

American Dressage Legends: Jessica Ransehausen

From Olympic teams to the dressage tests, this pioneer has made her mark—and then some

Some dressage enthusiasts make their mark as riders. Others' primary contributions are as judges, organizers, or other roles. Not many people reach the top in multiple categories.

One who did is Jessica Newberry Ransehausen, 76, a three-time Olympian who went on to forge careers as an influential instructor, judge, *chef d'équipe*, and governance figure.



ON THE MAP: With Forstrat, Jessica Ransehausen (née Newberry) represented the US at the 1960 and 1964 Olympic Games. They are pictured in Aachen, Germany, in 1960.

In 1956 and 1957, riding Forstrat, Ransehausen won the United States Equestrian Team's dressage national championship. In 1959, the pair helped the US team to win a silver medal at the Pan American Games

in Chicago. They went on to compete on the US dressage teams at the 1960 Rome Olympic Games and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Along the way, Ransehausen became the first American dressage competitor to wear the prestigious green leading-rider armband at Aachen, Germany.

After a break to marry and raise children Clayton and Missy, Ransehausen returned to dressage competition. Aboard Orpheus, she represented the US at her third and final Olympic Games, Seoul 1988.

After the Seoul Olympics, Ransehausen—who continued to ride and train—was just getting started. She served as the *chef d'équipe* of the US dressage squad at the 1992, 1996, and 2000 Olympic Games; at the 1990 and 1994 World Equestrian Games; and at the 1991 and 1995 Pan American Games. She earned a dressage judge's license and rose through the ranks to FEI "I" (now 4*) judge, officiating at many high-profile competitions. She was the USET's vice president for dressage, served three terms as chair of the American Horse Shows Association (now United States Equestrian Federation) Dressage Committee, and in 1997 was elected the AHSA's assistant secretary. She also served as the US representative to the FEI World Cup Committee and helped bring a World Cup League to North America.

After a stint in Germany so that she and her children could ride and train with the late Dr. Reiner Klimke, Ransehausen returned to the US in 1980 and settled at her Blue Hill Farm in Unionville, PA, where she and daughter Missy are still based today. Missy, a successful eventing trainer and competitor and former *chef* of the US para-equestrian dressage team,

is just one of the many prominent equestrians Jessica Ransehausen has helped educate. She coached Dorothy Morkis on Monaco before the pair won team bronze at the 1976 Montreal Olympics. Longtime student Todd Flettrich was the inaugural FEI North American Young Riders Championships dressage individual gold medalist in 1992; he went on to be a member of the US team at the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games. In 2001, student Kerri Sowers won team silver and individual bronze at the NAYRC. Eventers she has coached in dressage include Olympic medalists Darren Chiacchia and Phillip Dutton. Ransehausen's most prominent para-equestrian dressage student to date (with coaching duties shared with Missy Ransehausen) is six-time USEF national champion Rebecca Hart, whose mounts have included Jessica's own Lord Ludger.

In recognition of her seminal efforts on behalf of US dressage, the USDF inducted Ransehausen into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame in 2001. In 2009, she was honored with the USEF Lifetime Achievement Award and the Jimmy A. Williams Trophy.

You are part of Ransehausen's dressage legacy every time you stretch your horse during a ride, and particularly when you ride a "stretching circle" in a lower-level dressage test. Ransehausen was a member of the test-writing committee that introduced the stretching circle into the AHSA (now USEF) Training and First Level tests. This movement, which has remained in those tests ever since, is now considered a key assessment of a horse's basic dressage training.

In the June 1995 issue of *Practical Horseman* magazine, Ransehausen collaborated with FEI-level rider Oded Shimoni to explain the stretching circle. *USDF Connection* thanks *Practical Horseman* for granting permission to reprint this classic article, whose advice is as useful today as when it first appeared.

Let Him Take the Reins

What three-time Olympic dressage competitor and two-time USET *chef d'équipe* Jessica Ranshousen calls “one of the most intriguing movements in the 1995 AHSA dressage tests” comes in Training Level Tests 3 and 4 and First Level Tests 1 and 3, when you give your horse the opportunity to take the reins out of your hands on a twenty-meter circle. Of course, he doesn't actually remove the reins from your hands; he just gently *eases a short stretch of reins through your relaxed fingers* by stretching his frame, lowering his neck, moving his head forward and slightly downward, and relaxing and swinging the muscles of his back. Beginning below, rider Oded Shimoni shows you how to ride this new movement; on page 20, Jessica explains what she and the others who designed the new tests hoped to achieve with the addition of this movement and with the whole new series of tests, from Training through Fourth Level.

