

History of the Dressage Quadrille

An explanation of where the quadrille came from and how it was originally used.

By Ron Smith

By 1657 classical riding was beginning its rebirth and the armies of Europe had at least one riding school per country for its mounted corps. Saumur in France and the Spanish Riding School (SRS) in Austria were among them but the SRS was more of a riding school than a military training center. Saumur taught military tactics as well as High School riding.

These schools taught equitation and formation riding in varying degrees. From the 1650s to World War I, battles were fought in linear formations. This type of fighting technique required disciplined men and horses to move as one. The basic elements of quadrille riding came from this formation. Each sub-group (twos or fours) had to execute the maneuver required in order to allow the body as a whole to complete the movement. Linear tactics required the simultaneous movement of troops in order to maintain integrity of the line or formation. Squadrons were the common element of formation and usually consisted of 140-180 men and horses. When on the march, the squadron had to perform various movements in order to change direction, continue the march or face an enemy.

Cavalry usually moved by File (single), Twos (pairs), Threes and Fours (Sets). In quadrille we see the maneuver of singles to pairs. In military terms, it would be from files to twos. Fan formation is from twos to fours, or the "Form Fours." Fours were commonly used to attack if in column. This was rarely done in Europe but was highly effective in the U.S. Indian Wars. (The 4th U.S. Cavalry in 1872 attacked Lipan Apache Indians in Mexico using this method.)

An oblique line was used for a directional change of march, to avoid obstacles or to realign with the enemy's front on the battlefield, usually done by file, twos, or fours. A simple turn, if executed improperly, could destroy a column's integrity instantaneously. When turning, each trooper had to turn at the same spot in order to maintain the line or column. If the turn was called for by files, twos, threes or fours, each group was required to perform a left turn simultaneously.

Consider that a column could be as much as six to seven miles in length, and you can see the need for precision in executing each maneuver. On many battlefields in Europe and the Middle East, up to and including Waterloo, the front of a cavalry corps could contain as many as 10,000 horses. That meant a front up to eight miles wide, which explains why so many battles were on the plains of Europe and Asia Minor. When aligning all of these troops so they could charge or receive the enemy, it was paramount that the groups moved as one. Lateral movements such as the half pass take on new meaning when there are 60 horses moving left or right at the same time. If the squadron is in double ranks (two deep but act as one), the levels of precision are even more demanding.

The truth of the rank and file cavalryman, dragoon, curassier, lancer, etc., was that until the riders had reached about five years of service, they were not that skilled. Most were city peasant boys or poor farm kids who knew nothing of riding. But many became highly skilled horsemen and many achieved the rank of instructor. Non-commissioned officers (sergeants or corporals) did most of the real instruction under an officer's supervision.

Officers were schooled as young men as the social customs dictated from the end of the Dark Ages through the early 20th century. Once in the Army, their riding training was intense, and they would have been expected to become what we would consider a Grand Prix rider today. Not all achieved this, of course, but many did. Bear in mind that all of the masters were military horsemen at some point and many were quite skilled soldiers as well.

Quadrille was also used as a diplomatic tool by the Royal Courts. Officers in charge of the cavalry schools as well as some of the field grade officers would perform quadrille for their king or queen and their guests to show the prowess of the host country's cavalry. Well-groomed mounts of strong blood fitted with gold-accented tack and fine cloth accoutrements mounted by young officers of proper blood in their most elegant uniforms made quite an impression. But the level of skill displayed in the court arena was not always what was seen on the field of battle.

The Prussian, Polish and French cavalry were considered the best on any field. At Waterloo, the French made repeated charges upon British Squares at the trot (as was their custom). The British were highly impressed by the precision at which they maintained line integrity and uniformity of gait, and it is said that a few British officers remarked that the French died in an orderly fashion.

Quadrille training taught man and horse to work in the same tempo as the next man and horse. This allowed for the unit to advance at any gait (in theory) and keep each trooper and horse aligned or dressed with the ones left and right of him. With enough practice, a group of horsemen up to 100 wide can walk, trot, hand gallop or canter and maintain a boot-to-boot position.

A Staff Sergeant in the Army, Ron Smith has been riding dressage for 20 years. He is a founding member of the Conclave of Cavalry Historians and is an amateur military historian. He has done quadrille clinics all over the country, for both dressage riders and the military law enforcement. He was on the United States Dressage Federation quadrille committee in 2005 and has also trained riders and horses for the United States military. Thank you to Ron for allowing us to use this article.