

The New Pyramid of Training

The time-tested "training scale" has some wording changes. Here's what's new in the 2019 update.

By Marilyn Heath

Have you ever noticed that the purpose of each dressage level is stated at the top of each test, from Training through Fourth Levels? There, and also in the US Equestrian Rule Book, appears the phrase "to confirm that the horse demonstrates correct basics...."

In other words, the horse should demonstrate correct basics in order to compete at that level. So what exactly are those elusive basics?

The basics are clearly and concisely

explained in the pyramid of training, which has been updated along with the USDF Glossary of Judging Terms and the 2019 USDF and US Equestrian dressage tests. Let's go over the pyramid, with special emphasis on the revisions.

How the Pyramid Works

First, it's important to understand that the steps and concepts contained in the pyramid of training are

- Required for the correct training of the horse, and

- Interrelated.

In other words, from the very beginning of dressage training, we are working toward the goals of each step on the pyramid—on the rhythm of each gait, on suppleness with elasticity and relaxation, on acceptance of the aids, with impulsion, engagement, throughness, obedience, and straightness. All the time, with every horse at every level, we are addressing balance and an increasing lightness of the forehead.

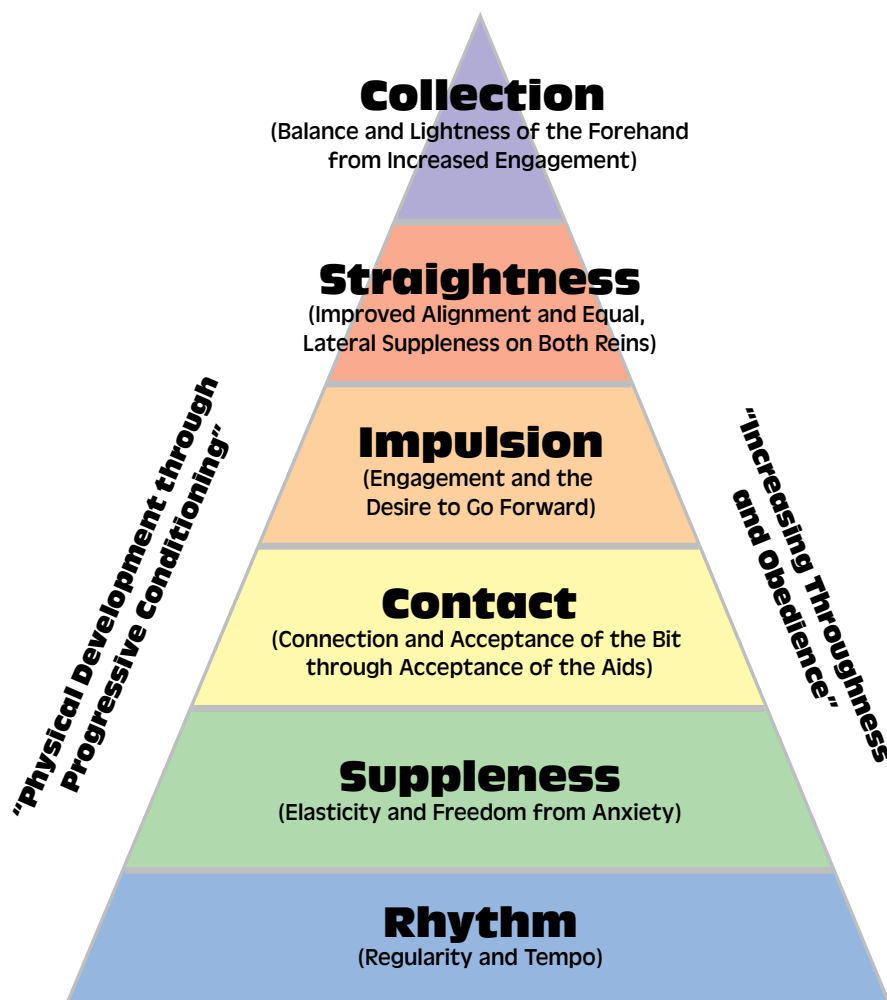
Climbing the Pyramid: The Steps Explained

The main headings in the 2019 revision are **Rhythm, Suppleness, Contact, Impulsion, Straightness, and Collection**. Each heading is followed by a brief parenthetical description: the definitions in the 2019 Glossary of Judging Terms, which summarize the concepts that accompany each step on the pyramid. Along with each step is a meaningful paragraph or two of explanation. To get the most out of your study of the pyramid of training, pay attention to the explanations of the words in the pyramid.

