



# GET TO SECOND BASE

## Are You on First?

Part 1 of a six-part series on finding success at Second Level

By Beth Baumert

Photographs by Susan]Stickle.com

**S**econd Level—it's known as the Black Hole. Horses and riders stick their toes in Second Level's choppy waters and often encounter a stumbling block called collection.

Collection is the progressive development of an uphill balance in which the horse's hindquarters carry more

weight without losing impulsion. This series of six articles is intended to help you develop collection so that you can navigate the waters of Second Level and emerge ready for Third.


We'll begin this month by reviewing the checklist of prerequisites to be sure you're ready for the journey. After all, before you get to second base, you have to hit the ball and get to first. In future installments, we'll look at the tools you'll need for Second Level success: figures and movements with bend, medium paces, transitions, and half-halts.

### At Home Plate: Training Level Review

All other things being equal, no one was ever great at First Level but just couldn't handle Second. As you prepare to tackle the requirements of Second Level, be honest with yourself

and analyze your current situation, starting with the purpose of Training Level and then of First Level (see "Train with a Purpose" below). Give you and your horse a grade for each of the stated qualities. Although it's human nature to avoid that which we aren't good at, you'll need to be the friendly police and concentrate on those areas the most.

### Within the requirements of Training Level, how do you stack up?

 Does your horse move freely forward in a clear and steady rhythm?

Don't take this one for granted, for this is the quality that can make or break a horse all through the levels up to Grand Prix. You'll need to pay attention to this quality forever, and it will pay off forever.

*Rhythm* includes:

**Regularity.** Your horse maintains the regularity of whatever gait you want: a clear four-beat walk, two-beat trot, or three-beat canter. The rhythm is "steady" if it stays the same when you bend him, when you lengthen the stride, and when you shorten the stride. You will need to give your horse little reminders to keep the rhythm in all situations, but when he is well trained, you can then use your aids primarily for other things, such as preparing for and executing movements.



**BATTER UP:** With her relaxation, straightness, suppleness, and acceptance of the aids, the seven-year-old PRE mare *Infanta HGE*, ridden by Mica Mabragaña, looks confident and ready for Second Level

### Train with a Purpose

**T**he purpose of each level in dressage, as established by the US Equestrian Federation, is printed on the front of the USEF test sheet. It spells out the exact qualities the judge is looking for. Your chances of success increase exponentially when you keep the purpose in mind as you ride.

Start your journey to Second Level by reviewing the purpose of Training and First Levels:

**The Purpose of Training Level is:** To confirm that the horse is supple and moves freely forward in a clear and steady rhythm, accepting contact with the bit.

**The Purpose of First Level is:** To confirm that the horse, in addition to the requirements of Training Level, has developed the thrust (pushing power/impulsion) to achieve improved balance and throughness and to maintain a more consistent contact with the bit.

**Tempo** (speed of the rhythm). In a benign way, horses evade engagement (carrying more weight with the hind-quarters, as is needed in collection) by increasing the tempo on straight lines and slowing it on bent lines, and by increasing the tempo when you lengthen the stride and decreasing it when you shorten it. You need to be a metronome for your horse. If you have trouble keeping the beat, invest in an inexpensive portable metro-

nome. You'll be amazed at how much this little tool can help you.

The purpose of Training Level also includes the words *freely forward*:

**Freely:** The appearance that the horse is moving forward by his own volition is what makes him beautiful. Horses that need to be pushed and driven constantly are not moving freely. Horses that move freely are responsive to the forward driving aids, and they keep going forward on their own

with the help of some reminding aids. They work over their backs and reach out to the bit.

