



GET TO SECOND BASE

Half-Halts

Part 4 of a six-part series on finding success at Second Level

By Beth Baumert
Photographs by Susan]Stickle.com

As you strive to excel at Second Level, your success will be measured largely by whether your horse collects. Collection is the magic ingredient in the move up to this level. Here are the things that develop collection:

- Lateral exercises (the subject of part 2 of this series, in the July/August issue)
- Transitions that skip a gait (next month's series topic)
- Half-halts.

Half-halts, this month's topic, also "connect" your horse longitudinally, so I'm sure you've done half-halts at

Training Level and First Level with some degree of success. But at Second Level and above, you not only have to connect the horse but also collect him with half-halts. That is, the half-halt has to add weight to a hind leg. But I'm getting ahead of myself here.

What the Heck Is a Half-Halt?

It's been said that if you ask a dozen dressage professionals to explain a half-halt, you'll get a dozen different answers. I'll try to simplify.

The story of the half-halt began for a simple reason: As a four-legged

creature, the horse has problems coordinating his forehand and his hindquarters. The forehand is the "pulling engine" that pulls the horse along, and the hind end is the "pushing engine." All horses are eager to use the forehand and a bit unconscious about the hindquarters. Left to his own devices, the horse uses his forehand first and most. However, the moment he makes the mistake of initiating motion with his front legs, he sprawls, and the front legs end up pulling the dragging hindquarters.

The horse's inclination needs to be reversed: The hind "pushing engine" needs to thrust, or push energy "through" the horse's entire body; and the forehand needs to wait. Therefore, the perpetual job of the rider at all levels is to help the horse coordinate his two "engines" by making him eager to use his hindquarters and slowing the miles per hour of the forehand. That coordinated slowing and energizing puts the horse in balance—and is precisely the job of the half-halt.

Normal half-halts are invisible to the onlooker, but the result is the appearance of perfect balance. All half-halts convey one message: "Balance under me."

How to Make a Half-Halt

All half-halts have three components (see the photos on the opposite page):

1. Your aids tell the hindquarters, "Work."
2. Your aids tell the forehand, "Whoa"
3. Finally, there's a little release in which your aids let go and say, "You're free to carry yourself."

Let's take a look at how you accomplish each of these components.

1. Make the hindquarters work. Half-halts don't work unless the horse's hindquarters are working rhythmically with only occasional reminders from the rider. But what, exactly, are we asking the hind legs to do?

A horse's hind leg does three things: It thrusts, it reaches, and it engages.



IN SYNC: Mica Mabragaña is a perfectly balanced rider here; her half-halts have helped her horse, Infanta HGE, balance perfectly



THE HALF-HALT MOMENTS: *Activating the hindquarters (top), slowing the forehand (middle), and release of the aids (above)*

Create thrust. In this phase, the rider drives, and the horse's hind leg pushes off the ground. As it pushes off, it releases stored energy (creates impulsion).

How much thrust should you strive to create? Just enough. Too much thrust and your horse will be too forward for the balance. He'll get tense and get too heavy or run through the bit. Too little thrust and the energy will never make it to the bit. The horse will be unconnected, lacking in elasticity and athleticism.

You'll feel adrift. For an image of the right amount of thrust, see the photo at right.

To ask for thrust, you close your leg and sit *toward* your hand, going with and perhaps enhancing the motion. In response, the horse thrusts, reaches, and "draws on" your rein the way a fish on the hook draws on the line.

Now here's a question for you: As your horse draws on the rein, what part of your body does he draw on? If your answer was "my hands," you've identi-



CORRECT THRUST: *Infanta HGF is thrusting with her left hind leg and reaching under her center of gravity with her right hind*

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fied a problem. Rethink the process. If your answer was “my elbows,” that’s a better answer. If your answer was “my seat because of the connection through my elbows,” I like that answer best. You want to feel that your horse is drawing on your seat, or your entire vertical self. When he steps to the bridle, he draws you deeper into the saddle. Those mechanics are necessary for the half-halt to work in a way that influences the hindquarters.



CONNECTED: *Infanta HGF draws on Mica's seat, and Mica's seat automatically draws the mare's inside hind leg under her center of gravity*

Create reach. In this phase, the hind leg reaches forward, ideally toward the place under the horse's center of gravity. Again, more isn't necessarily better, and too little isn't enough. That exact point under your center isn't easy to find. By nature, the horse will tend to step either beyond that point or not up to it. The answer, as it is for so many things in dressage, is shoulder-fore, which positions the inside hind foot under the center of gravity without letting the outside hind escape to the outside. (Need to brush up on shoulder-fore? Review part 2 of this series, in the July/August issue.)

Create engagement. The hind leg carries weight when its joints are bent and the hind foot is flat on the ground, ideally under the center of gravity. As a result, the horse's forehand visibly lightens. When you can successfully add a little weight to a hind leg without compromising your basics, you've developed a bit of collection.

Knowing how the hindquarters work helps you know what to do; but the primary point is that you, the rider, need to be thinking about the hindquarters all the time. Bit by bit, you'll become accustomed to “riding the hindquarters,” at which point your hands and reins can become secondary aids to your legs and seat.

2. Tell the forehand to whoa.

Does this sound like the tricky part? Actually, it's simple.

I'd like you to try three methods of applying the “whoa” aid. The first two methods are actually incorrect, but trying them once will help you understand and confirm the correct method.

1. Move your hands backward, closer to your seat. This method will shorten your horse's neck, and it might also hollow his back. (For more about the shortened neck, see “A Common ‘Whoa’ Problem” below.)

