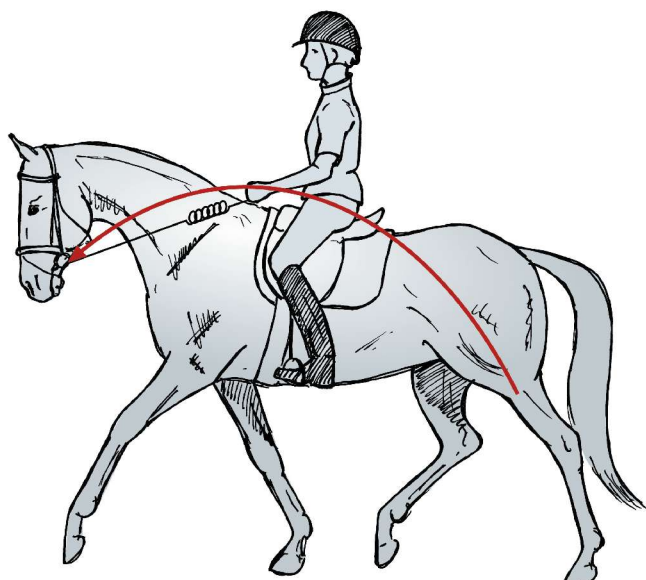


# Contact Explained

From the newly revised German horsemanship bible *The Principles of Riding*, a guide to developing correct contact in dressage

Contact is defined as the steady, soft, and elastic connection between the rider's hand and the horse's mouth. Essential for this is a supple, balanced, and smooth seat, which allows for a sensitive connection between the rider's hand and the horse's mouth. The rider frames the horse from the seat with the seat and legs and through the reins, without ever wedging the horse between the aids.

outside rein must, however, remain so flexible that the flexion of the horse is permitted. Its restraining function is maintained in combination with the outside leg. As a general rule, the connection should remain even on both reins. The horse's natural crookedness often makes this more difficult, which is why gymnastic work with frequent changes of rein gradually helps to improve the contact.



IDEAL CONTACT: With suitable driving aids and by going with the movement, the rider ensures that the horse steps into the soft and elastic connection with active hindquarters

**The contact is dynamic; it will sometimes be stronger and then become lighter again. The rider has the responsibility for keeping it as steady and as light as possible.**

On a curved line, the rider must bring the horse more onto the outside aids—particularly the outside rein—with the inside leg (diagonal aids). The secure connection on the outside rein ensures a restriction throughout the turn and allows the rider to become light with the inside rein and to let the forward movement out. The use of the

**The horse develops a willingness to stretch to the sensitive rider's hand through a rhythmic, supple, forward movement toward the bit.**

This willingness to stretch leads to the feeling of a steady connection with the horse's mouth. The rider rides the horse from back to front and into the hand in order to achieve a secure contact

and to keep it steady.

**The quality of the contact depends, among other things, very closely on suppleness. Both aspects influence and depend on each other and, at the same time, have an influence on the rhythm.**

Only a supple horse will stretch forward-downward to the rider's hand, and a soft, elastic contact allows the horse to attain suppleness. Problems with any of these aspects

will always also have a negative effect on each of the others. Rhythm, which is to be regarded as a condition for suppleness, will also be lastingly disturbed through a lack of suppleness and problems in the contact.

**The willingness and the ability to stretch, as well as the quality of the contact, are also always dependent on the horse's willingness to move forward, and the energy of the movement!**

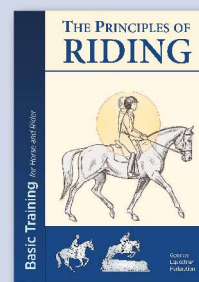
The horse's sensitivity in responding to the lightest aids must constantly be reestablished. This is important because the horse can only develop this

## The Classic, Revised

Long considered the essential basic dressage text, the German Equestrian Federation's official instruction handbook,

*The Principles of Riding: Basic Training for Horse and Rider*, is a step-by-step guide to establishing a solid foundation for both horse and rider, whether the eventual intended discipline is dressage, jumping, or eventing. *The Principles of Riding* is on the recommended-reading list of both the USDF Instructor/Trainer Program and the USDF L Education Program.