**Forward:** Your horse needs to go forward in a clear and steady rhythm. When your instructor tells you to "Go more forward," she may mean "You need more energy," "You need longer strides," or "You need to quicken the tempo." Decide which kind of "forward" you need. Too much forwardness creates tension. Too little creates

## Training Level Self-Test 1: Forward and Back

**P**ut yourself to this forward-and-back Training Level test:

Do transitions between gaits, keeping the feeling of forward-flowing energy, even in the halt and especially in the slower gait. Your horse should keep his energy flowing like the wheel on a paddleboat. Try these:

1. Walk-halt-walk-halt. Your horse should keep his engine idling in the halt so you have the feeling that you can go forward out of it easily. If you have trouble, do a preliminary exercise: walk-*almost* halt-walk.

2. Walk-trot-walk-trot. Keep the energy the same in both gaits. If your horse loses the ability to go forward easily out of the walk, do a preliminary exercise: trot-*almost* walk-trot.

3. Canter-trot-canter-trot. Keep the same energy in trot and canter. If your horse loses his ability to trot smoothly from canter, do canter-*almost* trot-canter.

When you don't need to remind your horse to keep the energy going, then you can use your aids to shape and direct him. Be persistent and particular.

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a slack inability to do anything. Your horse needs enough forward activity to achieve the next quality: acceptance of the contact (see below).



*Is your horse supple?*

Your horse should carry himself forward with activity, accepting contact with the bit and lifting and swinging through his back. That rhythmic, round, swinging back is what allows you to make him elastic.

The elastic horse is supple in two ways:

1. Longitudinally, he can go forward and back smoothly.
2. Laterally, the Training Level horse can bend equally left and right on a 20-meter circle.



*Does your horse accept contact with the bit?*

Imagine the flow of energy as your horse moves. In upward transitions, the

energy flows from his thrusting hind leg, through his topline, to the bit. In downward transitions and half-halts, the energy gets “recycled” through the bit and your receiving hands and back through your seat, returning to his hindquarters as weight over his grounded hind leg. Then the hind leg thrusts again and the energy continues to flow in a self-perpetuating cycle.

Upward transitions teach the horse to reach for the bit, and downward

## Training Level Self-Test 2: Bending

Put yourself to this Training Level bending test:

At A, circle right 20 meters in trot. Keep your horse on a perfect arc. Use your inside leg toward a quiet outside rein, and



**OUTSIDE CONTACT:** *As she bends correctly on the 20-meter circle, Infanta's neck “fills up” Mica's outside rein*

then pat your horse on the neck with your inside rein.

After the circle, go straight and repeat the 20-meter circle right at E. Point your horse's nose on the line of travel, using your inside leg to a receiving outside rein and making a perfect arc. Go straight ahead again and repeat the circle at C. Change directions and repeat to the left. Develop the connection between your inside leg and outside rein in both directions, and release the inside rein often. Repeat in canter.

This is a difficult exercise. Be persistent and particular.

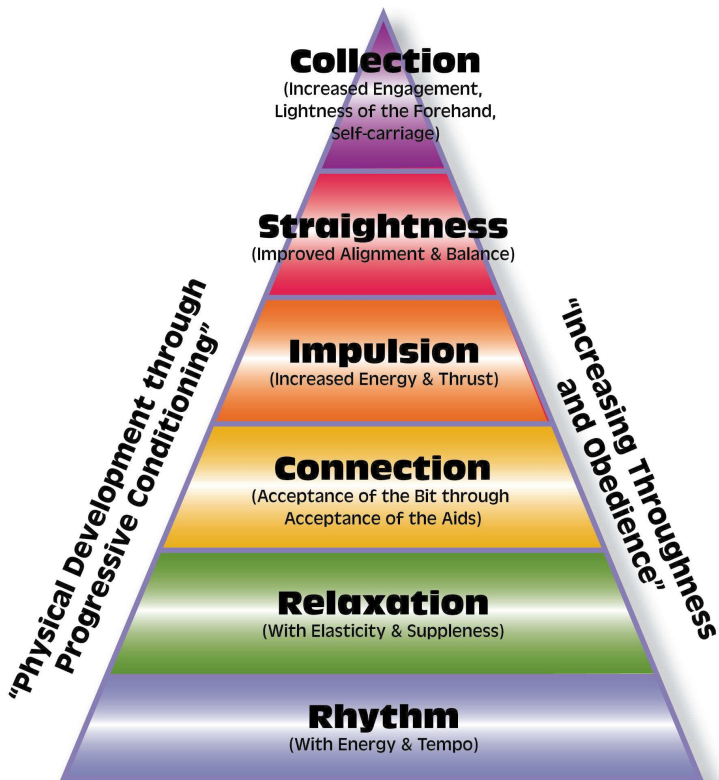
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*The USDF pyramid of training*