2. Bring your hands and your seat closer together. This method will also have a negative effect.

3. Keep your hands forward and sit against the hand. Bringing your seat forward against your forward hand. If this is difficult, hold onto the pommel or to a bucking strap, and sit against



MOMENT OF ENGAGEMENT: *The joints of Infanta HGF's hind leg are bent, and her hoof is flat on the ground carrying weight*

it. Be careful not to lean back. Your upper body needs to keep going forward with the horse.

When you sit against the hand that stays forward, your horse will shorten behind the saddle; but his neck will stay the same, without shortening. His hind legs will bend more, which will cause his croup to lower. He'll carry more weight behind.

Did it work? If not, ride forward and try it again. And again.

Connecting half-halts create the habit in your horse to always go forward with a “bridge” that connects his hind legs to the bit. Then those half-halts start to collect him. The forwardness is so ingrained that the half-halts add weight to the hind legs,

A Common “Whoa” Problem

The shortened, tightened neck is one of the dressage horse's most common problems, so here's a challenge for you: Ride a half-halt that makes the neck longer. Here's how.

In the “whoa” moment, sit against the hand, but imagine that your hands are attached to your horse's shoulders. Think of sitting against his shoulders, not his mouth. After all, it's the shoulders you want to slow down, not the mouth. Pretend that your horse is wearing a neck strap. Sit against the neck strap and then release.

If your horse learns that every time you gather him behind, you're going to let his neck be a centimeter longer, he's going to be very easy to collect.



SITTING AGAINST THE FORWARD HAND: After a medium canter, Mica sits against her hands. The hands stay forward. Infanta HGF steps directly under her center of gravity as Mica asks the forehand to slow down.

and the forehand becomes light. If the connection ever starts to suffer, then you simply need to repeat those connecting half-halts that have a more forward, horizontal feeling.

3. Soften the aids. In evaluating a dressage horse's gaits, the judge looks at "freedom and regularity." That freedom—when the horse appears to be performing of his own volition—is what makes dressage beautiful. The rider is in control, of course,



RELEASE OF THE REIN: Mica demonstrates *Überstreichen* to the withers

but the horse looks and feels free. The softening of the aids in the half-halt achieves that freedom.

Softening the aids sometimes takes the form of the *Überstreichen* that is required in the tests: You release the rein entirely and reach toward the bit or toward the horse's ears to demonstrate that he is in self-carriage. He should maintain the balance, the rhythm, the bend, and the outline without your rein contact.

I tell my students to touch their

horses' withers frequently while they ride. This gesture is comforting to horses, so riders like it. The horse's energy goes through that place, so it helps him balance with a relaxed neck.

Usually, however, the softening of the aids is indiscernible to the onlooker. It's a softening within the connection—with the horse's back, or his rib cage, or his mouth. The rider can lighten the seat, soften the hand, or relax the legs in an invisible way. ➔

Patti Newton Photography

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Don't worry too much if softening the aids doesn't always work. Try again and again. Show your horse what you want, and then soften. (What do you want? You want the hindquarters to work. You want the shoulders to slow down. You want to set your horse free.) In the process, that hindquarter "pushing engine" will start to become a carrying engine. The forehand will start to lift instead of pull. Your horse will collect.

Making It Happen

So that's the nuts and bolts of the half-halt, but how do you coordinate it? Listen to your horse's rhythm and movement. The rhythm is his language. Try to speak his language. His movement is similar to that of an empty rocking chair that you set in motion with a push of your hand. There's a forward moment and an equal back moment. The motion is self-perpetuating to an extent, although you'll occasionally need to remind that rocking chair to keep going with a nudge of your hand.

When you're on your horse, feel for the forward moment and the back moment. Feel for the swinging back (see last month's "Clinic" for more on the swinging back), and participate in your horse's motion. He'll tell you when to do what. Within the circle of energy, he'll tell you immediately if the forward is lacking or if the back is lacking. He'll tell you what he needs.

When to Use the Half-Halt

By encouraging the hind legs, discouraging the forehand, and allowing the horse to carry himself, the half-halt asks the horse to balance under you. It's that simple.

Of course, you want your horse to "balance under you" before you do *anything*, so the half-halt is preparation for *anything and everything*. Such as:

If you want to do shoulder-in after the corner, you ride a half-halt in ten-meter bend and say "pay attention to my inside leg." You "layer" the information about the inside leg on top of the half-halt.

Before an extension on the diagonal, your half-halt revs the engine: It gathers the hind legs under you in shoulder-fore as you come onto the diagonal and says, "Get ready to thrust off those hind legs." Again, you layer information into your half-halt aids.

In preparation for a halt at X, your half-halts keep the energy going around and around in shorter and shorter strides until you settle (like a feather, ideally) into a square halt at X. (By the way, square halts happen when the half-halts are square—that is, when they influence each hind leg equally.)

You layer the other aids into the half-halt as you shape your horse and tell him how long you want his strides to be and what you want him to do. All the while, he should keep stepping through the aids in a soft way. The flow of energy must continue as you half-halt.

The Rider's Half-Halt

Your horse can't collect if he's not balanced, and he can't be balanced if you are not sitting straight, aligned, and balanced on top of your horse.

Experienced riders are constantly rebalancing their bodies—giving themselves a half-halt, if you will. During the softening moment of the half-halt, rebalance yourself in relation to the earth. You should feel grounded to the earth in your position. If you hold onto the saddle to maintain balance, you will forever be in your horse's balance, and therefore unable to influence his balance. Feel as if the soles of your feet were on the ground. Half-halt yourself often to stay in balance over your feet. The weight of your head and your seat should be distributed equally over both feet.

Any questions? Send them to editorial@usdf.org. ▲

Next month: Transitions.

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 HGE, a seven-year-old PRE mare by Idilio, owned by Mary Magee and bred by Hampton Green Farm.

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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