Last month, the German FN released an updated and revised edition of its classic. The English-language version is available in the US from Trafalgar Square Books (HorseandRiderBooks.com). The text in this article is © 2017 FN Verlag and excerpted by permission of Trafalgar Square Books.



willingness to stretch into the rider's hand when it has accepted the driving aids. The steady, elastic contact can thus be regarded as a basic condition for the development of forward thrust (pushing power), which is the transformation of the power from the hind-quarters into the forward movement of the horse. Therefore, the development of impulsion and contact are dependent on each other to a certain degree.

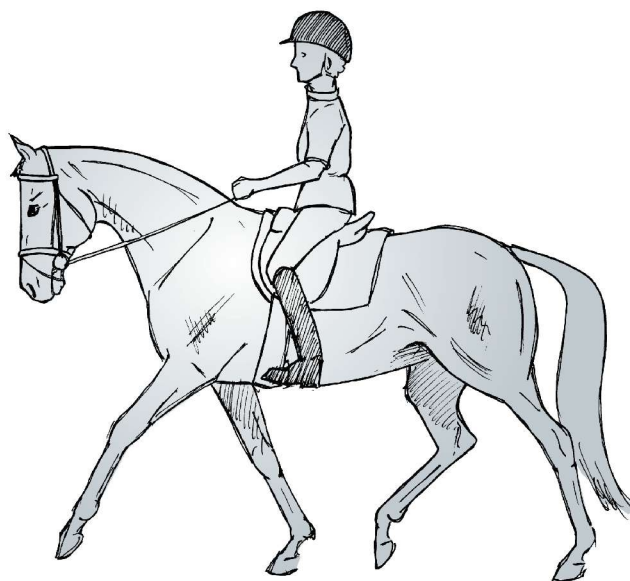
### Developing Correct Carriage

Through a good collaboration of the driving and regulating aids, the horse's carriage will improve according to its level of training.

The achievement of a soft, elastic contact is a fundamental requirement for influencing the horse's carriage. In every change of the horse's carriage, the highest degree of attention must be given to this trusting connection.

Through a coordinated interaction between the driving and the regulating aids, the rider brings the horse

into a certain head-neck position, which also always corresponds to the movement and the particular positive muscular tension that is necessary in the horse. The neck must always be sufficiently "long" to enable the horse to balance. The lower neck muscles are relaxed; the upper neck muscles are noticeably active and "carry" the neck. The poll is relaxed, and the horse carries the neck so that the poll is the highest point. A horse that is well balanced, with active hind legs so that it carries itself and is very light in the rider's hand, is moving in the desired self-carriage and is therefore



*The horse is in balance, the head-nose line is slightly in front of the vertical, and the poll is the highest point*

in balance. The rider will feel this through a light connection with the horse's mouth. This is the result of correct and sensitive riding.

**On the bit.** A well-ridden horse trusts the rider's hand, accepts the con-



Photo: Stacey Nedrow-Wigmore



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tact through the reins, and steps forward into this connection. If the rider accompanies the horse patiently with the hand, the horse will start to chew on the bit, which leads to relaxation of the jaw, the tongue, and the poll. With sensitive support from the rider's driving aids (leg and seat aids), the horse will continue to move forward happily and will start to become "light in the hand." It accepts the minor resistance of the rider's hand with an elastic poll in order to then seek the contact once again. With a horse that initially moved with an elongated neck and the nose clearly ahead of the vertical, the head-nose line now comes closer to the vertical. The poll is the highest point. The horse stands still or moves forward into the rein with contact. The horse is now said to be "on the bit."

