

EXCLUSIVE TRAINING SERIES

Dressage Puzzlers

We tackle some of the most perplexing concepts in dressage.
This month: half-halts.

By Jennifer Baumert with Amber Heintzberger

In this month's "Dressage Puzzlers" installment, we break down the elements of the much-misunderstood half-halt.

A half-halt serves as a helpful "heads up" to the horse that something—a new movement, a transition—is coming. Using half-halts

sensitivity on the part of the rider, and instructors often struggle to convey to their students exactly what the half-halt is and how to ride this subtle but essential rebalancing exercise. We asked FEI-level USDF-certified instructor Jennifer Baumert to help sort it out.

Jennifer Baumert says:

When I think of the half-halt, I think of it as an organization of the horse's energy, not as a stopping of the energy. It's a rebalancing of the whole horse.

The half-halt must be preceded by a driving aid. You drive the horse up to the contact; that is the energy you're closing your reins against. Then immediately after the half-halt, there must be a forward release of that energy. I think that's where people often go wrong—by holding the half-halt for too long.

Some horses fill up your hand in a light way and some give you a strong feel, but it's important that your horse takes you into the half-halt. You have to make sure that it's an engaged reaction from the horse, which is why the driving aids precede the half-halt.

I like to borrow Olympian Courtney Dye's expression when I'm teaching the half-halt. She calls it a half-go, to reinforce the idea of using half-halts to rebalance the horse and to



BEAUTIFUL RESULT: *Effective half-halts rebalance the horse and add energy to his movement. Jennifer Baumert schools DeWert during a training trip to Germany to study with German Olympian Klaus Balkenhol. The horse's balance has shifted rearward and his shoulders are elevated as the result of a half-halt in the canter.*

Contrary to what the name suggests, a half-halt is not half of a halt. A half-halt is a momentary rebalancing of the horse, and skilled dressage riders use them—ideally invisibly—continually: to maintain the desired tempo of a gait, before making a transition from one gait to another, before changing directions, and in changing paces within a gait.

throughout a ride makes it possible for the horse to handle changes of gait, weight, and balance.

Although it is one of the most helpful and commonly used elements of the dressage rider's toolbox, the half-halt tends to be a mystifying concept to less-experienced riders. Its very nature requires both timing and

Meet the Expert

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JACKIE HARRIS

add energy and power to his gaits, because riders are inclined to kill the horse's energy with half-halts, which is the opposite of what the half-halt is supposed to do.

If the horse is pulling or leaning on you, essentially he's disengaged. If you try to half-halt in that moment, you're just pulling on his front end, and the result will be that you slow him down, shorten his neck, or both. If that's the case, then you need to work on the engagement and the connection first. You need to be a little clever and find out if you can push him a little sideways to engage his hind end before you half-halt. I'll explain some ways to do that in a minute.

What Does the Half-Halt Feel and Look Like?

The feeling can definitely vary, depending on the horse's level of training and innate talent. On an upper-level horse, you get a real sense of self-carriage and that he is carrying you forward after the half-halt. On a younger or greener horse, you get the feeling that he is more in front of you and more buoyant and round, carrying you forward. The exact feeling may vary, but you should always feel an improvement in the balance and the contact.

After a correctly executed half-halt, the horse should give you the feeling that his forehead is elevated and that there is a lot of length in front of you—as if there is more horse in front of you than behind you. He becomes shorter, not in a tight or unpleasant way but in a balanced way. I love the idea that although the horse is "shorter," his topline feels long because it's so round. The horse carries himself. Even though he's more organized and connected, he feels free—not strung out, but free.

From the ground, a half-halt might look a little different on a young horse versus a more trained horse or one with better movement; but whatever his training or quality, it should be very clear after the half-halt that he takes more weight behind and that

there's more freedom in the forehead.

The gait after the half-halt should be more elevated, not flatter. There should be an opening of the gait, with more expression and freedom, not a loss of the gait. The shape of the horse is also important: Viewed from the side, the back and the line of the neck should look as if they belong together. The topline should look connected and soft; the horse may look shorter from back to front, but he shouldn't look tighter or less expressive.