Oded Explains the Movement

Letting your horse stretch down and gradually take the reins out of your hands is one of the most basic tools in classical dressage. It:

- Shows that he is relaxed and carrying himself in self-balance, without your having to hold him together.
- Gives him a little break in the middle of his work and unlocks his hard-working back and neck muscles. A big part of dressage training is building his muscles, but you inevitably reach a point where muscles get “stuck” and you can't build them any more. Stretching loosens them again and prepares them for the next round of strengthening.
- Teaches you to ride your horse's back and hind legs. When you try to stretch him forward without first getting him to step energetically under from behind, he'll do one or

more of the following: fall on his forehand, stick his head and neck in the air, hollow his back, roll up his neck and come behind the bit, speed up, or slow down.

Jessica Ranshousen gives you the background of this movement on page 20; here I'm going to give you the how-to. I'll tell you what your horse will need to be able to do before he starts, identify some common pitfalls you and he can fall into (along with ways to avoid them), give you guidelines about

when and how to practice at home, and offer some tips for handling that awful day at the show when you think he's too stiff, tense, or distracted to ever relax and stretch down.

Before You Try

Before your horse can *automatically and properly* stretch, “chew” the reins through your fingers, and reach forward and down with his nose, he needs to know how to move forward ener-

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The Process of Stretching

Throughout the exercise, I use the same forward aids as in the regular trot. I don't do anything different with my legs. Here's how it works:

1. We've just left B in rising trot. I'm simply maintaining the rhythm and forwardness as I tell my horse that stretching is coming by beginning to soften my fingers and lower my hands down the withers.

2. I'm continuing to move my hands lower and forward, toward his mouth, as he starts to lengthen his neck and open his throatlatch.

3. Now he begins to lower his neck, too. I continue to maintain his balance by making sure he doesn't fall on my inside leg, and by keeping a steady contact on the outside rein.

4. Lowering his neck and stretching even more, he's almost to the point we want. In this split second he's a tad behind the vertical, but...

5. ...a moment later he's at the ideal point of stretching down. This is what the judges will be looking for—and, most important, they'll see that while stretching forward and lower, he's maintained his balance. In this photo, he's clearly showing the point of the whole exercise: His outside hind leg is taking a bigger stride, more under his body, than when we began, and his back is rounding up—he certainly isn't falling on his forehand!



getically and rhythmically, bend evenly around a twenty-meter circle, move away from your leg, and maintain a steady, elastic, even, conversational contact on the bit. If he has a tendency to be above the bit and tries to avoid submitting to the reins with a stiff poll and rigid under-neck muscles, he'll get strung out and on the forehand and won't stretch properly. If he tends to evade contact by moving his head backward and dropping behind the bit, he'll get very low and roll up. In either case, and in or out of the show ring, his response is a dead giveaway that you need to go back with him and do some very, very basic groundwork that's beyond the scope of this article.

Even at Training Level, your horse should understand and listen to half-halts. When you lightly press your legs against his sides and momentarily

squeeze your outside hand on the rein, he should bend his hocks a bit more, slightly lower his hindquarters, carry some weight toward the rear, and step farther under himself from behind. He should be able to travel straight, with his hind feet stepping in the track of his front feet, whether he's going down the long side or curving around a corner or a circle, and stay in some reasonable form of balance: not leaning against one of your legs, not hanging on one side of the bit, and giving you a healthy, even, non-pulling contact on the reins.

I'd love to be able to tell you exactly how much contact that is, but I can't measure it for you by weight. As a rider, you'll have to consider quality and elasticity, and those are very individual things. You and your horse may feel comfortable with fifteen pounds of contact, and your friend and her

Shortening the Reins

1. As you come toward B to close your twenty-meter circle, shorten your reins by bridging them. Shorten the outside (left) rein first, as I'm doing here, by bridging the reins in your inside (right) hand...

2. ...and then the inside rein by switching the bridge from your inside hand...

3. ...to your outside. This shortening will help you bring your horse's head and neck smoothly back up to his normal working frame.



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horse may feel comfortable with five, but that doesn't necessarily make five pounds better. I've seen two pounds of awful contact and twenty pounds of excellent, and vice versa. It's all relative to your physique and to what works for you and your horse—as long as you're able to maintain contact without pulling and nagging, and he responds to your half-halts by shifting into what I call "practical balance": He doesn't need to be as engaged and "under" himself as a Grand Prix horse,

but he's taking his first steps toward becoming a dressage horse, starting to bend his hocks and carry some weight toward the rear.

