkur to hyperflexion, and the promise of research into the effects – no studies were conducted. The result of the second is a new name (LDR) and a series of difficult to police guidelines for stewards that leave many grey areas open to individual interpretation.

The fictitious Black Beauty let us know how he felt about short driving (bearing) reins that held the horse's head in a supposedly elegant posture (improved deportment). The reins received much notoriety after their potential for cruelty and abuse was vividly portrayed in the novel. These are mechanical aids and easily abused. Historically, improper use and overuse created chronic problems with the spine and back that in some cases made some horses crippled. The fashion extremes of the 18th and 19th centuries at times required a tightened bearing rein to the degree that it even made breathing difficult. These reins were abolished because of the protests caused by the novel, but sadly we still see very similar devices coming into fashion and being used today.

Mechanical devices that help the rider alter a horse's head and neck carriage (frame) are still common, and used by riders and trainers everywhere without much concern. There are draw reins, bearing reins, vienna reins, side reins, pessoas's, gags, combination bits, curb bits with chains and many others. These are all mechanical devices designed to multiply the amount of pressure that a person can apply to the horse's body.

If like Black Beauty horses could speak, we would be able to share their feelings and emotions, and we would know just how far is too far when they are 'asked' to perform. In reality however, we never will know exactly how horses see the world. Equitation science can help us measure the physiological effect (horse's stress level) that our practices can have, it can enlighten and educate horse owners about what horses value and how to motivate them, but in the end it is up to individuals to manage and train their horses in ways that protect their mental and physical wellbeing.

*Anna Sewell's popular novel was the the first to consider the horse's perspective. Although welfare awareness has come a long way since Victorian times, there is still much more to be done, as is reflected by the current "rollkur" debate that has put modern dressage training under the spot light.*

