

# THE PYRAMID OF TRAINING – COLLECTION

## Increased Engagement, Lightness of the Forehand, Self-Carriage

“The horse shows collection when he lowers and engages his hindquarters– shortening and narrowing his base of support, resulting in lightness and mobility of the forehand. Because the center of mass is shifted backward, the forehand is lightened and elevated; the horse feels more ‘uphill’. The horse’s neck is raised and arched and the whole top line is stretched. He shows shorter, but powerful, cadenced, steps and strides. Elevation must be the result of, and relative to, the lowering of the hindquarters. This is called ‘Relative Elevation’. It indicates a training problem if the horse raises his neck without displacement of his center of mass to the rear. This is called ‘Absolute Elevation’ and can, if pervasive, adversely affect the horse’s health and his way of going. Collection with Relative Elevation will enhance the horse’s self-carriage, so that he can be ridden almost entirely off the seat, and the aids of the legs and especially those of the hands can become very light.” [USDF Glossary of Judging Terms]

### Purpose

“The aim of collection of the horse is:

- To further develop and improve the balance and equilibrium of the horse, which has been more or less displaced by the additional weight of the rider.
- To develop and increase the horse’s ability to lower and engage his quarters for the benefit of the lightness and mobility of his forehand.
- To add to the ease and carriage of the horse and make it more pleasurable to ride.” [FEI Rule Book Article 417]
- To improve the horse’s ability to extend.

### Qualities

“True collection produces ‘schwung’ and cadence in the paces, not just shorter strides. If both hind legs step further forward under the horse’s center of gravity, the quarters with bent haunches carry more weight and then propel the body powerfully forwards and upwards. Because the center of gravity is shifted backwards, and the quarters carry more weight, the forehand is lightened and elevated, the horse’s neck is arched and it shows proud and cadenced steps and strides.” [Advanced Techniques of Riding, p 28]

“In collection, the hind legs (hock and stifle joints) bend more, stepping further underneath the horse in the direction of the center of gravity and taking a greater share of the load. This lightens the forehand giving more freedom to the movements of the forelegs. The horse looks and feels more ‘uphill.’ The steps become shorter but without losing their energy and activity. The impulsion is maintained in full in the trot and canter, and as a result, the steps become more expressive and ‘stately.” [Principles of Riding, p 159]

### How it is Achieved

Collection is developed through the use of shoulder-in and half-pass, travers, renvers, transitions up and down, and especially half-halts. “Collection is improved and achieved by engaging the hind legs, with the joints bent and supple, stepping forward under the horse’s body by using the containing hand and seat and legs. Collection is consequently not achieved by shortening of the pace through a resisting action of the hand, but instead by using the seat and legs to engage the hind legs further under the horse’s body.” [FEI Rule Book Article 417]

“With improved flexibility of the quarters, it becomes possible to allow the legs to move more under the horse, and by using simultaneous half-halts, and driving aids to push the horse more together and ‘through,’ thus allowing the weight to be transferred more onto the quarters, the horse then becomes collected.” [The Dressage Horse, p 115]

Any exercise which teaches the horse to carry more weight on its hindquarters is a collecting exercise. Collecting exercises include transitions ridden on straight and curved tracks including half-halts, and transitions to halt.

“A useful exercise to prepare the horse for a higher degree of collection is increasing and decreasing the size of the circle.” [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 30]

## Faults

Collection may never be achieved forcefully by rein action shortening the stride. Forced collection will not lower and bend the haunches, but the horse will step forward with stiff hind legs, and a tense back. The sequence of the paces suffers easily (flat, four-time canter, pacing walk). The most important rule for collection is: The purity of the pace and Schwung may never suffer, but should be improved.” [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 28]

## Discussion of Elevation & Self Carriage

“Head carriage is directly related to the collection. The horse should move with its head and neck raised in accordance with [or relative to] the degree of collection, or in dressage parlance, with its head and neck relatively raised.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 168]

This is called “**Relative Elevation.**” It is “relative” to the horse’s ability to collect at that particular stage of training, according to his conformation. With correct training, this carriage of head and neck will develop naturally.