**Elevation (raising of the forehead).** The so-called elevation or raising of the horse's forehead must always follow the level of the horse's training. It emerges from the horse's overall body posture and balance. Therefore, horse's forehead should be relatively raised (see page 20). This correct form of elevation is always the result of the horse's degree of collection. In an advanced stage of training, it corresponds to good self-carriage in collection. A horse that can bend lower in the hindquarters, with well-angled joints, appears more "uphill" and is better able to carry itself in an elevated manner.

### Mistakes in Contact and in Getting the Horse on the Bit

Mistakes in contact and in getting the horse on the bit result in most cases from seat and aid mistakes by the rider. A rider who cannot go with the horse's movement elastically is hardly able to establish a steady connection with the horse's mouth. This is further reinforced when the rider's hand position and the holding of the reins is not elastic. An incorrect conception of the way contact and getting the horse on the bit are achieved will also result in different problems.

**Against the hand or above the bit.** A horse that refuses to accept the rider's rein aids and does not give in the poll is said to go "against the hand" or "above the bit." The horse stiffens and hollows its back, and the hindquarters can no longer come under the horse's body correctly. The lower neck muscles are tense and dominant, and the upper neck muscles no longer assume their usual carrying function and therefore do not develop positively. The cause nearly always lies in the rider working impatiently and/or with a lack of feeling in the hand. If this problem has been in existence for a long time, then the lower neck muscles will have developed more than the upper neck muscles. Since in this errant posture the rider's weight cannot be carried in any way other than through stiffening the back muscles, lunging with correctly attached side reins, combined with intensive schooling for the rider, can be helpful.

When correcting this mistake under saddle, the rider should initially establish and maintain a trustful connection with the horse's mouth. Only once these foundations have been reestablished can the horse be ridden from behind into the rider's hand in order to become light in the hand with the help of transitions and half-halts.

### Tip

**R**egularly letting the horse chew the reins out of the hand and picking them up again benefits the horse's trust and the skill of the rider.

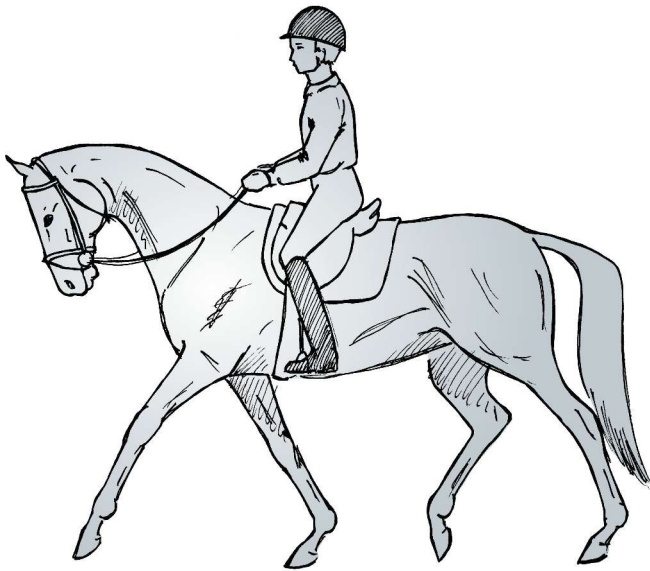


*Behind the vertical and tight in the neck. The rider sits against the horse's movement.*

**Behind the vertical.** Horses generally avoid a backward-acting rein by giving in the poll. The head-nose line therefore comes considerably behind the vertical, impeding the suppleness, the activity of the back, and the impulsion or the forward thrust as a result. If the rider does not give, the horse will become continuously short in the neck. This in turn will make it increasingly difficult for the horse to balance and carry the rider's weight. This problem can also arise when the horse does not respond correctly to half-halts and the rider does not carry these out and repeat them consistently enough. Even more frequently, the problem lies in not riding the half-halt correctly from back to front with dominant driving aids.