The first step on the pyramid is **Rhythm** (Regularity and Tempo.) Rhythm is the characteristic sequence of footfalls and timing of a pure walk, pure trot, and pure canter. The tempo must be consistent and appropriate to the horse, and the horse should be in balance and self-carriage suitable to the level being shown. Dressage training should enhance the gaits, with correct tempo and balance allowing increased freedom and elasticity. Quality of the gaits is often the first directive idea of each movement.

The two major changes in the 2019 pyramid update are the replacement of **Relaxation** with **Suppleness** on the second step, and the replacement of **Connection** with **Contact** on the third step. Let's look at these terms in more detail.

Relaxation has to do with the horse's mental and physical state. Mental relaxation (freedom from anxiety) is a positive quality. A horse's physical



UPDATED WORDING, SAME GOAL: *The pyramid of training aims to guide dressage training correctly*

and mental/emotional states often go hand in hand. His physical state requires muscle tone for function. As the horse moves, his muscles alternately contract and relax, but sustained contraction or rigidity of the muscles is harmful. Relaxation requires the absence of muscular contraction other than that needed for optimal carriage, strength, range, and fluency of movement. **Suppleness** (Elasticity and Freedom from Anxiety) is needed for the horse to move with flexibility, pliability, and elasticity. Suppleness is related to the horse's conformation—that is, the length of the bones and angulation of the joints. However, the surrounding muscles, ligaments, and tendons can be improved over time through proper conditioning and exercises. They can also be negatively impacted by incorrect training or riding.

The USDF Glossary of Judging Terms defines elasticity as “the ability or tendency to stretch and contract the musculature smoothly, giving the impression of stretchiness or springiness.” Anxiety refers to the horse's mental and emotional state.

Contact (Connection and Acceptance of the Bit Through Acceptance of the Aids) means that the horse should be ridden from back to front, with the energy created by the rider's driving aids received in the rider's allowing hands. In other words, the horse must accept all of the aids, resulting in a harmonious interaction between horse and rider. The stretching circle demonstrates this concept, while the releasing of the reins demonstrates self-carriage. Together they demonstrate the quality of the connection.

Impulsion includes the qualities in its accompanying parenthetical description: Engagement and the Desire to Go Forward. The horse carries himself forward with elasticity in his step, suppleness in his back, and engagement of his hindquarters. Impulsion is measured by the period of suspension in the trot and canter. It is required for the development of the medium paces and of (with the addition of collection) the extended paces.

Straightness (Improved Alignment and Equal, Lateral Suppleness on Both Reins) is the fifth step of the pyramid of training. Since by nature every horse is crooked (or “hollow” on one side), it is important to work from the beginning

The major changes to the pyramid of training are the replacement of Relaxation with Suppleness and of Connection with Contact.

to develop straightness. Gymnastic exercises help the horse to engage both hind legs evenly to prepare for the collected work, thereby improving both his lateral and longitudinal balance.

Collection (Balance and Lightness of the Forehand from Increased Engagement) is the pinnacle of the pyramid. The beginning of collection is expected at Second Level, but obviously Second Level is not the end goal of dressage training. The same basics apply as the training progresses through the levels, all the way to Grand Prix. The rider of the Grand Prix horse must constantly strive to maintain a clear rhythm, a correct and steady tempo, a supple back, and acceptance of the aids along with engagement, an even acceptance of the bit and bend, and a balance appropriate to the level.

To achieve collection, the horse must engage his hindquarters and use his thoracic-sling muscles. He pushes himself up and back over his hindquarters, while at the same time bending the joints of his hind legs to carry his weight increasingly on the hindquarters and storing the energy to be released in the extended paces. In collection, the steps become shorter and more powerful and cadenced, and the rider's aids can become lighter.


Let the Pyramid Guide Your Dressage Training

The aim of dressage is to train the horse to be in a harmonious balance both physically and mentally,

while progressively conditioning his muscles to protect his joints, tendons, and ligaments to ensure his longevity.

By following the pyramid of training in your daily work, your dressage training can be systematic and progressive. Remember that the steps are interrelated. Never ignore rhythm to work on suppleness, or neglect suppleness to focus on contact, or disregard contact to address impulsion, or forget about impulsion when you work on straightness, or overlook any of these elements in your quest for collection. At the same time, don't wait to work on the “higher” steps while you work on the “lower” steps. They are all interrelated! ▲

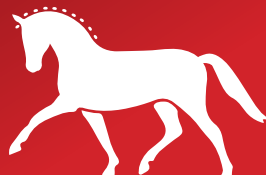
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