“**Relative Elevation** is the raising of the forehand coupled with the lowering of the hindquarters, involving shifting of the horse’s balance to the rear.” [*USDF Glossary of Judging Terms*]

Conversely, “**Absolute Elevation**” is artificially created by the rider’s hands and is not desirable. “Raising the head mainly by use of the hands is incorrect. The head carriage in this case is no longer related to the degree of engagement. In dressage parlance, the head and neck are said to be raised absolutely, as opposed to relatively.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 168]

**Absolute Elevation** is the raising of the horse’s neck (in isolation without shifting the horse’s balance to the rear.” [*USDF Glossary of Judging Terms*]

“**Self-carriage** is the state in which the horse carries itself without taking support or balancing on the rider’s hand.” [*USDF Glossary of Judging Terms*]

In absolute elevation, “the rider is supporting the head and neck, and the activity of the hindquarters is restricted because the horse is not working correctly through its back.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 168-169]

“If the carrying capacity of the hindquarters is sufficiently developed, the horse will be able to balance itself and move in self-carriage in any gait, notwithstanding the rider’s weight. The rider can test this balance by ‘giving and retaking the reins’ for a few strides. The horse should remain in self-carriage.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 169]

[Note: See Chapter 21 for “Übersteichen – releasing the rein (contact).]

“Collection can never be obtained by ‘direct means, which is forcibly, by use of the double bridle. This incorrect usage can only hamper the engagement and reduce the amount of weight carried by the hindquarters. For correct collection in a double bridle, the horse must take contact with, and ‘go into’ the bridoon. The curb serves only for momentary ‘fine-tuning’”. [*Advanced Techniques of Dressage*, p.17]

In collection, the legs lift higher above the ground and therefore, coincidentally, move in shorter strides. However, a horse that only shortens his strides without lifting his legs higher is not collected. The hip, stifle, hock, and fetlock joints rotate supplely and with increased articulation. [*Training Strategies for Dressage Riders*, p.144 ]

# Understanding Engagement

*Written by Stephen Clarke*

*FEI-O dressage judge, rider and trainer, England. Dressage Magazine, May 1998*

“Engagement is about the weight carrying capacity of the hind legs, as opposed to the pushing power of the hind legs.

It is possible to have a horse going with a lot of energy with pushing rather than carrying hind legs. You can find horses that are very successful at national levels, yet never quite break through to the same success at Grand Prix. This is because they have gotten away with a bit of power and pushing but never quite found the full capacity of the hind legs, which is what enables the horse to find the balance and collection needed for piaffe and passage.

The feeling of the horse, properly engaged, is one of balance and lightness of the shoulders, so that he can perform the movement of whichever level he is at with ease and fluency. In fact what we are talking about is collection. So, if one of the ingredients of collection is engagement, we can talk about the ingredients you need to have for engagement.

As judges, we have to be careful when we say to a rider that a certain ingredient is either missing or needs more development, so that if the rider takes us at our word, the horse ends up better, not worse. We could say, even up to the very highest level that “a horse could be more engaged.” It is a comment often relied upon as you can’t go far wrong! But we have to relate to the less experienced rider who maybe has a problem with straightness and suppleness.

For more engagement the horse first needs to be straight, supple, in balance, and accepting the aids. The engagement can then be developed through transitions, the half-halt, small circles and lateral work. With a horse that is stiff in the back or against the hand, it is only going to produce more resistance to do the exercises without the ingredients.

At lower levels, there is a bit of confusion with the word ‘collection.’ When it says on the test sheet ‘collected trot,’ it only means that the degree of collection required should only be enough for the horse to perform at that level with ease and fluency.

Going back to ingredients, of course you cannot develop any of these qualities unless the horse is in front of the rider, otherwise you are banging your head on a brick wall. Before you start influencing the horse, look at yourself first, that you are sitting correctly and applying the aids effectively in an educated manner.

