

# DESIGNING A TRAINING PROGRAM

## Introduction

“In order to design a training program, riders must have developed their own horsemanship. They must understand all that goes into the horse and its training and, above all, have an awareness of the horse’s well being. They must be able to establish priorities in the training program and never lose sight of the true goal of dressage. (Don’t lose the focus of the training in order to just learn movements or to perform tests.)

But the rider must distinguish between laziness and weakness. With the latter, shorter periods of work should be allowed in order not to discourage the horse by demanding too much. It cannot be repeated too often that one of the greatest faults a rider can commit is to demand more from his horse than is justified by his physical and mental condition.” [*The Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, p 95]

“Every rider must be perfectly clear in his own mind as to which phase of training his horse is in, as well as the method to be followed in his lessons and the goal he wishes to achieve. Every rider must not only ride but also think, as only a thinking rider will be able to attain his goal in a relatively short time without spoiling his horse.” [*The Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, p 26]

Podhajsky makes numerous references to what he calls the “thinking rider.” This is his term for a trainer or rider who is flexible and aware of what is going on in the horse’s mind and body. [*The Complete Training of the Horse and Rider*, pp 155, 163]

“Though one tries to put forward a general training plan for dressage, this plan can only give an overall picture of the aids and movements required. In practice one must of course study each horse individually and build up a training method that suits that horse; especially as they all have their own different speeds of learning and have different temperaments.” [*The Dressage Horse*, p 168]

“The trainer must create a suitable environment conducive to the training of the horse. The arena must be safely enclosed. Equipment must be checked for safety and suitability. Always use the simplest equipment and avoid unusual gadgets and sharp bits.” [Gerhard Politz]

## Goal Setting

### *Long-Term Goals*

The trainer has the responsibility of designing a goal that is fair to the horse. The long-term goals of each horse will vary according to the following conditions:

- The horse’s physical and mental aptitude for dressage
- The owner/rider’s personal goals with the horse

A horse should have completed its third year (i.e., be approaching four) before being asked to work. It then takes at least a year to school a horse to preliminary level.

### *Short-Term Goals*

Assuming there is a consensus on the long-term goals for the horse, the trainer must establish a short-term goal for the horse or the horse/rider combination. Caution must be used when determining goals within time frames, as this can lead to rushing the horse and compromising standards.

Once a goal has been established, the trainer must be sure to set up a logical progression toward the goal, whether the goal is a student’s first recognized show, or a young horse’s first season of competition, or an older rider’s confirmation of sequential changes.

## ***Goals for Today***

Setting a daily goal again requires that the trainer be flexible. Not only does he need to be keenly aware of how the horse is feeling underneath him, but he needs to be tuned in to his own physical and mental attitudes. When setting daily goals, the following guidelines may be used:

- Confirming that the horse is exhibiting all the necessary qualities in warm-up.
- A somewhat lighter day after a day off or after a longer or more difficult schooling session.
- Confirming new movements or exercises may be approached, or
- Backing up a step or two may be necessary to re-establish basics if a new exercise has caused tension or too much fatigue in the horse.
- Understand that the horse may not come out today the way he came out yesterday. Ride the horse that you have for today.

## **The Training Phases**

### ***Warm-Up***

“Every athlete and every dancer loosens up his muscles before starting to work. How much more important this is with the horse, which in all his movements and actions must not only bend to the will of another living creature but also carry him. The horse must be relaxed in both body and mind before he is ready to be trained by a rider.” [*The Complete Training of the Horse and Rider*, p 116]

For the horse, the purpose of this phase is to loosen up the horse. One should leave more than enough time to loosen up because without the horse being supple and unconstrained, it will be of little use to correct or improve any movements. One would expect approximately 10 or 15 minutes to be enough to loosen up the horse. Up to half an hour or maybe even longer to loosen up a horse which has a specific problem and will not move through his back may be necessary.” [*The Dressage Horse*, p 168]

For the rider, the purpose of this phase is the evaluation of the horse.

### ***Work Session***

The working phase of the training session may last as long as 40 minutes, with the exercises designed to follow through from day to day. Again, the trainer must remain open-minded and flexible. Include adequate walk periods. Keep in mind that “even in the middle of the working phase of the training session, one should continuously relax the horse and give him enough time to settle.” [*The Dressage Horse*, p 170]

### ***Cool-Down***

“The purpose of the cool-down phase is to relax the horse in body and mind as well as to return the horse’s physiological systems to their normal resting levels. This phase lasts approximately 5-10 minutes.

To achieve this relaxation of mind and body, the rider utilizes simple school figures such as large circles, serpentines, and simple lines or changes of directions and may allow the horse to chew the reins out of the hands. This can be done in the walk, trot or canter.

It is important that the cool-down phase last long enough that the horse’s physiological system (i.e. muscle chemistry, heart rate, respiration and body temperature) begin to return to their normal resting levels. This will help avoid problems such as shortening of the muscles, colic, laminitis, tying up, and heat stroke, among others.

It is also vital that the horse return to the barn mentally relaxed and happy about his work. Sometimes the greatest reward we can give a horse is simply to dismount and cool the horse down in-hand.” [Rachel Satory-Saavedra]

### ***Length of Daily Training Session***

The length of the training session will vary according to the age, fitness level, and education of the horse. A younger horse will obviously tire more quickly as will a horse just coming back from an injury. A green horse may begin to tire mentally if too much is presented to him at once and he may begin to worry.