transitions teach him to come back.

Can you check off this quality? If so, great! However, you'll always need to monitor it.


How did you stack up in the forward-and-back and the bending tests? You'll always need to pay attention to these qualities, but if these were very difficult or new concepts, go to work on them in a quiet, persistent way.

If you're the academic type, you may have noticed that the Purpose of the Training Level tests coincides pre-


cisely with the first three elements of the pyramid of training: rhythm, suppleness, and contact (see illustration on page 27). The next element is impulsion—a quality you need at First Level.

### Who's on First? First Level Review

Within the requirements of First Level, how do you stack up?

 Has your horse developed thrust (pushing power/impulsion)?

Thrust or impulsion is the releasing of energy stored by engagement. The energy is stored when the joints of the hind leg bend as the limb meets the ground and bears weight (engages). The hind leg acts as a compressed spring, releasing energy when the limb pushes off the ground. That energy should go through the swinging back that you developed at Training Level.


 Have your horse's balance and throughness improved?

According to the USDF Glossary of Judging Terms, throughness is "the supple, elastic, unblocked, connected state of the horse's musculature that permits an unrestricted flow of energy from back to front and front to back, which allows the aids/influences to freely go through to all parts of the horse (e.g., the rein aids go through and reach and influence the hind legs)."

When a horse is "through," it's easy for the rider to improve the horse's balance so that each leg carries approximately 25 percent of his weight and his



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## First Level Self-Test 1: Lengthen and Shorten

**T**ake this First Level test:

Can your horse lengthen his stride and his outline, reaching for the bit without losing the rhythm, the tempo, or the suppleness? Can he return to a working pace easily after lengthening?



**CORRECT LENGTHENING:** *Infanta lengthens her stride in the rising trot while maintaining balance, rhythm, tempo, and suppleness*

frame is horizontal. This balance enables the horse to work in relaxation.

The ten-meter circle required at First Level is an important exercise that helps to improve the horse's balance and throughness—and, as you'll see as we get into the Second Level work, it's critical for success at that level that the ten-meter circle be confirmed.

To help master this important figure, try this lunge-line exercise. Have an experienced helper snap the line to the inner ring of the snaffle bit and then, with your helper standing in the middle, walk a ten-meter circle between any letter on the long side and the center line. Your helper will simply give you five meters of line and

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stand in the middle of the circle. Point your horse's nose on the line of travel, and use your aids to bend his body to describe a precise circle arc, keeping the lunge line uniformly taut but not tight. Ride the exercise in both directions and later try it in trot, giving your horse frequent breaks by riding straight ahead.

As homework for next month, memorize the feel of a precise ten-meter circle in both directions. When you no longer need the "geometry aid" of the lunge line, ride the circle on your own.



*Is the contact more consistent?*

A steadier contact is a byproduct of your horse's improved balance and throughness. When he is balanced, connected, and through, he can be relaxed. When he's relaxed, the consistency of the contact will automatically improve.



