

Let the Training Scale Be Your Guide

Dressage should be an art without pressure or force

By Walter Zettl

Photographs courtesy of Walter Zettl

Riding dressage is not easy because two completely different beings have to find harmony together. The rider must have enormous patience and look for any faults in himself, not in the horse. Some riders blame the horse for problems, but no

as an individual, paying attention to his particular needs and treating him like an equal partner, can one hope to succeed. We can bring out the best movements of the horse by gymnasticizing him rather than drilling him. Classical dressage is an art without pressure

gaits, the exact timing of aids, and so much more before a correct understanding can be accomplished.

The horse doesn't want to make a mistake, and any mistakes are certainly not on purpose. Most mistakes happen because the horse is afraid of something, or the rider hasn't given the aids at the right time or hasn't adjusted them to fit the situation. When the rider hasn't given the aids correctly, the horse cannot respond correctly. The problem could be that the rider asked for an exercise that the horse is not able to cope with either mentally or physically at the current training level. In order to make progress, it is necessary to bring the horse to his limit, but never over his limit. Riding over the limit causes the horse to become afraid and tense, which has a negative effect on both the exercise and the gaits. The horse also loses trust in the rider, and trust is difficult to regain. The horse has an extensive memory and remembers bad experiences more acutely than the good ones.

Even such upper-level movements as pirouettes, half-pass, piaffe, and passage are not so very difficult if you prepare the horse correctly from the beginning. But making excessive demands for advanced exercises—often accompanied by impatience and a search for shortcuts—is cheating on the basics of training. When this happens, the horse is both a victim and a scapegoat. This is not the art form of dressage.

The Scale of Training

The old equestrian masters studied horses thoroughly, including their mental and physical strengths and weaknesses. As a guide for proper training of the horse and rider, they introduced what we now call the training scale, or the pyramid of training (see illustration opposite).

The scale of training is the fundamental tool for riders, trainers, and coaches. When followed correctly, it produces horses with the proper musculature, soundness, power, and athleticism to perform the advanced movements with relaxed ease. Let us



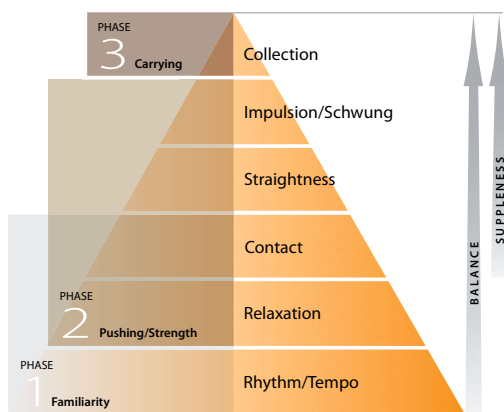
NATURAL PROGRESSION: *If the scale of training is followed carefully, collection, as in this passage, almost evolves by itself*

harmony can be established until the rider accepts responsibility first.

The horse is a herd animal and is easily frightened. His fears can be overcome, but the rider must be a trusted leader. It takes a lot of love, patience, and knowledge about the horse and his behavior. Only by training each horse

or force, bringing out the beauty of the horse and developing his gaits to their fullest potential.

Above all, it is important to understand the language of the horse—his reactions to his surroundings and to the rider's aids. A rider needs to understand the sequence of the horse's



The scale of training

take a closer look at the six elements of the scale of training.

The first three stages of the scale of training—*rhythm and tempo*, *relaxation*, and *contact*—constitute the first phase of training: *familiarization*.

The second set of stages—*relaxation*, *contact*, *Schwung*, and *straightness*—encompass the second phase of training, the *development of forward thrust*.

The third and final phase of training, the *development of carrying power*, includes the stages of *contact*, *Schwung*, *straightness*, and *collection*.

These six elements can be developed as pairs:

- Rhythm and tempo / Relaxation: Without rhythm and tempo, there can be no relaxation.
- Contact / *Schwung*: Without *Schwung*, there can be no contact.
- Straightness / Collection: Without straightness, there is no real collection.

When the training scale is followed properly, it results in “throughness,” which means that the horse willingly responds to all forward, sideways, and backward driving aids.

