I created this month’s article in partnership with my student Jessica Morgan because I think she is representative of many USDF members. Jessie is an adult amateur rider who works in Hartford, CT, and rides after work, often on cold, dark, unfriendly New England winter nights.

In 2010, with her Hanoverian mare, Weltdancer (seen in these photos), Jessie was the Adequan/USDF Second Level Horse of the Year reserve champion—missing the number-one spot, in nationwide open competition, by a fraction of a point. Go amateurs! To you I say, “Ride like a pro! If you want to, you can do it!”

So we’re going to conclude our six-part series on moving up to Second Level with a discussion of how to put your newly acquired Second Level skills to work, based on Jessie’s own experience. She’ll explain how she succeeded, and how she still presses on each day to retain the basics as she moves her mare up the levels.

The Self-Perpetuating Working Gaits

“For Second Level, I need a self-perpetuating trot and canter,” says Jessie. “At First Level, you can hug, squeeze, beg, and plead; but in order to collect, you need to have a horse who goes on his own and is in front of the leg.”

Without that self-perpetuating pace, you can’t sit against the hand and half-halt, and you can’t collect—and collection is what you need at Second Level.

As you ride the working paces, look for the circle of energy. Feel for your horse’s swinging back. Feel for the circle of the aids. Maintain the same rhythm and tempo, the same outline and length of stride, the same degree of energy, the same length and height of the neck. Every stride is the same. You and your horse stay in this comfortable working balance, and the energy goes around and around.

One of the best ways to achieve self-perpetuating gaits is by trotting poles. The discipline of poles requires that the horse use his body with integrity; the work supple and strengthens all of his muscles. Start with one pole and gradually add more, one at a time. Depending on your horse’s stride, space them between 1.2 and 1.3 meters apart (between four feet and four feet, three inches).

Check yourself: Can your horse maintain the same rhythm, outline, and balance all the way around the arena in each direction? If so, you’re in a good position to test whether or not you’re in the “land of all possibilities.”

The Land of All Possibilities

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“From this consistent balance, I should always be able to do whatever I want,” says Jessie. She means: When your horse is motoring along in balance, it feels as if each hind foot lands in your hand. You have sufficient ac-
IS ANYTHING POSSIBLE? When your horse is moving in balance and giving you access to his hind legs, you should be able to ask for any exercise at any time. Jessie tests Weltdancer by asking for medium trot (top) and stretch and Überstreichen (above).

cess to the hind legs that you can do anything smoothly.

✓ Ask yourself:

• Is my horse’s rhythm good and his back swinging? (If so, you can use rhythmic, “breathing,” timely aids.)
• How is the feeling in my hand?
• Could I halt easily?
• Could I do a medium?
• Do my half-halts go through?
• Does my horse take a bit of weight on the hind legs without scrunching his neck? (If not, try the “almost transition” exercise at the end of this section.)
• Could I stretch my horse down if I wanted to?
• Could I smoothly turn left or right?
• Does my horse carry himself when I take my aids away?

If you answered yes to all, then your horse is in balance and you’re well prepared to do whatever you want. Give your horse these little checks all the time. You’ll have to work for it. Don’t think it’s easy.

⇒ Try this to improve your ability to half-halt: Do “almost” transitions: From a self-perpetuating working trot, shorten the strides and almost walk; then go forward in a better-balanced

THE “ALMOST” TRANSITION: Jessie shortens Weltdancer’s strides and almost walks, then proceeds in trot. The result is better balance and increased connection and collection.

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trot. This invites the horse’s hind legs to step under and carry a bit more weight. It connects and collects him just a bit.

Where Is Your Focus?

What are you thinking about as you ride? Be endlessly particular about your riding position. It’s the single most important factor in determining your degree of success. Focus on your center (your “core”) and ride from that place.

When your position is ideal, you can make your aids precise and specific. Only with consistent aiding can you understand completely what you want and give you a consistent answer. If your aids are inconsistent, they’re like a difficult multiple-choice test for your horse.

What part of your horse’s body are you focusing on as you ride? Lots of people think too much about the horse’s head and neck. Dial into your horse’s hind end and his back instead. Then his front end becomes the result of what you’re doing with the hindquarters.

Use Your Corners

Jessie says that riders either lose some control or gain control in the corners. Which type are you?

Start by understanding what kind of a corner you’re riding. All corners are one-quarter of a circle. Is your corner going to be part of a twelve-meter circle? A ten-meter circle? An eight-meter circle? The deeper the corner, the smaller the circle and the more challenging.

Try this corner exercise: The purpose of this exercise is to ensure that your corner actually is one-quarter of a circle. Let’s start with a corner that’s part of a twelve-meter circle. There’s already a corner letter that’s six meters from the place where two walls of the arena meet. That’s one of your circle points. Now pace off six meters from the corner on the short side. If you begin your corner at one marker and finish it at the next, you will have ridden exactly one-quarter of a twelve-meter circle (see illustration below). Try it in walk first. Your horse’s shoulder leaves the track at the first corner marker and returns to the track at the next.

Understand your aids as you ride corners. The inside aids are in charge of bending your horse and putting him in front of the leg. The outside aids are in charge of throughness, connection, collection, and turning. If you keep those simple facts in mind, you’ll always know which aids you need.
What’s Your Intent?

“What's your intent when you do a shoulder-in?” Jessie asks. “Most riders do it because it's required in the tests.”

Ride shoulder-in with the idea of improving your connection and your horse's balance. You might be surprised to see that it's easier to do any movement if you have this goal in mind. In fact, ride all movements with the intention of improving the connection and the balance.

→ Check yourself: Ride shoulder-in on the long side and then straighten. Did your trot improve because of the exercise? If not, don't despair. Try again.

