

To Bring the Back up, Let the Neck ‘Fall Down’

Developing Second Level collection despite conformational challenges takes careful riding and a good seat

By Vicki Hammers-O'Neil with Amber Heintzberger
Photographs by Amber Heintzberger

Adult amateur Sandy Rabinowitz is riding her American Saddlebred gelding, Sequoia, at Second Level. Sandy, who has ridden since the age of eight, started dressage about 30 years ago and has

always ridden horses that she raised and trained herself. She bought Sequoia, now twelve, from his breeder as an untrained six-year-old.

Because of conformational and gait considerations related to Sequoia's



INCLINATION: As a result of his conformation, Sequoia's natural preference is to carry himself with his head high and his back hollow



CONNECTED: For some horses, this connection would be considered too flat; but for Sequoia, an American Saddlebred gelding owned and ridden by Sandy Rabinowitz, this medium trot shows a good desire to fill up the rein.

breed, Sandy spends much of her schooling time riding him with a “falling-down neck,” interspersed with short periods of riding him “up,” according to Sandy's instructor, USDF-certified instructor Vicki Hammers-O'Neil. Their lessons tend to focus on how Sandy can use her seat to help Sequoia lift and round over his back instead of just raising his poll.

The issue: Many riders at this level struggle to gain mastery over the seat in order to influence their horses' bodies. Sequoia's conformation makes doing so particularly challenging.

Hammers-O'Neil says: Sandy is working on everything typical for this level: collection within the gaits and increased self-carriage. It's more difficult because the conformation of the Saddlebred means they fall into that high-headed, hollow-backed category, so it's even more difficult than it would be with some horses to make sure the back stays as “up” as possible and the horse stays free into the contact—that he's not artificially elevating his forehand. That's our big challenge, and along with that is how the rider applies the aids because that can make or break the situation. So



HALF-STRETCH: Good illustration of the “falling-down neck” as Sandy warms up Sequoia. The horse is lifting his back and going toward the rein.

that’s what we’re looking at, specifically in Second Level Test 4, which Sandy is preparing to show.

A Tailored Warm-Up

As you know, Sandy, we generally keep Sequoia’s warm-up on the longer, “deeper” side, with flexion at the poll. Doing so allows the part of the horse’s neck right in front of the withers to be freer, and you get a “waterfall” effect (which some refer to as the falling-down neck) coming out of the withers. We go back to that place frequently with your horse because it’s easier for him to draw his neck up while leaving his back down, and we of course don’t want that to happen. We want his desire to go to the rein always to be there. That’s true of any horse, but this horse’s conformation makes it slightly more difficult.

So as you ride, Sandy, stay elastic with your arms, but make sure he’s cantering into the rein, not floating around behind it. Carry your two hands in front of you, not too wide; that’s it. With this horse, the freer he can warm up, the easier he is to put together later.

Gradually shorten your reins so that, as he shortens his outline and comes more together and “shortens the wheelbase,” you don’t end up with your hands in your lap. He looks good

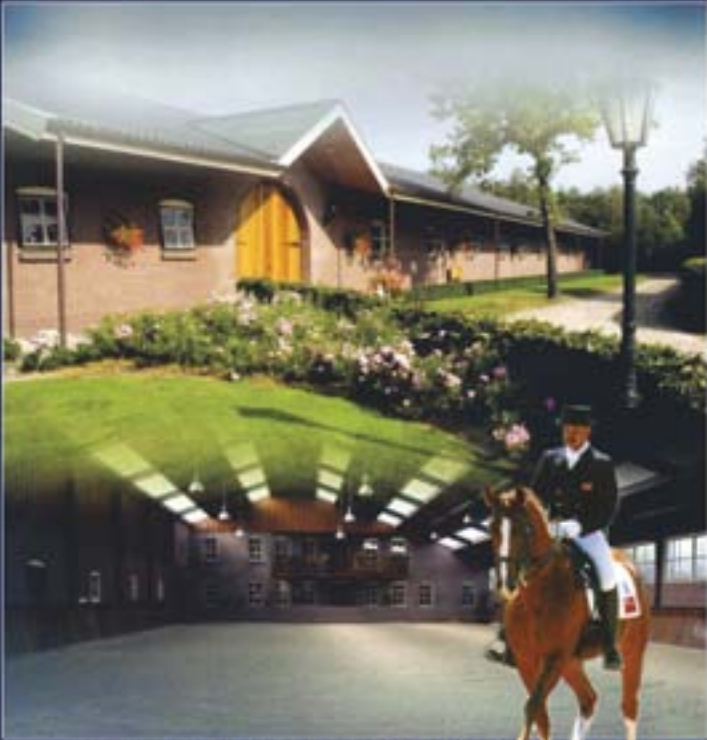
over his back, and he’s reaching for the rein. Think more of a falling-down neck. Good, Sandy.

As you start to organize the walk, ride some turns on the haunches and some walk-halt transitions, still with him slightly deep but not too short. We’ve had that discussion before: about feeling that you have collection from the tail to the withers, but then you want almost a stretching neck from the withers to the poll—collection behind the withers and

stretching in front of the withers.