Rhythm and tempo. The walk should be a clear four-beat gait. The horse’s legs move equilaterally (e.g., left front foot, left hind foot, right front foot, right hind foot). The horse can only perform a clean four-beat walk if the tempo is appropriate, the rider doesn’t disturb the horse with a tight, unsteady hand, and the rider doesn’t drive the horse too strongly.

Too much driving in the walk can make the horse frightened and tense, which can lead to fidgeting and pacing (a lateral walk), among others.

The walk is the most difficult gait; it can easily be destroyed if one is not careful. The rider should walk often on a loose rein.

The trot is a diagonal “two time” gait, meaning that there are two beats to a stride. The left front and the right hind land simultaneously, making the first beat. In the moment of suspension,

all four feet are in the air, after which the opposite diagonal leg pair (right front and left hind) lands to make the second beat. The tempo should be adjusted to each horse’s natural pace, no faster or slower.

If the diagonal pair of legs is taking steps of equal length, then this is a well-balanced, clean pace and the horse is moving “over his back.” If the front legs are “flicking” in an exaggerated way, then the horse will have to take very short steps with his



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DIFFICULT GAIT: *The walk can easily be destroyed, and the rider should walk often on a loose rein*

hind legs. When this occurs, the trot steps look similar to passage but are stiff. The horse is not moving over his back and loses the rhythm of the trot, which you can see when the diagonal pair of legs swings forward and one foot is still on the ground.

The canter is a three-beat gait. In the left-lead canter, the sequence is: right hind; left hind and right front together; left front. After the suspension phase that follows, during which all four feet are in the air, the right hind lands again as the first beat of the next stride.



RELAXATION: *Only if the horse is relaxed both mentally and physically can he perform without stress. This rider is allowing her horse to stretch part way out and down in the trot on a longer rein.*

You can probably imagine how much pressure is put on that one right hind hoof and the joints and soft tissues of the leg, as well as on the leading leg when it lands, bearing the horse's entire weight. This is the reason why my old master Oberst H.W. Aust didn't let young horses canter too early. He would let them canter only after six months of riding them, after he was certain that the joints, tendons, and muscles were developed to the point where the horse would not get hurt. If a young horse offered the canter out of exuberance, we would take it and not shut the horse down, but we would stay off his back by using a half-seat. When the horse was ready, we would go to a big race track with a long stretch of straight track and ride in a half-seat.

Relaxation. Only when the horse is mentally and physically relaxed is he truly able to perform the most difficult exercises without mental or physical stress. Relaxation is impossible to achieve if there is even the slightest amount of tension or fear. It isn't easy for such a fearful flight animal to cope with everything that goes on around him—especially the rider on his back. If the rider falls abruptly into the saddle when mounting, the horse experiences back pain and becomes fearful. When we take up the reins, we are touching the most sensitive part of the horse. It is our obligation to maintain this sensitivity by being extra careful with our hands.

The horse's back is equally sensitive, and a poorly fitting saddle can cause pain. It is important to make sure that your saddle fits well. Have the fit checked twice a year and adjusted if needed.

In addition, the rider's aids are often too strong and not balanced. The rider must always determine how gently he can give the aids. Only if the rider does not get a response from the horse should the intensity of the aids be increased. Only well-balanced aids lead to success because they do not inflict pain and are more easily understood by the horse.

Contact. Contact is the connection between the horse's mouth and the rider's hands. The rider should feel a constant, light connection after taking up the reins, with an equal amount of weight in each hand. The hand should always "give" more than it takes and should always act on the horse's sensitive mouth in a soft way.

If you want to ride a turn or corner to the left, close your left fist to indicate to the horse that he should bend around your inside leg. By instantly releasing slightly after closing your fist, you are allowing the horse to do as you wish. The outside rein controls the horse's movement by slightly giving or taking with the outside rein, depending on the situation. Your seat, leg, and rein aids must work harmoniously and in a balanced fashion.

Be gentle like a baby with the reins, but be ready to drive with your seat and legs if needed. The horse mustn't be forced into a frame with the hands, but instead must give to well-balanced driving aids.

