

We Got the Beat

Learn how to identify and maintain your horse's tempos

By Michelle Anderson

Finding the correct tempos for a dressage horse's gaits can lead a rider to feel a lot like Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

At times, your horse is too fast, charging around the arena on his forehand while lacking balance and regularity. Or he's too slow, with insufficient activity and energy. All the while, you're really just looking for that comfortable, balanced spot in the middle.



LIKE CLOCKWORK: Jennifer Schrader Williams and her 1996 Hungarian Warmblood stallion HS Wistar (*Wishes and Dreams* – H. Marado) trot with Takt

In this article, an FEI-level rider and trainer and a judge and USDF "L" Education Program faculty member explain how rhythm, speed, and tempo differ (no, they're not synony-

mous). They'll explain the factors that play a role in your horse's tempos, and they'll help you find the tempo at each gait that's—aaahh!—just right.

Rhythm and Tempo and Speed (Oh My!)

The Germans use the word *Takt* to describe both rhythm and regularity, or tempo, of the gaits. The word doesn't translate directly into English, leading to some confusion between the terms, says FEI-level trainer, US Equestrian Federation "S" dressage judge, and USDF "L" judge faculty member Trenna Atkins, of Coupeville, WA.

The American definitions of rhythm and tempo reflect these terms' musical origins, with rhythm referring to the sequencing of the beats and tempo referring to the rate at which the rhythm is maintained (for the USDF definitions, see "Rhythm and Tempo Defined" on the opposing page). However, correct rhythm is unequivocally tied to tempo.

"Tempo is the rate of repetition at which the rhythm of the gait is carried out," explains Atkins.

If an appropriate tempo is not maintained, then the rhythm and purity of the gaits are jeopardized. For example, the walk (a four-beat gait) that is too fast can become lateral or



TECHNICAL EXPERTISE: Trainer and judge Trenna Atkins conducts a session of the USDF "L" Education Program

two-beat in nature. Likewise, a canter that is too slow or inactive can become four-beat rather than a correct three-beat gait. As a result, it's possible to have a consistent tempo but an incorrect rhythm.

Some riders mistake the concept of tempo for speed. To sort them out, consider that the tempo can quicken but the horse isn't going any faster.

"Speed is just how fast you get from one place to another," says Atkins. "But we're riding dressage horses, not racehorses."

Steady, Now

Adjusting and rating a horse's tempos come from the rider's ability to judge and regulate her horse within the rhythm of the gait, says Atkins. The first challenge is to recognize a steady tempo. The second is learning to influence the tempo to improve your horse and his movement.

A steady and appropriate tempo is "the basis of all the movements. First, it's a test of how effective your aids are; but it also allows for timing so the rider can apply aids at the right moment to be effective in the movements," says Jennifer Schrader Williams, a former young rider who today is a successful FEI-level competitor and the head trainer at Summervale Farm in Roy, WA. Williams was the 2010 recipient

of The Dressage Foundation's Anne L. Barlow Ramsay Grant, taking her Hungarian Warmblood stallion HS Wistar to Germany to train with US rider Catherine Haddad.

"The more fit and balanced a rider is, the easier it is for her to hold her horse in a steady and correct tempo," Williams says. "I find that even newer, adult riders who dance, work out, or play music have an easier time achieving steady tempo on their horses." (Saddle time and practice also help, Atkins adds.)

For new riders or those who struggle to get the beat, Williams turns to lunge lessons aboard a steady schoolmaster. Riding a schooled horse that maintains a consistent tempo allows the student to concentrate on developing her own sense of tempo. Williams counts out loud and has the rider try to match the horse's tempo to her beat.

Williams's technique is better than having the rider count for herself, Atkins says: "Often, when I ask riders to count aloud, they'll speed up or slow down their counting with the horse's tempo, rather than the other way around."

Rhythm and Tempo Defined

From the 2011 USDF Competitor and Member Guide

Rhythm: The recurring characteristic sequence and timing of footfalls and phases of a given gait. For the purposes of dressage, the only correct rhythms are those of the pure walk, trot, and canter, and rein back and piaffe (not those of amble, pace, rack, etc.). In music, the repeated pattern or grouping of musical beats.

Tempo: Rate of repetition of the rhythm, the strides, or of the emphasized musical beats—beats per minute, as may be measured by a metronome.

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Atkins uses other techniques as well, such as turning on a metro-nome or having students ride to music; but she stresses that the biggest tempo issue for riders is usually related to awareness. “Many adult amateurs or even young riders will ride with other things on their minds,” she says. “They want to get in, ride, and get out because they’re busy and have other things to do. They need to focus on the details when they’re riding and create a constant awareness

of the horse’s tempo and the influence as a rider over it. Over time, it will become as instinctual as posting the trot.”

Williams agrees on the importance of awareness—and she also uses a tempo check as a test of the horse’s adjustability and obedience to the aids: “I’m always checking in with myself and the horse to make sure we’re in the right tempo, and I test the horse to my seat and leg to see if I can change tempo within the gaits.”

