

TRAINING CLASSIC

Sequential Schooling of the Dressage Horse

First in a series. This month: The dressage prospect.

By Hilda Gurney

Photographs by Hillair Carthine Bell

Your dressage prospect should be fairly athletic and have three good paces. He should travel evenly and have strong, sound hind legs. The breed, size and color are not important. Your horse doesn't have to be the super-athletic Olympic prospect in order to achieve the Grand Prix level of schooling. Training your horse to perform the Grand Prix test correctly to the best of his ability is a



Active, energetic trot of a good dressage prospect

very satisfying goal. The joy of working such a horse is extremely rewarding even though he may not possess the scope to make the Olympic team.

You must like your horse if you are to school him an hour a day for at least five years. Nervous, unaggressive riders usually do better with sensitive horses. Demanding, high-strung riders often succeed with less sensitive,

somewhat phlegmatic horses. Quiet, patient riders do well with more highly strung horses. The super-athletic horses usually require riders who can handle super-athletic stunts. Over-mounted riders live with fear, which stifles both them and their horses.

Three good gaits are essential for the competitive dressage prospect. The walk should be even, long-strided, and four-beat with an overstep, even when led on the line. Avoid horses that pace or are so long-backed or short-strided that they can't overstep. Marked winging, winding, rotating hocks, and other forms of crookedness are undesirable, but not as serious as faults like pacing or lack of overstep. Uneven steps are also quite undesirable.

The trot should also be fairly straight, with long, loose strides. The dressage prospect should show potential for extension and collection. His hocks should work under his body. Horses that push out with their hocks ("chicken hocked") are usually difficult to collect. Marked dragging of the hind legs is another sign of lazy haunches. A tendency to spread the hocks apart as viewed from the rear may indicate problems later with spraddling extensions. The hocks should flex well at each stride but not show greater action than the forelegs. Even the young horse should give you a feeling that thrusting haunches power the forehand. Horses that trot with short strides, lack suspension, or seem to have a disconnected head-nodding trot are less desirable as prospects. When asked to lengthen the trot, very few young horses will be able to show much. However, if the horse can easily



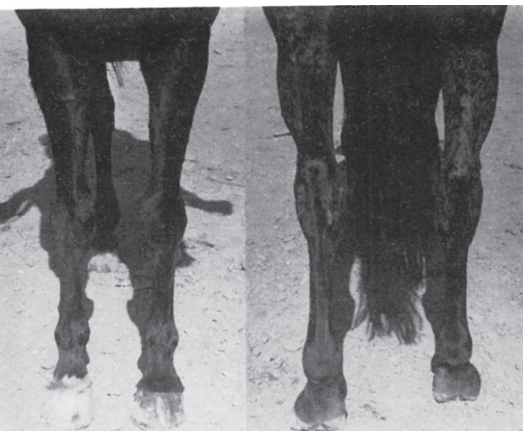
A horse that is not tracking up at the trot.

Causes might be: 1. Horse restricted by rider. 2. Horse not moving forward. 3. Lack of freedom in gait—which means that the horse would not be a good dressage prospect.

overstep his front tracks with his hind legs and doesn't have too high knee action, he will probably develop extensions. Horses that spraddle behind or are short-strided, stiff-hocked, or have high knee action frequently have difficulty learning to extend their strides. Horses that are "chicken hocked" may have lovely free lengthenings; however, such horses are difficult to balance and engage for higher-level work. At lower levels, many "chicken hocked" horses win consistently but are rarely able to advance to higher levels.

A round, springy, fluid canter is ideal. It should have three beats and a pronounced suspension period. The hind legs should come well under the horse's body at each stride. Many young horses will gallop at first, but should show the ability to bring the haunches under the body as well as a distinct suspension period. The hind legs should bend well, and the horse should not appear to pace with the inside pair of legs. This pacing type of canter is called a lateral canter. Prospects with lateral canters tend to hurry in canter extensions but are usually very quick to learn flying changes. Many horses have a very different canter on one lead as compared to the other. This unevenness often causes problems throughout schooling. When a horse has a shorter stride on one canter lead than on the other, the tempi changes tend to be ir-

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Left: Nice straight legs, set neither too close nor too far apart. Right: A pair of nicely developed, straight hind legs.

regular and more difficult for the horse to learn. Horses that perform a “running” canter with little or no suspension period start dressage schooling at a disadvantage. These horses must be ridden more forward with emphasis put on the roundness and suspension period until their canter becomes correct. Such “running” canters are often a result of schooling a horse to canter slowly with a long, low frame. In nature a horse will almost always canter with a fairly high neck and a marked suspension period. When schooled to canter with a low neck, the horse will frequently compensate by losing the period of suspension. A very crooked canter may indicate that the horse is evading using his haunches. Such horses frequently like to switch leads behind and have difficulty holding the counter lead. A slightly crooked canter is natural. In fact, the only really unnatural movement we teach the horse in dressage is a straight canter. However, a straight canter is necessary in order for the horse to learn fluid tempi changes and small, balanced pirouettes. A short, stiff canter is difficult to develop into an elastic round gait and should be avoided.