Think the same way when you ride the canter. As you come around the circle, don’t pull Sequoia’s forehead around. Carry your hands in front of you. Think of your seat describing a tall, almost-stationary oval: When you sit, you don’t want to push his back down. You may almost feel as if you’re coming in front of the vertical with your upper body—but not arching your back, though! Keep your lower back flat. ➔

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Turn on the Haunches

Now school the turn on the haunches again. Sit to the inside; that's better with your upper body, Sandy. Your position and weight distribution make a



ONE GOOD TURN: *Sequoia* in a balanced turn on the haunches to the right

difference because, if *Sequoia* is thinking of stepping out or stopping with a hind leg, and if your seat is light and you're encouraging him to step up underneath you, he's less likely to make a mistake. But if you're pushing down with your seat, you're more likely to encourage him to stop, so you need to stay light.

Keep fishing that nose out; he's up in his neck now but too deep at the poll. Remember: The higher the neck comes, the higher the poll needs to stay as well. Yes, up there. Sit and come around. Good job; walk forward. Very good.

Now that you've schooled the turns on the haunches in both directions, try riding them the same way they happen in Second Level Test 4: half-turns from the rail, to the right at R and then to the left at C. Carry your hands, sitting tall and being organized. Good. Hands in front; shoulder-fore. The first step needs to happen on the spot, and then you come around. Turn and wait. I'm seeing your hands want to come back to you; ride toward his ears, that's better. Rebalance and come around. Good job; pat him.

Work with the Horse's Strong Points

Between the canter and the trot, *Sequoia's* canter is the better of the two gaits. He basically has no suspension in the trot, which is typical of his breed, so let's go to the canter next; we'll do the trot work last. What I'd like to see in your canter work today, Sandy, is that you increase and decrease the stride, with some strides of ultra-collected canter. If you feel that he needs to be deeper, put him deeper; and if you feel that the withers need to be more up, ride him up.

Collect him again; then ride forward. On the long side, ride medium canter to the corner. Stretch taller, Sandy, even in the medium: Make sure that your seat doesn't start to polish the saddle. Absorb the motion of the canter, more "up"; that's correct. It's a vertical oval or elliptical feeling. That's better; stay tall like that, and even taller with a shorter motion of your seat as you shorten the stride.



ENVISIONING SUCCESS: Artist Sandy Rabinowitz and her American Saddlebred, *Sequoia*, in a nice free walk during their lesson

A Visual Approach to Dressage

Sandy Rabinowitz is a graphic artist by profession. Her work is well known to many dressage enthusiasts, as she's the illustrator for the "Solutions" page in *Dressage Today* magazine (and yes, she tries out the concepts on her own horses).

As an artist, Rabinowitz naturally is a visual person. Her dressage instructor, Vicki Hammers-O'Neil, has used visualization to help her student learn to find the right feel with her seat.

"We've been discussing the motion of the seat for collection because, especially at lower levels or on horses that don't maybe have the best canters, it's very easy to start pumping the shoulders and 'polishing the saddle' with your seat," Hammers-O'Neil says. "This causes the canter to be flat and long and pushes the withers down. If you have a horse with a nice canter, you can get away with that for a while, though it catches up with you eventually.

"With a horse like *Sequoia*, it is so necessary for his back to come up, so how you move your seat is really important. Because Sandy is very visual, I encouraged her to feel that the motion of her seat is describing a vertical oval. That image totally changed how she moved her seat, which changed his canter. When you increase the canter stride, the oval becomes a little wider: It stays tall, but it's wider because you have more motion. Then when you come to collection or ask for a shorter stride, the oval becomes narrower again, but it's still tall. This explanation has been very useful for her, and I've used it with other students with great success."

Now, the only thing I'd change is that I'd like to see the collection *before* you turn the corner. Did you feel that? You were still shortening the stride as you were turning the corner. It's too easy for him to "tip over" through the corner then; he needs to stay upright. You need to feel that the half-halt and the transition to collected canter stays on the straight line so he stays upright; then you can release him and allow him to carry you through the corner.

Let's ride that again. Take it down the long side at M, collecting at F. Make sure he's straight before you collect; don't collect while you're turning. He's not allowed to fall over! Good, Sandy, I like where he's carrying himself; I don't feel like he's working his neck against you at all. Keep him straight! And release. Better.

Counter-Canter

Now let's go to the counter-canter on the diagonal. While on the diagonal, increase and decrease the stride. Come straight, and for a moment, without allowing the stride to get bigger, allow the neck to fall down again. You can even take a little counterflexion, not letting the stride get bigger.

As you came through the short



GOOD DEPART: A straight, balanced, and forward walk-canter transition



CANTER CONNECTION: Gymnastic work helps Sequoia improve his engagement and connection in the canter—from dropped in his back and not stretching from withers to poll (left) to softly lifting in his back and "filling up" the reins (right)



side, he came up with his neck. Be sure that you're making it clear with your seat and your leg that you want him to stay in the canter, and use your hand to position his neck. If you aren't clear with him, he's going to opt for what's easier, which is to increase the stride and go more on the forehand.

