

PYRAMID OF TRAINING – RHYTHM

Energy and Tempo

Rhythm is the term used for the characteristic sequence of footfalls and timing of a pure walk, pure trot, and pure canter. The rhythm should be expressed with energy and in a suitable and consistent tempo, with the horse remaining in the balance and self-carriage appropriate to its individual conformation and level of training.

“The object of correct dressage is not to teach the horse to perform the exercises of the High School in the collected gaits at the expense of the elementary gaits. The classical school, on the contrary, demands that as well as teaching the difficult exercises, the natural gaits of the horse should not only be preserved but should also be improved by the fact that the horse has been strengthened by gymnastics. Therefore, if during the course of training the natural paces are not improved, it would be proof that the training was incorrect.” [*The Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, p 161]

One important function of basic training is to preserve and refine the purity and regularity of the natural gaits. It is therefore essential that the trainer knows exactly how the horse moves in each of the three basic gaits, because only then will he be in a position to take the appropriate action to correct or improve them.

When establishing rhythm, “the horse should be ridden in the basic pace best suited to it.” [*Principles of Riding*, p. 160]

The rhythm must be maintained in each of the basic gaits, and in each form of the gait, i.e. working, collected and extended. “To be able to judge the correctness of the rhythm, the trainer needs a good understanding of how the horse moves in the basic gaits.” [*Principles of Riding*, p. 155]

“The rhythm should be maintained through transitions and turns as well as on straight lines. No exercise or movement can be good if the rhythm falters; and the training is incorrect if it results in loss of rhythm.” [*Principles of Riding*, p. 155]

One of the main objectives in training is to preserve or create in the horse, the desire for active forward movement.

Definitions (*USDF Glossary of Judging Terms*)

Rhythm is the term used for the characteristic sequence of footfalls and timing of a pure walk, pure trot, and pure canter. The rhythm should be expressed with energy and in a suitable and consistent tempo, with the horse remaining in the balance and self-carriage appropriate to its level of training.

Tempo is the “rate of repetition of the rhythm, the strides, or of the emphasized beats – beats per minute, as may be measured by a metronome (in walk and trot, the footfalls of both forelegs are typically counted, and in canter the footfall of the leading foreleg is typically counted).

Regularity is defined as the “purity of the gait and (at walk and trot) evenness of the length of the steps and levelness of the height of the steps taken by the front or hind pairs of legs (i.e. the left and right legs of the pair are symmetrical in height or length of step).

Regularity includes these elements

Correctness is the straightness of the action of the limbs (e.g., faults would be winging, paddling, twisting hocks). Not the same as *Purity*. Dressage judges deal with *Correctness* only indirectly, that is, to the degree that it affects the purity or quality of the gait. Breeding class judges address correctness directly.

Purity is the correct order and timing of the footfalls and phases of a gait.

Irregular Gaits

When the gaits are irregular they are impure, unlevel, or uneven. Can be momentary or pervasive, and may or may not be due to unsoundness. Should not be used to mean unsteadiness of tempo.

The **quality of a gait** refers to its freedom/ amplitude, elasticity, fluency, etc. Not the same as “Purity” or “Correctness.”

Freedom is the reach, scope, and lack of constriction in the movement of the fore and hind limbs.

Elasticity is the ability or tendency to stretch and contract the musculature smoothly, giving the impression of stretchiness or springiness.

The Walk

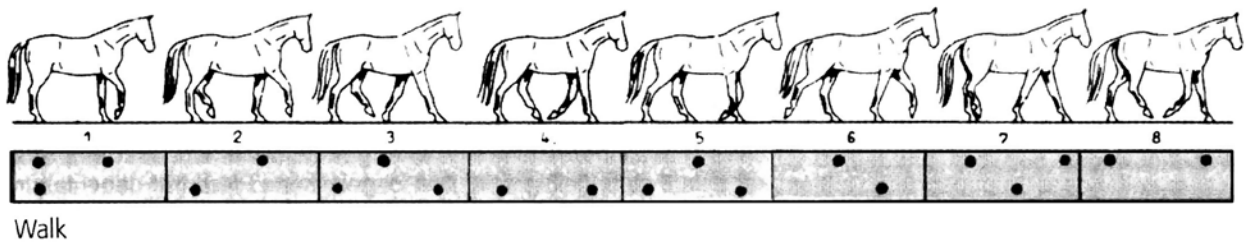
Definition

“The walk is a marching movement in four-time with no moment of suspension.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 143] The sequence is: inside hind, inside fore, outside hind, outside fore.