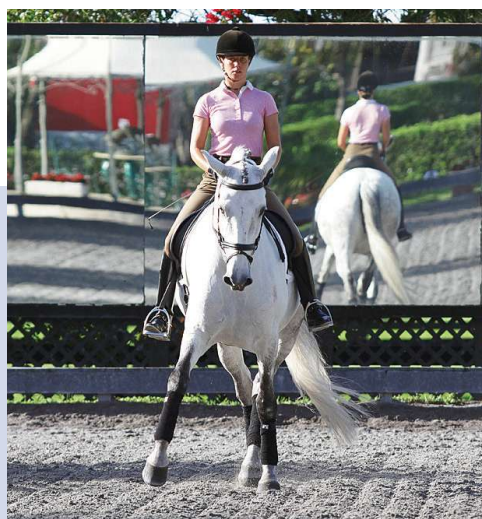
**LUNGE-LINE CIRCLE EXERCISE:** Mica and Infanta practice making a perfect ten-meter circle with a little help from a precisely measured lunge line. Mica says: "Teach your horse the difference between an inside leg that asks for bend and one that asks for more speed. The bending leg is steady and is used in conjunction with the other bending aids. In corners and on circles, be clear about the aids for bend."

## First Level Self-Test 2: Leg-Yielding

**T**ry this First Level leg-yielding test:

Proceed in working walk on the right rein down the long side of the arena. Flex your horse to the left and use your left leg to ask for three to five strides of leg-yield right, away from the wall; then straighten. When he is "through" and responsive, his left legs will cross over his right legs in the first stride, and you will feel the energy surge through his body and land in your right hand. Rather than "developing" leg-yield, your horse should "do" it.

After the strides of leg-yield, straighten and repeat the exercise, making sure to practice it in both directions. When you're successful at a walk, do it in trot. This exercise will help develop your horse's balance and throughness.



**CORRECT LEG-YIELD:** Infanta in trot leg-yield right, away from Mica's left (inside) leg. Note that the mare's body remains straight while she is flexed slightly left so that Mica can barely see her inside eye.

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## Control What You Can

Three variables can pose challenges to the rider seeking to climb the levels in dressage: her horse's conformation, his temperament, and her own position and effectiveness in the saddle.



**PERFECT WHAT YOU CAN:** *Mica* shows exemplary position while riding a 20-meter circle. *Mica* says: "Let this be a challenge not only to lower-level riders, but also to Grand Prix-level riders. It is actually quite difficult to do a 20-meter circle correctly."

Which of these three challenges can you control? Right! Your position. If your horse has less-than-ideal conformation for dressage, the rules for training him are exactly the same, but he may have to work a bit harder to achieve the same result as a horse whose build makes the demands of the sport easier for him. As for temperament, the team player often goes farther than the more talented horse.

But the single most important factor in your horse's success is one that is completely under your control: your riding position. You'll have fewer vet bills and fewer training problems if you polish your equitation. Granted, it won't be easy. All riders with perfectly balanced positions worked hard to achieve them, but it's a requirement for Second Level. Horses can never be balanced when their riders are unbalanced, and only balanced horses can develop the collection required for Second Level.



## Batter Up!

When you are able to consistently pass all the tests I've described in this article, you're ready for Second Level. If you have questions along the way, send them to [editorial@usdf.org](mailto:editorial@usdf.org). ▲

*Next month:* Success with shoulder-in and other lateral movements.

*Thanks to our photo model, Fourth Level USDF-certified instructor/trainer Mica Mabragaña, of Bedford, NY; and Wellington, FL, for her assistance with this article. Mica is riding Infanta HGF, a seven-year-old PRE mare by Idilio, owned by Mary Magee and bred by Hampton Green Farm.*

## Meet the Instructor

**B**eth Baumert is a Fourth Level USDF-certified instructor/trainer based at her family's Cloverlea Farm in Columbia, CT. She works with horses and riders from Training Level to Grand Prix. Beth was the technical editor of *Dressage Today* magazine for sixteen years. She is on The Dressage Foundation's Board of Directors and currently serves as secretary.



*THE TEAM: Freelance writer and USDF-certified instructor Beth Baumert (left) with photo models Infanta HGF and fellow certified instructor Mica Mabragaña*