**Short in the neck and deep.** Going behind the vertical is frequently associated with the problem of the horse becoming clearly "short" in the neck, or when it is intentionally ridden "short and deep." Half-halts and many transitions, which give the rider the chance to give with the reins and to ride forward, can help here. Giving and retaking the reins occasionally, as well as frequently letting the horse chew the reins out of the hand and picking them up again, are also necessary.





*The horse is behind the bit and does not step sufficiently forward from back to front toward the hand*

**Behind the bit.** A horse is “behind the bit” when it does not step forward to the bit or the rider’s hand. The contact is, as a result, no longer even and steady. The reasons for this can be diverse. Frequently the problem lies with the

rider, in the lack of harmony between driving and regulating aids. Not trusting the rider’s hand, the horse will become short in the neck and/or will remain behind the vertical with its head-nose line. Since the horse avoids the rein aids by backing away from the contact, the rider’s hands no longer have a steady connection with the horse’s mouth via the reins.

The lack of activity in the hindquarters, which is mostly responsible for this, and the lack of activity in the back can be traced to too little or incorrectly understood driving aids and/or insensitive rein aids. Because of this mistake,

the rider has lost one of the fundamental components for harmonious communication with the horse. The horse simply has no chance of establishing a connection with the rider’s hand. Horses that have difficulties stepping into this connection must be ridden forward from behind and into the sensitive rider’s hand. Horses that are very light in the poll are especially prone to this fault in contact. The most fundamental causes are a lack of suppleness and willingness to stretch, combined with a lack of pushing power from the hindquarters. This must then be developed. Transitions between trot and canter, along with cavalletti work and hacking out, are particularly suitable for this.

Only a fine feeling for the collaboration of the driving and the regulating aids will enable the rider to restore the horse’s trust in the hand. In doing so, the correct position of the hands is fundamental, with a straight line from the elbow to the hand and the rein. Only with a soft, elastic, and low hand

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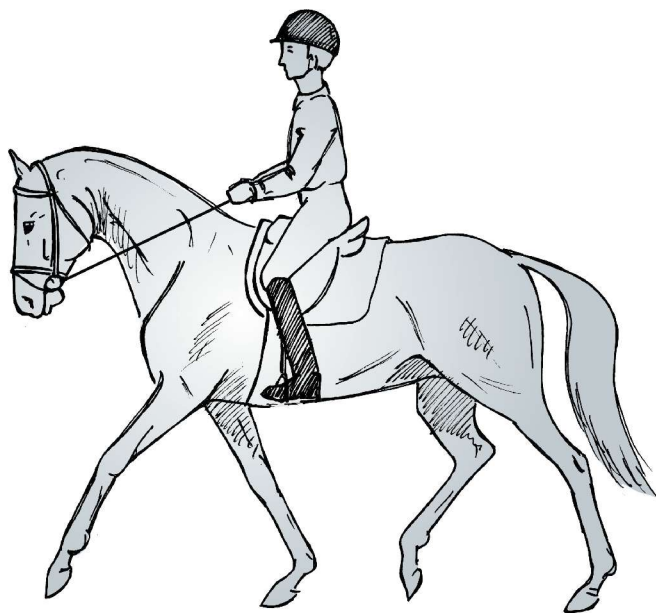
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A neck “broken” at the third vertebra (the flexion is from a point behind the poll) can be the result of incorrect training

**False bend/ broken at the third vertebra.** Going behind the bit, behind the vertical, or being short in the neck can lead to a “false bend” (or the horse’s neck being “broken at the third vertebra”). This is the unnatural curving of the neck that arises if a horse, despite a tensed poll, gives to the rein in the region of the second and

will the horse then seek the connection with the hand. Frequent, sensitively ridden transitions can help in establishing a stable, more confident contact.

third cervical vertebrae. The poll is no longer the highest point, and establishing a steady contact is even more difficult. This serious mistake can only be eradicated through gymnastic

training with a sufficiently long neck to help the upper neck muscles to reform. Letting the horse chew the reins out of the hand is again particularly helpful.