In dressage, conformation is not as important as gaits. A good shoulder is a shoulder that moves freely. A horse that moves elastically with a good overstep and suspension must have a functionally proper length of back. In short, function determines the correctness of the conformation. However, there are a few

generalizations that will be helpful in evaluating the dressage prospect’s conformation. High croups frequently lead to problems in developing engagement. It is preferable to have a lower croup than withers, although I have observed horses which in spite of having a high croup when standing, move well under behind and appear lower-crouped when moving. Low-carried necks tend to put a horse more on the forehand, although necks can be developed with schooling. Necks that are much more strongly muscled

underneath than above are indicative of a horse that resists the bit. Forearms that are more strongly muscled than gaskins tell loudly and clearly which end of the horse is doing the work. A horse with a forehand markedly more developed than the haunches would have to be completely changed from using his forehand to using his haunches. Straight hind legs frequently relate to shorter, less-engaged strides. Wide-set hocks tend to spraddle. A too-thick throatlatch or overdeveloped glands in the throat-

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latch region can make a horse completely unsuited for dressage. Flexing the poll on such horses may obstruct the trachea, making “on the bit” a choking matter. Closely set elbows or excess fat may interfere with the freedom of movement of the elbows. Crooked-appearing legs are not much of a problem for dressage as long as the horse moves fairly straight. However, your dressage prospect must travel sound and free of pain if he is to perform long, springy gaits. Weak stifles and hocks are the enemy of the dressage horse.

A weak-stifled horse can give many years of service as a hunter, whereas dressage work would break him down. Riders might remember the stress on their horses’ haunches whenever they practice high-stress movements. There is less chance that strain will occur if such movements are practiced for short periods of time and are alternated with other movements or rest periods.

Correct dressage results in the improvement of the horse’s movements and appearance. Elastic, springy, bal-

anced, rhythmic gaits are a result of good schooling. I have been amazed over and over again at the complete metamorphosis of a short-strided, ewe-necked, unmuscled prospect into an elastic, free-moving, rounded, powerful Grand Prix horse. However, the more correctly moving and conformed your prospect is, the easier the task of schooling him will be, as long as both your temperaments are compatible. Remember that there is no such thing as the perfect horse, and you must understand both the strengths and weaknesses in order to understand your horse effectively.

Equipment

Appropriate equipment makes the schooling task more efficient as well as decreasing the chance of injuries to the horse and trainer. Horses will injure themselves even under the best conditions, but poor equipment, careless stable management, and poor judgment will greatly increase the injury rate.

Young horses tend to interfere and will frequently clumsily knock their legs together. For that reason, it is wise to use galloping boots, wraps, or polo bandages during the first stages of schooling until their motor coordination improves.

Lungeing requires a lungeing cavesson, lunge line, lunge whip with a nice long lash, and easily adjusted long side reins. A nice lunge line or tape has a swivel clip at the end and is not made of nylon. The nylon tapes can burn terribly if they are pulled through your hands by an unruly horse. Knots must not be allowed to get into the tape, as the constant pulling tightens them and makes them very difficult to remove. Side reins should be even in length and easily adjusted. Numbered holes are an asset. Elastic side reins can be useful for very light-mouthed horses, but I prefer solid side reins since most horses won’t lug on them quite as much. Horses shouldn’t be ridden with side reins. If a horse fights the side reins, he may easily rear over backward on his rider. Also, too much walking on side reins damages the qual-



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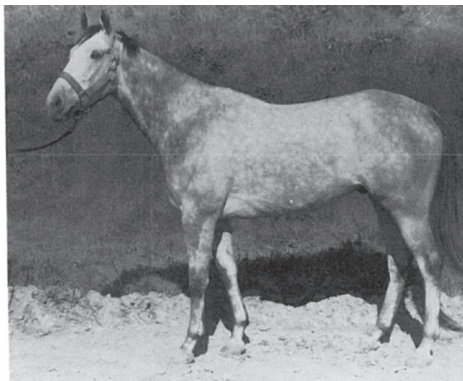
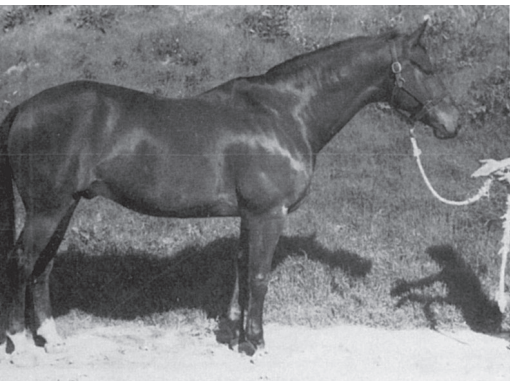
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for application information.



Left: An excellent prospect: well-set neck, withers higher than croup, balanced muscling of forehand and haunches (although haunches could be more developed), hocks nicely bent. Right: Another good prospect: nicely set neck, too thick at throatlatch, which might cause problems with flexion or cause wind restriction. More development necessary through loins and back.

ity of the walk, since the horse is unable to nod his head and neck.

Generally a fairly mild snaffle should be used on the young horse. The bit should be adjusted so that it isn't too low, inviting the horse to put his tongue over it. Correct width of the bit is also important, since a bit that is too narrow may pinch the horse's mouth and one too wide will

allow the joint to hang too far down in the horse's mouth. Use of a dropped noseband is advisable to prevent the horse from getting into the habit of opening his mouth or crossing his jaw.

Fitting the saddle is important for both horse and rider. Clearance over the withers and spine is extremely important to prevent pain or injury. However, a saddle that sits too far

above the withers tends to have the deepest point far back toward the cantle, forcing the rider into a chair seat. When buying a saddle, make sure it fits both the horse and rider well. Well-chosen and maintained equipment will last for years and even decades. Good equipment must be carefully chosen and fitted and will greatly aid the dressage rider in schooling the horse. ▲

Next month: Starting the young horse.

When Hilda Gurney wrote this series for Dressage & CT magazine, it had been only two years since she had won a team bronze medal at the 1976 Olympics with her legendary Thoroughbred, Keen. Forty years later, Gurney is still going strong at her Keenridge in Moorpark, CA, where she continues to ride, train, and teach. For her contributions as a dressage professional, competitor, judge, sport-horse breeder, and more, she was inducted into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame in 2007. Keen was inducted in 1997.



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