Schwung. This German word—referred to in English as *impulsion*—refers to the power that we gain through increased driving of the hindquarters, which is passed over the horse's swinging back and into a soft, connected hand. You can have *Schwung* (power from behind) without collection, but you cannot ride correct collection without *Schwung*. This becomes very obvious in shoulder-in, travers, renvers, and half-pass, in which the *Schwung* is often lost because the rider is using the hands too much. Without *Schwung*, no movement can be ridden correctly. *Schwung* is not created by chasing the horse forward; if this happens, the horse will become tense and will lose the rhythm and relaxation.

Straightness. The horse, similar to humans, is crooked to one side; that is, he finds it more comfortable to travel in one direction than the other. To enable the horse to perform the most advanced movements, it is necessary to train him to be equally straight and supple on both sides. The



CONNECTION: When the horse is on the bit, he seeks an even contact with both reins in a light and elastic manner

challenge is that the horse feels good in his natural crookedness and finds straightness difficult. As a result, he will look for ways to evade straightening, but the rider must gently persist in helping the horse feel more com-

fortable in his straightness.

It is easiest to see a horse's crookedness when viewing him from behind. Most horses' hindquarters are slightly offset to the left when they are traveling to the left. However, this is



SCHWUNG: Thrust (aka impulsion) is a prerequisite for collection



CROOKED AND STRAIGHT: Most horses are left-sided and carry their haunches to the left, with their shoulders “falling” to the right (1). To straighten the horse, the rider must align the shoulders with the hindquarters (2).



not the root of the problem; the problem arises from a different area. In this case, it is the shoulder that is falling to the outside right. The rider must align the shoulders with the hindquarters, which is not easily done. Because of this innate crookedness, we will always have problems with new movements to the right.

When the horse is left-sided, the muscles on the left side of his body are stronger and shorter than those on the right; therefore, a left-sided horse is naturally inclined to put more pressure on the left rein. With such a horse, most movements are easier to the left than to the right, with the exception of shoulder-in, haunches-in, half-pass, and pirouettes to the left. This is because the right shoulder “falls out” (is out of alignment) in these movements.

The muscles on the right side of a left-sided horse are longer and less developed. The right side of the hindquarters is less flexible—straighter, stiffer, and tending to push the horse

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to the left. The rider should consider the way in which he can enable every step to become harmonious so that one movement floats into the next, like dancing. The horse must be straight in order to dance.

Collection. If the previous five elements have been considered carefully when training the horse, collection almost evolves by itself. It is very important that collection is never asked for an extended period of time. Collection should always be improved by riding strongly forward with *Schwung*. In the highest collection, rhythm, relaxation, a soft connection, *Schwung*, and straightness should always be visible. Only then will dressage, without pressure and force, turn into an art.

A Relationship Built on Mutual Trust and Respect

The horse should never fear the rider but respect him as the leader. When asked the secret to his equestrian success, Freiherr von Langen answered:

“There is no secret. I love my horses, and they thank me with their loyalty and devotion.”

There are riders, coaches, and trainers who think that the horse is just an animal without feelings and that it must do what is asked of it, and will use force to make the horse obey. The horses and pupils of those coaches and trainers can only be pitied, but thank God there are only a few of these humans out there who have never felt the beauty of being in a harmonious partnership with these noble animals. The relationship with a horse must be built on mutual trust and respect, without pressure or force, if the horse is to perform all tasks powerfully and respond willingly to almost-invisible aids. There is nothing more beautiful!

In dressage, the longest distance between two points is a shortcut. We must use our knowledge to never take the shortcut, but instead to patiently work through the scale of training until one day your horse asks to do a perfect piaffe! ▲

Meet the Expert

Walter Zettl, a native of Germany who makes his home in Canada, is a renowned dressage instructor and clinician. He is the author of several books, including *Dressage in Harmony*, *The Circle of Trust*, and *Ask Walter*. He is the patron of the new Meggle Champion of Honor award, which in 2015 will recognize a Grand Prix-level rider in each of three designated German dressage competitions for his or her fair, humane, and harmonious treatment of the horse.



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