How will that feel? Again, your horse will give you even contact on both reins, he'll step farther under himself with his hind legs, he'll swing the muscles in his back, which will come up and round underneath you, and you'll get a little sense of riding uphill. Those are all signs that he's starting to carry weight behind.

Riding the Movement

Here's the movement as it appears in Training Level Test 4. [*Editor's note: There is no longer a Test 4 in the USEF dressage tests.*]

B – Circle right 20m trot rising, letting the horse gradually take the reins out of the hands. [*Current wording: "...allowing the horse to stretch forward and downward."*]

Before B – Gradually take up the reins. [*Current wording: "Shorten the reins."*]

Whether you're schooling at home or riding a test at the show, the technique you'll need is pretty straightforward. It stays the same even though minor details can change; at home, for example, you can vary the exercise by stretching forward and down on a serpentine or circling two or three times. Here's the basic how-to:

Divide the twenty-meter circle roughly into quarters. In the first quarter, between B and the center line, gradually ask your horse to stretch forward and down. In the second and third quarters, from the center line to E to the center line, ride him stretched. In the fourth quarter, from the center line to B, gradually take him back up.

Now let's look at the movement step by step:

Tracking right toward B, establish an energetic trot. [*Editor's note: The text in this section has been edited to remove references to sitting trot, which is no longer required at Training or First Level. The stretching circle must be ridden in rising trot.*] Look ahead around the circle, toward the center line; half-halt him, with a squeeze of your legs and a squeeze of your fist on the outside rein, to alert him that a change is coming and to rebalance him. Turn his shoulders onto the track of the circle by bringing your outside rein against that shoulder and squeezing the fingers of your inside hand to create a soft bend in the jaw. Step more deeply into your inside stirrup, keep your inside leg against the girth to prevent him from falling in

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What We Were After: What We Want to See

By Jessica Ransehausen

Letting your horse take the reins out of your hands—a movement never before seen in our tests—can be quite attractive when it's done well. But we members of the test-writing committee had more than an attractive novelty in mind when we included it. Adding this movement was part of our effort to make the entire series of new tests—from Training Level through Fourth Level—into a workable blueprint for the *correct, systematic, step-by-step, daily training of your dressage horse*.

We designed these new tests to help you, the rider—particularly if, like so many American dressage enthusiasts, you live where there are few or no trainers, so you rely on test scores to tell you how your training is going, and on the upcoming levels to tell you where to take it next. We wanted the new tests to discourage riding with too much hand and muscle and not enough seat and leg. We wanted them to make unhappy, tense, “Swiss-cheese horses” (horses that are full of holes) with restricted gaits a thing of the past. We wanted to encourage lighter, happier, better-balanced horses, stepping freely and energetically under themselves from behind and not relying on their riders to hold them together. And we wanted the tests to progress logically and “doably,” the way training should. We emphasized (in many cases with double coefficients) the classical training tools of dressage that you should be using at home every day, such as:

- Clear transitions (between and within gaits, they challenge your and your horse's balance—and by so doing, improve it)
- Changes of bend and direction (they supple your horse and teach him obedience)
- Lateral work, such as leg-yields (to supple and strengthen him)

- And this movement, taking the reins out of the hands, which tests and improves your horse's ability to stay balanced on his own.

What do I, as a judge, want to see from this movement? A relaxed, balanced horse, on an accurate circle, smoothly and quietly stretching down, maintaining his rhythm and energy, then coming back up without resistance or hesitation. As you start the circle, I want to see you gradually giving the reins. I want to see him respond to your “invitation” by evenly and politely easing three or four inches of rein through your fingers without rooting, jerking, or flipping his head. I want to see him stay in the same flowing, energetic trot rhythm as he stretches his nose forward and down, neither putting his head up in the air nor rolling up in a ball and bringing his head to his chest or knees. And I want to see you keeping things pretty much under control by maintaining your position and contact with his mouth—because you still have an accurate twenty-meter circle to ride. When, several strides before you finish the circle, you gradually begin to shorten



the reins, I want to see your horse raise his frame without resisting, tensing up, opening his mouth, throwing his head, or slowing down.

What difference should I see between Training and First Level? Not much; just the increased animation and “bounce to the ounce” that naturally goes along with a First Level horse.

Simple, huh? This “new movement” really isn't radically different. It's just an extension of what I hope you're already doing in your daily training. All we test writers are interested in is seeing your horse relax and swing through his back and stay balanced and comfortable when you give him a little longer rein and allow him to lower his frame, nose, neck, and ears.

on the circle, and bring your outside leg about a hand's width behind your inside leg to help him bend and prevent his haunches from sliding to the outside.