**Absolutely raised.** Riding with the forehand “absolutely raised” describes the situation wherein the horse’s neck is raised actively higher by the rider’s hand—too high in relation to the level of collection. With an unsuitably high elevation, the horse is no longer able to move in a supple way with a swinging back. This errant carriage is therefore contradictory to a positive development and to obtaining a correct, relative raising of the forehand. If the horse assumes this position by itself, a longer outline needs to be established again.

**Tilting in the poll.** Tilting in the poll is generally connected to a lack of straightness of the horse, or to exaggerated efforts to obtain flexion. The horse holds its head crooked; the ears are no longer on the same level. This can only be corrected by reestablishing a secure, light contact with an open neck-mandible angle as well as self-carriage, and through a systematic straightening.

This problem can also arise or be made worse through rider problems in the straightening work, or lack of feeling for an even contact. Even a minor tilt in the poll needs to be taken seriously. A rider who sits crookedly can also be partly responsible. Attempts to correct head-tilting through rein aids alone usually make the problem worse.

**Leaning on the bit.** Horses that develop too little activity from the hind legs and/or are not very well balanced tend to lean on the hand or on the bit. The horse’s center of gravity shifts further toward the forehand; the horse uses the bit for support, searching for the so-called “fifth leg,” and does not engage the hind legs properly from behind.

Correction of this mistake requires a rider with well-attuned driving and regulating aids. The rider must be able, when riding a half-halt, to give

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## Road to the Finals

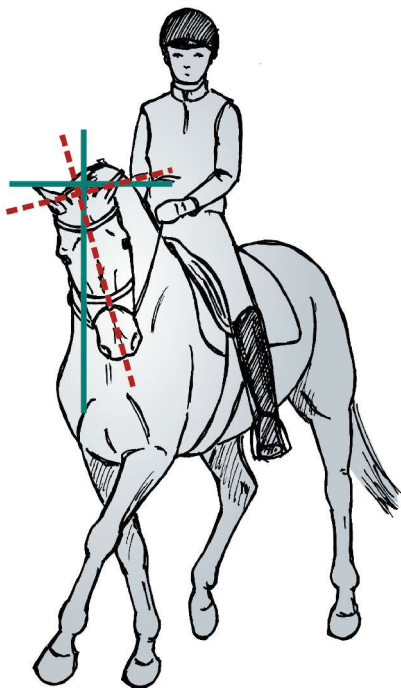
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again as soon as the horse is on the aids. Through half-halts and transitions between and within gaits, the rider helps the horse to find a better balance. In so doing, the rider invites the horse to become light in the hand. Thus, the horse will gradually find a secure self-carriage: able to move in a balanced way and to “carry” its neck and head.

**“Unhappy mouth”/tongue problems.** An “unhappy mouth” or a tongue sticking out or going over the bit is generally a symptom to be considered in relation to the abovementioned problems in contact and in getting the horse on the bit. Grinding of the teeth can also be a sign of unhappiness. It is thus necessary to work on the cause, which is frequently found in the rider’s hand. Sensitive riding involving smooth transitions and half-halts, with a rider’s hand that is always ready to give, usually leads to resolving this problem. Overtightening the noseband or the flash is a meaningless attempt to fight the symptoms with-



*Clear tilting of the poll to the left*

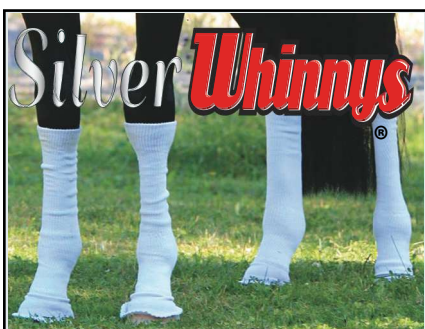
out resolving the cause. In fact, such measures contradict the meaning of systematic training.

## The Product of Correct Riding and Training

Correct riding will lead to a soft, elastic contact as well as to an outline and carriage appropriate for the horse’s level of training. ▲

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