Finding Your Horse’s Ideal Tempos

Each of the horse’s three natural gaits has its own distinct rhythm (see “The Rhythms of the Gaits” on page 30). Just as some people are natural-born dancers while others sport two left feet, some horses are innately more consistent than others in their tempos.

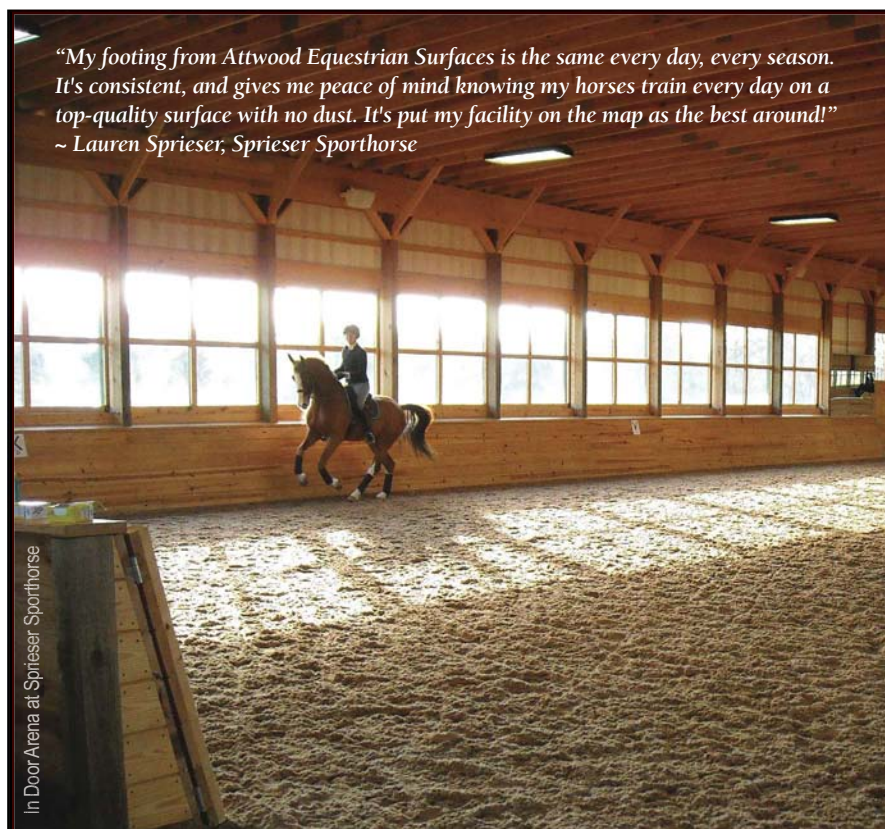
“Tempo has to do with the balance of the horse and its conformation,” explains Williams. “A horse with a more uphill, athletic build will have an easier time with balance and tempo.”

Williams uses a combination of verbal cue and seat aid to help a horse understand her request for a change in tempo. She’ll say “boing, boing, boing” aloud to set the beat as she posts to that tempo, helping to show her horse that her seat and the tempo are connected. Once the horse learns to follow her tempo as she posts, she segues the seat aid to the sitting trot and to the other gaits.

“Young horses have a more difficult time maintaining their tempo due to lack of balance and strength,” Williams says. “I find that, on horses that naturally have a quicker tempo or a shorter stride, working on slowing my posting until the horse matches the tempo created by my seat really helps them become independent from my hand. This helps me establish the idea for the horse to follow my lead and wait for my timing, not rushing off and looking for too much support from my hand.”

For horses that are too quick in their natural tempos and tend to run on the forehand, Atkins advises riding circles and serpentines, which require lots of bending and changing of bend. These exercises, when coupled with appropriately timed half-halts from the seat, naturally challenge the horse’s balance and encourage him to rebalance himself over his haunches without relying on the rider’s hands. The result is a moderated tempo with increased impulsion, she says.

“It’s important to ride back to front and not try to change tempo from



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the hand," Williams says, adding that many too-quick horses will simply curl behind the bit and forge ahead. Atkins agrees, adding that using a "hand brake" to slow the tempo is a big no-no but one she sees frequently when she judges.

Oh No, I've Lost the Beat!

Each level of dressage training presents tempo-related challenges. Our experts identify common problems and offer advice.

Training Level tempo issue #1: Riders at this level often choose a tempo that's too quick, especially at the trot.

Turn the beat around: They're confusing quickness with impulsion, which comes from the pushing power of engaged hindquarters. When the tempo is too fast, the horse is literally run onto his forehead.

"Quickness is the enemy of impulsion," Atkins says. "It usually leads to flatter, shorter strides and a lack of

impulsion." Try slowing your posting or the rhythm of your seat a notch and see if the balance improves.

Training Level tempo issue #2: The opposite problem: insufficient activity in a too-slow walk, with the horse behind the leg; and lack of impulsion in the canter, leading to an unclear rhythm.