Do it so the connection improves. Then take the benefit of the shoulder-in exercise into the next movement.

There’s an integrity to the dressage-training process: Good things build on good things.

Do Exercises That Directly Develop Collection

If you read the first five articles in this series, you know there are certain things that directly develop collection: transitions that skip a gait; half-halts; lateral exercises, such as shoulder-in, haunches-in, and half-pass; turn on the haunches or pirouettes in walk; and medium paces.

In addition, you can combine movements to develop collection. Here are my favorite exercises. The first improves the trot, and the second develops canter.

To develop collected trot: Ride counter-canter on the long side. If your horse is confused by your request for counter-canter, start it a little off the track so he feels as if he can turn toward his leading leg. Trot before the corner letter, and feel your
improved trot on the short side. Because the counter-canter is on a straight line, it’s easy for your horse. It’s really only counter-canter in a psychological sense, but you gain energy and straightness that improves the trot tremendously by adding those qualities.

To develop collected canter: Ride ten-meter circles in canter at the RSVP letters. Now count out loud: Count six strides in the first half of the circle and six in the second half. Count twelve strides on the long side between each letter. Doing this will help you develop a consistent canter with the correct length of stride.

Inconsistent aids are like a difficult multiple-choice test for your horse.

Put Yourself out There
Jessie has found that “Riding at a show, symposium, or clinic improves your riding at home. It forces you to do things you wouldn’t necessarily do at home.”

Even if you don’t show, use the dressage tests as a road map. The tests as we know them today were compiled over many years by the collective genius of generations of horsemen.
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Your Questions Answered

USDF member Kathy Channell has been reading our “Get to Second Base” series and sent the following question, which she titled “How Much?”

I try to read my horse’s body for signs I am overdoing, but I still want to press forward. Sometimes when I push him into shoulder-in with my inside leg, his body resists and he tries a spook. Could this be an attempt to get out of work?

Also, when riding shoulder-in or shoulder-fore, do you put more weight on the inside leg and seat bone and rotate your waist with the horse’s shoulders? My horse tries not to bend around my inside leg going to the left. I try to stay off the left rein and to use lots of left leg and spur, but he can get “pissy” with the spur.

Finally, should your horse “live” in shoulder-in and shoulder-fore in all three gaits?

Kathy, sometimes “pressing forward” means taking a deep breath and finding relaxation so your horse’s work will be done with integrity and thoroughness. Bending work is the easiest way to get relaxation; then when you go forward on a straight line, you retain the “ability to bend” by doing shoulder-fore.

Yes, you “live” in shoulder-fore, but not in shoulder-in. Shoulder-fore is a straightening tool, and whereas you achieve it with lateral aids, it is not a lateral exercise. If you were to ride shoulder-fore toward a mirror, your horse looks straight but retains the ability to bend. His inside hind leg steps in the space between his two front feet, and his outside hind is on the same track as his outside fore.

Before you ride shoulder-in, be sure that a ten-meter circle is easy. Be quietly persistent. Ten-meter bend is difficult, but going straight in ten-meter bend (shoulder-in) compounds the difficulty.

For spook avoidance, shoulder-in is a great exercise when done away from the spooky object. If the ghost is on the right, you do shoulder-in left. It’s hard to say without seeing you, but it’s possible your horse needs more support from the inside rein than you think in gaining the left bend. I understand that you are trying to avoid overusing the inside rein, but keep in mind that he can’t bend left until he is properly flexed left and in front of the left leg, with a receiving right (outside) rein.

The weight aids you suggested are correct, but many riders overdo the emphasis on the inside aids and end up abandoning the horse on the outside. The outside aids are the connecting, collecting aids. I would recommend that you try to sit in the middle.

As for your horse’s “pissy” response to the spur, many horses tighten from the spur instead of saying “Oops! I forgot to stay forward!” It sounds as if your horse needs to be in front of the leg, and a whip aid is traditionally the best aid for putting the horse in front of the leg. Use a “whispering” whip, and if that doesn’t work, a tapping one. If necessary, use a whack. But always return to a light aid, and be sure that the whip doesn’t become the primary forward driving aid. Your leg aid is primary, and you want to use an aid that helps your horse step through his back in response and go to the bit. What kind of a leg aid works best? A whisper? If not, does vibrating help? Tap-tap? Kick? And then return to the light aid.

Good luck!
The Thing about Amateurs

Have you noticed that some amateurs ride as well as the pros—or even better?

If you’re an amateur, your horse is competitive, and you want to compete, you should be able to do well. Amateurs can easily have the knowledge, the understanding, and the physical ability to train dressage horses well. Part of the road to success is having that certainty—that faith in the system, and the faith that your horse isn’t an exception to the system.

When you see a competent professional ride down center line, there’s an air of certainty that’s probably worth five percentage points. That certainty is a combination of confidence, know-how, and the ability to communicate with a horse free of mental doubt, physical imbalance, and the resulting unclear aids. There’s no reason why an amateur can’t have that same certainty, with pure intention, unclouded by hoping or wishing.

One problem specific to most amateurs is that they probably ride only one horse a day at the most. Those who ride frequently are accustomed to communicating with their bodies from the moment they get on. Horses know, within ten seconds, who’s the leader of the dance. Some amateurs have trouble being the leader from the get-go. Being the leader doesn’t mean being loud and bossy; good leaders do a lot of quiet listening.

Here’s a way to help establish your leadership role in the saddle: After your warm-up, do transitions every ten strides. Then do them every eight strides or every six. Play it like a game. This should give your horse confidence so he learns to tune into you. When you do transitions, you’re the leader.

Riding the tests or parts of them will make your horse better. If you do show, practice pieces of the test at home so that the test pattern is automatic. Then your brain will be free to just ride your horse. You might surprise yourself. Just enjoy it!

Beth 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.

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