Stay in the collected canter on the straightaway, but don't be afraid to be more "falling down" in the neck. Now go on the diagonal from F; ride medium canter on the diagonal, collected at H. Let the poll stay up, and carefully stretch tall. Good boy; collect and walk. Let him have a loose rein and take a break.

Let's go to the left now. Think about carrying your hands and staying elastic. As much as his neck fills up the rein in the medium canter, that's the feel I want you to have in the walk, which is much more difficult because the walk lacks the power of the canter.

At the walk, in preparation for canter, keep your seat and tickle him with the whip. Tickle him again and leave his neck out. A shorter rein would be helpful so you're riding more toward the bridle, not backward from the bridle. Better; good job; now transition to canter when you're ready. Good boy.

Circle, ride the transition back to walk, and then ride the up transition

again. You got a little flat through the transition, and so did he. Keep that lifting feeling in that first step of canter; don't do it once and then kind of take a breather. Carry it forward. Yeah, better, and keep that: You're picking him up every stride. Ride straighter on the short side too, and make sure you have a clear corner before the medium canter. That's correct. Stretch tall; this lead is more difficult to keep him straight and balanced. Don't pump with your seat. Collect and sit tall, keeping the reins short.

Canter-Walk Transitions

Let's practice your canter-walk transitions, Sandy. Hands forward, think forward; you need that rocking back and the sense that Sequoia is taking more weight behind, but not at the cost of the forward energy. Good boy, Sequoia. Keep him tall. Stretch tall and collect. I'm going to ask you to do one more, and he needs to stay within your aids; he's not allowed to go barging away. That was better. Now ride a ten-meter circle on the center of the long side and go to an ultra-collected canter. More bend. Use your aids in a way that you compress the inside of his body more. Good job and walk. Pat him and let him have a break again.

Serpentine

Sandy, I'd like you to canter down the long side in shoulder-fore position-ing. Now ride a three-loop serpentine from A to C with simple changes over the center line, and then ride medium canter from H to K.

This canter's quite good and active. Keep that jump; super. If you can get that much carrying power, that's great. That's a big effort for a horse with this type of conformation. Collect, stretch tall, and go—don't



RENVERS ON FOUR TRACKS: *Good bend in this renvers right, and four tracks instead of three is OK if the balance remains correct. Sandy must take care that Sequoia does not fall onto his outside (to the bend) shoulder, however.*

even think about it, go! Be careful that you don't start to ruminate about the transition, Sandy, because that gives him more time to develop tension in the simple changes.

Go medium canter down the long side, collect at K, then collected trot at A. Allow the medium to happen. That was much better, Sandy, now come shoulder-in to renvers and let's see how it feels. Keep the bend. That was a little too much on four tracks,

so go again in the renvers. That's better, you made a good correction near V and then you were much straighter. Better, now don't increase the angle; keep your right leg, a little more bend in the neck...there, that was much better.

We were talking about this the other day, that he doesn't bend enough in the neck, and that you have to be careful that, in increasing the bend in the neck, you don't increase the angle. Don't let him turn like a bus!

Let's look at the shoulder-in/renvers on the other side. I want to make sure he'll wait coming through the corner and that he takes the half-halt so you can put him on the diagonal and release him, because the shoulders need to be free coming into the medium trot. You have to feel that, when you release, he "grows" and carries you across the diagonal. He's got to get like a peacock, all puffed up and proud, but with his withers up, not with everything dropping down.

(Sandy comments: "The best gaited horses are like that: Their haunches drop to give that power.")

Their haunches drop, but so do their backs; we don't want that. And a gaited horse's hind leg is much more up and down; you need a hind leg that steps through so that the amount of articulation or flexion in the joint matches the amount the horse steps forward and pushes back. If you think about the good Saddlebreds, it's a lot of up and down, and their necks are pulled back into their withers rather than their necks staying out. It's very different from dressage: The animation comes from a fixed position in the back rather than from the looseness we're looking for in dressage.

Think smaller steps for a moment, like you're a puppeteer and can pick up each front foot, so his shoulders come higher. Lower your elbows. That's better.

He got tight and you lost some of the purity in the walk in that last

turn on the haunches. If you feel that he's not sitting back and waiting, you need to remember to collect from the withers to the tail but stretch from the withers to the poll, let his neck "fall" down and forward.

All right, Sandy, let's let him stretch and then walk. The thing to remember with all horses at this level is that the challenge of collection can create tension in the topline and shortness and tightness in the neck. You often see riders going through the motions of riding the test rather than riding for proper self-carriage and connection. It's the rider's responsibility to help the horse stay relaxed in the topline and honest in the contact. That's where thinking "collection from the withers to the tail"—but always having a sense that you could stretch the horse easily from the withers to the poll—helps to maintain a more honest connection. ▲

Editor's note: Sadly, since the writing of this article, Sequoia died following surgery. Sandy recently purchased a four-year-old gelding who happens to be related to Sequoia. We extend our condolences to Sandy and wish her the best with her new partner.

Meet the Instructor

Vicki Hammers-O'Neil is a USDF-certified instructor/trainer through Fourth

Level and a faculty member of the USDF Instructor Certification Program.

She trains out of Once Again Farm in Meriden, CT.