Riding the Half-Halt

As I explained on page 14, the half-halt has three basic parts. First, I create energy in the horse by using a driving aid. Then, in the moment of the half-halt, I rebalance the horse by closing my reins against the energy. Finally, I release the half-halt by resuming following the horse's motion with my hand.

Here's how that process might happen while I'm riding.

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with my horse to make sure that he is properly forward and in front of my leg. If I sense that the energy needs to be refreshed, I use a driving aid.

2. As I feel him respond to the leg aid and go forward into the rein contact, I steady or “fix” my hand for just a moment; that is, I stop following with my hand as I usually do. That is the half-halt. The timing is important because the moment of rebalancing the horse’s energy back toward his hindquarters and the corresponding lightening of the forehand can happen only when the horse’s hind leg is on the ground.

3. Immediately after the moment of rebalancing, I release the fixed hand and resume following the horse’s motion as usual so that he can go freely forward in the improved balance and energy created by the half-halt.

This entire process can happen in a stride or even less. Done correctly, the half-halt is invisible to the onlooker—because a skilled rider half-halts continually throughout the ride, before the horse has a chance to become truly unbalanced.

I use half-halts so frequently as I ride that the process is automatic. But I can tell you that I use half-halts in every corner and in preparation for every movement and every transition.

**Training and
Troubleshooting**

When you ask for a half-halt, if you don’t get a balanced shift of the horse’s weight onto the hindquarters, a useful tool is to ride a full down transition. This means a transition from walk to halt, from trot to walk, and so on, so that you’re actually getting a hind-leg reaction from the horse. If he’s pulling against you, the downward transition won’t fix the problem, but it will give you a chance to get the horse back and then to create a driving aid and to get a quality response to the aid. It may be a little stronger than I want, but this is a useful feeling to have in the reins. Downward transitions are a super way to make sure that your horse is at least headed in the direction of improving

the half-halt in his training.

Consider whether the forward energy that you’re getting from your driving aids is an “engaged forward” or whether your horse is actually leaning and running and pulling you along in a negative way. A little weight in your hand isn’t wrong; but if the driving aid is pushing the horse onto the forehand such that he’s leaning or pulling on you and has disengaged his hind leg, the half-halt hasn’t worked properly. I’m a big fan of using a little leg-yield or lateral work to reengage that hind leg. You can also make a “circle” that’s really a bunch of little turns.

Another exercise that is important in helping the horse to understand the half-halt is to make transitions within the gait. This does not mean slowing down and speeding up; you need to make sure that you are keeping his energy level the same while he is covering more or less ground.

Common Rider Mistakes

A really common mistake is not releasing the horse forward after taking back. It’s totally human nature, if you feel the half-halt is not working, to just hold on. But that makes the horse lean on the bit, and so the rider ends up “carrying” the horse with the hand. This also happens when the rider’s seat isn’t independent and she’s balancing on her hands a bit.

To help correct this issue, ride more full transitions. The horse needs to know that there will be a release; if there’s no release, you’re not able to ride the next half-halt. It’s worth pointing out that one half-halt is not always sufficient; sometimes you need several in succession to get the effect that you want. Sometimes the first two don’t get through, but the third one works!

Another issue is when the rider slows the horse down in the half-halt but never gets the energy back. It can be a fairly harmless problem, but you’re not actually creating a shift in the balance and you’re not able to add energy.

Another common problem is when the rider leans against the horse and he hollows his back. The goal of the half-halt is to shift the balance to the hind end and raise the forehead. But when the horse is driven down against the hand, you get a raised head and a hollow back, and that is the opposite of what you want to achieve through the half-halt.

Rider position is an important element in producing effective half-halts. Think about balancing yourself

relative to the ground and not falling into that sort of water-ski inclination, where you're leaning back with your feet out in front of you. If your horse were to disappear from underneath you, ideally you'd be in a position such that you'd land on your feet. Another helpful concept is to think about kneeling or squatting, and how that engages your core in a way that helps you stay with your horse's motion. If you press into your heels and your seat, you end up leaning back, which

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Exercises to Develop the Balance Shift

Prepare to do a transition, but then don't do it. This helps the

horse that needs to be reminded to stay forward in downward transitions. That needs to happen before the rider's half-halt can be effective.