Keep your hand, arm, and upper-body position the same (tilting forward can unbalance your horse, and straightening your arms, spreading your hands wide, or dropping them toward your knees are all no-no's) as you slightly relax your fingers on the reins without opening or straightening them and move your hands a couple of inches lower and toward his mouth. Help him to understand what you want by touching his withers as you move your hands; he'll gradually associate the feeling with stretching and respond more readily.

Over the next three or four strides, allow your horse to stretch freely forward over his back and neck muscles, "seek the bit," poke his nose forward, and gently and evenly lengthen the reins three or four inches, easing them through your relaxed fingers.

Remember to make the transition gradual, over three or four strides. It's not a dropping or throwing away of your horse; nor is it an attack. *Nothing* good in riding is ever abrupt.

As your horse stretches forward, he should almost feel as if he's becoming lighter, without the slightest glimpse of a loss of balance. You shouldn't feel him grab the reins out of your fingers and pull. You shouldn't feel him suddenly get heavy. You shouldn't feel him lean against one leg or the other. You *should* feel a tremendous release and looseness over and through his back and neck. You should even, through the reins, feel his throatlatch open and the muscles on the underside of his neck get loose, soft, relaxed, and almost floppy. (This is a very important aspect of stretching your horse, because those under-neck muscles can get braced and overdeveloped and start working against us.) And while he should neither speed up nor slow down—two typical accommodations to loss of balance—

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he may take slightly bigger, more enthusiastic, energetic steps with his hind legs (and, of course, his front legs will follow suit).

Maintain contact, continue to look ahead around the circle (a sure-fire way to tell the judge you're confident and in charge), and make sure your outside rein is continuing to guide and bring your horse's shoulders around. As you cross the center line on the way back to B, smoothly press your legs a little more firmly against his

sides, half-halt, and in the next three or four strides *before you arrive at B*, shorten the reins—outside rein first by bridging the reins in your inside hand, then inside by switching the bridge to the outside (see the photos on page 17)—and bring him back up to his normal working frame.

When Your Horse Is Tense

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(say it's cold and windy, or there's a lot going on)? You can try to get him a little tired and not so fresh by longeing, but I suggest you longe only as a last resort. Though at home longeing a fresh horse is usually fine, I prefer to stay away from longeing in a show situation—where, because the horse tends to be distracted and therefore susceptible to injuring himself longeing could do more harm than good. Better to relax him and get him listening and responding by picking up an energetic rising trot and doing lots of figures: fifteen-meter circles, serpentes, half-circles in reverse—even things you wouldn't ordinarily do on a normal, sunny, quiet day, like ten-meter circles, or anything else that will get him physically working and mentally paying attention.

When your horse starts to simmer down, you can throw in some walk-trot transitions and canter circles. And when you feel that you have his full attention and he's balanced and listening, go on a twenty-meter circle,

practice the movement, and let him stretch down.

Stretching During Schooling

Stretching your horse is a tremendous tool for helping you ride his hind legs, test his balance, and relax his muscles. During a single forty-five-minute schooling session, let him take the reins out of your hands several times, but be careful you don't get *too* hung up on stretching down. When that happens, you end up focusing on and riding his neck and nothing more. Besides, that much stretching isn't for everybody. If you and he are a little green, I don't recommend that you stretch him in the beginning of your training session; if you do, your whole ride may end up being stretched out. Instead, first make sure he's round and moving forward off your leg in a normal frame, able to maintain some semblance of balance. Make sure he's re-

ally on the bit and listening to your half-halts, and make sure he's giving to your leg by bending and going forward, before you test whether he can stay in balance when he stretches forward and down.

And remember *always* that allowing your horse to take the reins out of your hands is not simply a show-ring movement. As Jessica says on page TK, stretching forward and down at the trot was included in the new Training and First Level tests because it's something you should be doing at home, during every training session. If you are, doing it during a test will be a piece of cake! ▲

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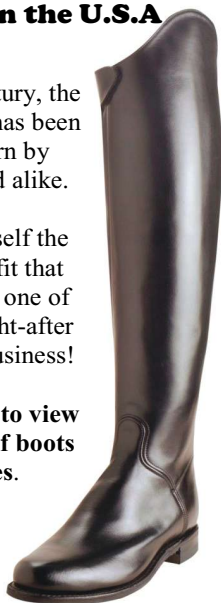
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