“One can easily have a working phase of up to three quarters of an hour and maybe now and then even longer without demanding too much from the horse.” [*The Dressage Horse*, p 170]

### ***Frequency of Training Session***

Generally, the horse should work 6 days a week. “One should, apart from the weekly day off, also include one or two days where the horse does not work so hard. This can be made easier for the horse by allowing a young rider to move him around for a while and maybe only ride him yourself for about 10 minutes. As an alternative, one can take the horse out for a hack. Such a relaxation day during the week is very important, especially with older dressage horses so that the horse maintains his desire to work for you.” [*The Dressage Horse*, p 170]

### ***Adding Variety to Training Sessions***

“The thinking rider will devise many different combinations to hold the attention of his horse.” [*The Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, p 157]

Varying the training sessions will encourage a fresh mental attitude and better overall fitness.

- Hacking and hill climbing.
- Use of trotting poles, cavalletti, or gymnastic jumping according to the horse’s ability over fences.
- Lungeing in side-reins.
- Allowing a [working] student to warm the horse up and then take him on a hack. This has the double benefit of letting the student have some riding time on a different horse.

## **Ground Poles**

“Ground poles are very useful aids when bringing on young horses and also for correcting problems. Through riding over ground poles, the Takt and Losgelassenheit of the horse can be greatly improved and the muscles of the back can be relaxed and strengthened.

“Reiner Klimke mentions in his book, Cavalletti, that he finds [that] using ground poles with older horses can improve the collection and also prepare the horse for passage. He says that up to four ground poles up to 35 centimeters off the ground can be of great use in asking the horse for a strong lifting of the legs as he goes over them.”

“This is of course a very interesting thought; I have personally never had much experience with this method, but I can see that one could improve the freedom of the shoulder using this work, especially with horses that have a slightly flat movement. A possible danger could be that the horse will flex the hind legs too much and not step through his back. One should therefore try first of all to see if this method is good for the horse in question as it will possibly not affect every horse the same way.” [*The Dressage Horse*, pp 166-167]

## **Benchmarks – Evaluating Your Training Progress**

### ***Progression Through the Training Scale***

When the horse begins with the training at the next level, he should be able to easily perform all the movements at the level he is currently schooling.

“In practice, one finds that one has to pay particular attention to two points before beginning medium work:

- The purity of the paces; and
- The straightness of the horse.” [*The Dressage Horse*, p 115]

“The training scale must be kept intact in order to preserve the qualities of the gaits.” [Gerhard Politz]

It should be remembered that a horse may not progress at the same rate in the three gaits.

## ***Chewing Reins Out of Rider's Hand***

Allowing the horse to take the reins and lower his head, while maintaining the same rhythm and impulsion, will show the rider if his horse is relaxed and is well balanced.

## ***Überstreichen***

To test whether or not the horse, when moving freely forward, is carrying himself in balance, one may occasionally give and retake the reins.

## ***Riding in Competition***

“Competing at the higher levels is physically as well as psychologically demanding for the horse. Participation has to be carefully planned in order to save the horse’s resources. It is also important to choose a type of competition appropriate to the standard of training and suitability of the horse.”

“Competing at the correct frequency in competitions of the right nature will mature the horse, but too much and the wrong type of competitions will discourage him, set him back in his training and ruin his health.” [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 108]

“The rider should critically reflect about the last competition. He should realize what went wrong and should also assess if the horse lived up to expectations and what this could mean for the future.” [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 145]

## ***Get a Second Opinion***

A professional trainer should always be willing and able to accept input from a variety of sources, including judges, clinicians, ground persons, photography and video.

“Even an experienced rider may be taken in by a horse that has acquired a degree of suppleness and so can give a false feeling while committing errors which can be pointed out only by an observer on the ground. In this way faults may creep in that later on are difficult or even impossible to eliminate.” [*The Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, p 98]

“Even the most experienced trainer should now and again seek the advice of another expert.” [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 25]

## **Other Considerations for Training Schedules**

### ***Horse***

The horse with suitable conformation, temperament and ability will naturally progress more quickly than his less than perfect neighbor. The trainer must be careful not to push the willing, talented horse too quickly, as he may not stay willing and sound.

A willing horse with a sudden change of temperament may be physically uncomfortable. Don’t assume he is unwilling or becoming lazy. Take into consideration changes in health and environment.

Horses with difficult temperaments will naturally require more time and patience and also more consideration on the part of the trainer. As a general rule, the older schooled horse may need more gymnastic exercises to maintain his suppleness. He may require shorter training sessions and will do well with hacking and hill work included in his conditioning program.

### ***Student***

The logical progression through the levels should be maintained as guidelines of the Training Scale.

The professional trainer must always remember that he is not only training the horse but also educating the owner/student, and he must be sure that the owner/student understands and accepts all of the work that is done. If, after some training, the professional finds a particular horse no longer meets the student's expectations and goals, he must express this to the owner/student. He must remain objective.

Every trainer knows that it is a long road to success at any level. Keep in mind that the goals should be realistic for both the horse and rider.

The trainer owes it to himself, the owner/student and the horse never to compromise his standards. At all times he should remain communicative with the owner/student, and if the client is being overly demanding or unrealistic about the horse's abilities, it is the trainer's responsibility to explain the situation to the owner/student. At no time should the horse be misrepresented to the owner/student. This is an unfair situation for all involved.

## **Conclusion**

"More than 350 years ago, Pluvinel gave us these great words of advice: 'We shall take great care not to annoy the horse and spoil his friendly charm, for it is like the scent of a blossom – once lost it will never return.'" [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 25]