Turn the beat around: Your horse may lack a correct response to the forward driving aids. If he is sluggish or makes you feel as if you have to push him forward at every stride, he probably needs to learn a better reaction to the leg, says Williams. If he doesn't respond to a light leg aid, tap him with the whip or bump him with the spur; then try the light leg aid again. Repeat if necessary until he learns that he must respond to light aids.

Training Level tempo issue #3: Variations in tempo before and during transitions between the gaits, such as in a trot-walk transition.

"We want to see tempo stay as consistent as possible, especially during the transition," Atkins says. (Although a horse's strides may shorten before a transition, the tempo should remain steady.)

Turn the beat around: Anticipation by horse or rider (or both) of the upcoming transition may be leading to moments of tension and a loss of fluidity of the strides. Practice riding many transitions, both between gaits and within the gait, while focusing on maintaining steady tempos. Ride transitions other than at points commonly used in the tests (such as at X or at the ends of long diagonals) to keep your horse guessing.

First Level tempo issue: Overly ambitious riders, trying to give judges "everything they can" in trot and canter lengthenings, sacrifice tempo for speed.

Turn the beat around: "We want to see a gradual transition, and not running too fast, which often results

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The Rhythms of the Gaits

Each gait has a distinct rhythm of hoofbeats when performed correctly. Tempo plays a direct role in the purity of the gaits. If tempo is too quick or too slow, the gaits risk becoming disunited. If you're to control and improve your horse's gaits, you must start by learning their rhythms.

Walk: The walk is a four-beat gait, meaning that each hoof leaves and strikes the ground individually in even intervals.

The count: One-two-three-four-one-two-three-four.

Trot: The trot is a two-beat gait, which allows for the steady up-down rhythm of posting. A trotting horse moves his legs in diagonal pairs (right front/left hind; left front/right hind), with a moment of suspension ("air time") in between.

(Having trouble visualizing the diagonal pairs? Wrap each pair with a different color of polo wrap.)

The count: One-two-one-two

Canter: A proper canter is a three-beat gait plus a moment of suspension during which all four limbs are airborne. When a horse is in left-lead canter, his left foreleg is the last in the sequence to touch down; the reverse is true for right-lead canter, as follows:

Left lead: Right hind / left hind and right fore / left fore

Right lead: Left hind / right hind and left fore / right fore

The count: One-two-three-one-two-three

Rein back: In a correct rein back, the horse lowers his haunches and moves his legs backward and in diagonal pairs (not unlike a trot in reverse, but without a moment of suspension, and obviously slower).

The count: One-two-one-two.

in a loss of balance and, during the trot, breaking into a canter," Atkins says. When you school lengthenings, practice developing your feel for "the edge"—the greatest increase in stride length your horse is capable of while still maintaining his balance. If, say, he breaks from trot to canter, you'll know you went a little too far.

Second Level tempo issue #1:

The tempos of the collected trot and canter (both introduced at this level) are too slow.

Turn the beat around: "Due to the increased demand of the lateral movements and the balance and bend of the counter-canter, sometimes we see people slow the tempo way down in both the trot and the canter," Atkins says. Williams adds that the tempo is too slow if the horse's hind legs feel "stuck" in the lateral work—an indication that he lacks sufficient impulsion.

Intersperse transitions within the gait, such as from collected to medium canter and back again, with lateral work during your schooling sessions to refresh the energy and to help determine whether the tempo has gotten too slow.

Second Level tempo issue #2:

The horse quickens or rushes through the simple changes (changes of canter lead through the walk). He may jig in the walk, thereby failing to show a clear walk rhythm, says Atkins.

Turn the beat around: Lack of relaxation or loss of balance (or both) may be to blame. Help restore his focus and confidence by going back to easier transitions, such as trot-walk or canter-trot, for a while. Or mix it up by walking and immediately riding a small circle or a few steps of leg-yield to help supple and rebalance him before asking for the canter again.

The Foundation

Your awareness of and ability to regulate your horse's tempos become increasingly important as you move up the levels of dressage, says Atkins. Once you gain a firm understanding of rhythm and tempo, you can help advance him through the levels, maintaining tempo through the flying changes, tempi changes (sequenced flying changes), half-pass, pirouettes, passage, and piaffe.

Each movement presents its own challenges related to the maintenance of a consistent tempo, Williams says. But by becoming an aware and active rider, you'll find your own inner Goldilocks and learn to identify when everything is "just right." ▲

Michelle Anderson works in marketing and public relations in Bend, OR. She's currently competing a young horse at First Level.

Try These Test-Movement Tempo Challenges

Three well-known dressage test movements—the free walk, the trot stretching circle, and the release of a rein in the canter (*überstreichen*)—are all excellent exercises that test the rider's mastery of her horse's tempos, says FEI-level trainer Jennifer Schrader Williams. In the stretching circle, especially, you must use your seat, leg, and posting to regulate the tempo as your horse stretches forward and down.

In these exercises, holes in the basic training, reliance on the reins, and lack of self-carriage often become obvious, Williams says.