I like to think in terms of "connecting half-halts" and "collecting half-halts" (or connecting transitions and collecting transitions). When you ride a connecting half-halt or transition, you are in essence, trying to catch the moment when the horse would like to quit. He needs to be reminded that he must stay "forward thinking" in that moment in

which he is inclined to do less. You'll be most effective if you can make the correction at the very moment that your horse is trying to fall behind your leg. If you make the correction after he quits, it is not as effective.

Shoulder-in. It's important to have a proper shoulder-in. Ride down the long side of the arena with your inside leg at the girth, your outside leg a little back, and your seat bones pointed the same direction as your horse's hind legs. Ask for a little flex-



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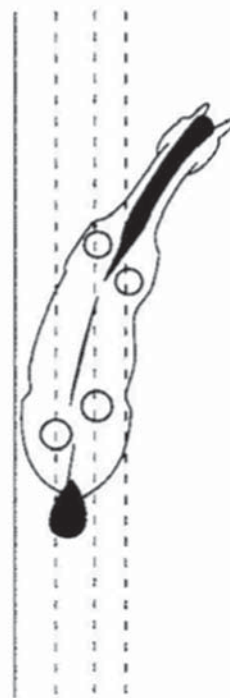
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SHOULDER-IN: Illustration from the USEF rule book shows proper alignment

ion with your inside rein. You want to feel your horse's shoulders off the wall, not just his neck.

I also like to ride what I call "developing shoulder-in." Beginning in shoulder-in, use your outside aids to bring the whole horse slightly off the wall; then, with your inside leg and outside rein, bring the shoulder-in back to the wall. Do this exercise in both directions. Coming off the track and then back to the wall is a great exercise for creating the half-halt and shifting the horse's balance back toward his hindquarters.

ILLUSTRATION © UNITED STATES EQUESTRIAN FEDERATION

Mix lateral with forward. I do tons of exercises that mix lateral work with forward work. Example: Using the whole diagonal, I'll begin with a little haunches-in on the diagonal ride; then I'll straighten and ride medium trot from quarter line to quarter line. As I approach the second quarter line, I'll half-halt in the shape of the bend that I had in the first haunches-in, and then I'll develop half-pass again. Varying between lateral movements and forward pieces helps give the horse more energy in the lateral work and more compression in the forward work. It also requires effective half-halts.

In the Show Arena

If you think of half-halts in terms of a dressage test—either a test you've ridden or one you've seen that is memorable—you can see how the half-halt builds the energy and the compression that you need for the next movement. When you're in the arena, corners are an important place to use the half-halt, as you prepare for the next movement. In fact, half-halts are useful for both physically rebalancing the horse and mentally preparing him before every transition or movement.

The half-halt gives the rider a feeling of preparation for the next movement, as well. We've all done those tests where you feel like, "What just happened?" The half-halts give you a chance to make sure you have your horse prepared for what's coming next. Mentally, that helps you feel more organized and helps you recover from any little bobbles or mistakes. If things aren't going well, it's a good way to reorganize.

A good rider has a "built in" half-halt. There's a "wait" in every driving aid: They're bringing the horse's energy

up under him rather than allowing him to get flat and faster. When I teach clinics, I'll often see someone who's rising the trot and it's flat and they're having to push a lot; then they go to sitting trot and the horse is more together. Even a rider with an unskilled seat finds an element of putting their horse together in the sitting trot. You're always trying to build that sort of *Schwung* or expression in the forward energy.

An All-Purpose Riding Tool

Learning to ride an effective half-halt takes practice and patience, but it's worth the effort. Once you have mastered the half-halt, your horse will be more comfortable and responsive, and it will bring a feeling of effortlessness and flow to your riding. Your horse will be balanced and prepared for each movement, and you will lose the anxiety you may feel while riding a dressage test because you feel more prepared. Not only is this more pleasant for those watching from the ground, but the feeling you'll get in the saddle will improve dramatically. ▲

Amber Heintzberger is an award-winning equestrian journalist and co-author with Anna Ford of the 2009 American Horse Publications book of the year, Beyond the Track: From Racehorse to Riding Horse (Trafalgar Square, 2009) and of Modern Eventing with Phillip Dutton (Trafalgar Square, 2013). She lives outside New York City with her husband and children.

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