When we talk about exercises; transitions, small circles, shoulder-in, the point is to have a clear objective at the start as to what we are doing and the effect we are trying to create. For example, [the objective] in a downward transition is that the horse remains straight and takes his weight further back onto the hind legs. Any transition should be a responsive reaction to an aid, the degree of response – the time it takes for a transition to happen – should depend on the stage of training of the horse. It is quite deliberate that the lower level tests say that transitions can be progressive as the horse’s balance at that stage does not allow too immediate a reaction.

With small circles, [the objective] is suppleness to bend without loss of the hindquarters, submission to the outside aids, and no loss of activity. Then, the circle itself helps produce more suppleness and engagement.”

*Written by Ferdi Eiberg,*

*British team member 93-95, rider, and trainer to British 3-day team, England, Dressage Magazine, May 1998*

“Engagement is so connected to the half-halt. It is where it comes from as the horse’s natural desire to go forward meets up with and accepts the half-halt. This in return has the effect of changing the horse’s balance.

[When] talking about exercises to develop engagement, we are talking transitions, creating more and more desire to use the hind leg. A lot of people don’t get to engagement because they are so concerned about control. It happens most often at novice and elementary levels, riders want to feel in control so they slow down, which is entirely the wrong step to take. You have to put the power in first, then control it with the half-halt. To do it you have to get through that wobbly feeling, before the balance and engagement is improved by the use of the half-halt, without being tempted to slow down. Once the horse has been shown that he does enough behind and lifts his shoulder, the balance will be there to go round

the corner. It is a stepping stone to a different range.

Once the horse accepts the half-halt, and his power is there with balance through engagement, suddenly it is a different horse. Engagement has nothing to do with speed. You can go wrong in another way and speed the horse out of balance, which creates similar problems at the other end of the scale.

What engagement is, is strength in the hind leg, a willingness to take weight back off the front end. When you see a really engaged extended trot, it is not fast. A full development of power, yet the horse is completely in balance, it is uphill.

At the moment you ask for more power, the horse should not try to run against the hand or contact. He should immediately improve his 'lift' and transform the extra power into height. As the weight is carried two-thirds on the hind end, it allows freedom in the shoulder. When you see a really top horse, it is almost as if he feeds himself in spring and lift.

In a transition from extended to collected and back to extended trot for example, as the horse comes out of collection, he should be able within two or three strides to open up to the full extension of his natural reach. When he comes back to collection, he should not 'break up' in front in his rhythm, that little shuffle you often see, but sit under as the front end comes back.

The whole thing should be like sliding a lever, in and out. You can't suddenly say 'I want collection,' it is a very gradual process of developing transitions so the horse can come back without loss of power.

Young horses have to learn and develop ability to come back and at the same time increase the power in the hind leg – engagement. When that happens, collection is handed to you on a plate.

It is a gradual process. It takes time to build the strength and to develop the full working capacity of the joints. The dressage horse is a mixture of gymnast and weight lifter.

"How much [engagement] to ask for?" and "Have I got enough [engagement]?" are questions I am often asked. There is no fixed measure, every horse is different, but if the horse is right in the basic way of going it should be completely up to you. It depends on feeling how much you can move the 'sliding lever' smoothly, not switching suddenly, but in one continuous movement with no hiccups.

Development is all about day to day regular work, maintenance work. If you can get the horse both forwards and reacting to the half-halt, everything will come from that. Top horses make it all look so easy, going in and coming out without effort or resistance. The highest level is all about transition, using the whole 'sliding lever' and when that is open and smooth, everything flows.

**Engagement** is defined as "increased flexion of the lumbosacral joint and the joints of the hind leg during its weight-bearing (support) phase of the stride, thus lowering the croup relative to the forehead ("lightening the forehead").

Engagement is "carrying power," rather than "pushing power". A prerequisite for upward thrust/impulsion." [*USDF Glossary of Judging Terms*]