Qualities

“As well as a clearly defined four-time beat, the basic requirements in all forms of walk are activity, freedom and adequate length of stride.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 92]

Source: *Principles of Riding*



“The walk is said to be regular when each step occurs with the same interval between them, staying in the same tempo with the same length. Failure in rhythm and regularity can happen when the horse holds his back rigid, when the rider forces the walk forwards or when the walk is over collected at too early a stage.” [*The Dressage Horse*, p 112]

Common Mistakes

If the feet are moved forward and set down in lateral pairs, the horse is ‘pacing’ instead of walking. Pushing wrongly and rigid hands are the usual causes of a lateral-type walk, which is very difficult to correct.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 93]

Training Advice

It is at the walk that the imperfections of dressage are most evident. This is also the reason why a horse should not be asked to walk on the bit at the early stages of his training. A too precipitous collection will not only spoil the collected walk but the medium and the extended walk as well. [*USEF Rule Book* DR103]

“The rider keeps the walk active, forward and regular by elastically following the movement and keeping his legs lightly in contact with the horse’s sides. He ‘gives’ sufficiently with his hands, and from his shoulders and elbows, to allow the slight nodding movement of the horse’s head and neck.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 92]

“Too strong use of the hands is one of the commonest faults when riding in walk and can seriously detract from the horse’s rhythm and looseness. Pushing too hard, clamping the lower legs against the horse, and pushing alternately with the legs in an incorrect and exaggerated way can also lead to loss of rhythm and regularity due, for example, to the hind legs not stepping forward equally under the body.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 93]

Paces of the Walk

Collected Walk

“The horse remaining ‘on the bit’ moves resolutely forward, with his neck raised and arched, and showing clear self carriage. The head approaches the vertical position, the light contact with the mouth being maintained. The hind legs are engaged with good hock action. The gait should remain marching and vigorous, the feet being placed in regular sequence. Each step covers less ground and is higher than at the medium walk, because all the joints flex more markedly. In order not to become hurried or irregular the collected walk is shorter than the medium walk, although showing greater activity.” [USEF Rule Book DR103]

“A faulty collected walk is one in which the well defined walk sequence is lost, so the horse appears to be ambling. Another fault is when the collected walk is slowed down only with increased rein action, the steps are slower and shorter and the hooves are dragged listlessly over the ground.” [Advanced Techniques of Riding, p 33]

Medium Walk

“A clear, regular and unconstrained walk of moderate lengthening. The horse, remaining on the bit, walks energetically but calmly with even and determined steps, the hind feet touching the ground in front of the footprints of the forefeet. The rider maintains a light, soft and steady contact with the mouth.

Extended Walk

The horse covers as much ground as possible without haste and without losing the regularity of his steps, the hind feet touching the ground clearly in front of the footprints of the forefeet. The rider allows the horse to stretch out his head and neck without, however, losing contact with the mouth.

Free Walk

The free walk is a pace of relaxation in which the horse is allowed complete freedom to lower and stretch out his head and neck.” [USEF Rule Book DR103]

“In **EXTENDED** walk, the rider needs to lengthen the reins and move his hands forward so as to allow the horse to lengthen its outline and stretch its neck as required, but he should not give up the contact. He should be able to alter the length of stride or the direction of movement at any time. The poll is kept slightly flexed in extended walk, but it is important that the rider’s hands allow the natural ‘nodding’ movement of the horse’s head, in order to enable the horse to take long, ground-covering strides. In the **MEDIUM** walk, the horse is in a short outline, and has a rather more definite contact, and there is less movement of the head and neck. In the **COLLECTED** walk, because of the increased flexion of the hindquarters and the active stepping of the hind feet under the center of gravity, there is no longer any movement of the head and neck. If the horse ‘nods’ in collected walk, it means that it is not taking the weight onto the hindquarter sufficiently.” [Advanced Techniques of Dressage, p. 33]

The Trot

Definition

“The trot is a swinging movement in which diagonal pairs of legs are simultaneously lifted and placed on the ground. The forward moving pair of legs reach the ground a moment after the lifting pair of legs leave the ground. There is, therefore, a moment of suspension.” [The Dressage Horse, p 112]

The trot is a gait of “two time” on alternate diagonal legs (inside hind and outside front together, and outside hind and inside front together) separated by a moment of suspension. The trot, always with free, active and regular steps, should be moved into without hesitation.

Qualities

“The trot is regular when

- The forward moving diagonal follows the lifting diagonal.
- The interval of time between the diagonals is the same. Once can recognize a clean Takt (rhythm and regularity) in

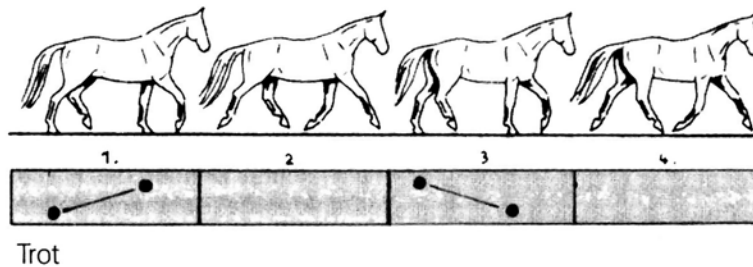
trot when the diagonal front and back legs are parallel to one another. Irregularity occurs especially when the hind leg lifts later than its corresponding diagonal front leg.” [The Dressage Horse, p 112]

“The quality of the trot is judged by the general impression, the regularity and elasticity of the steps – originated from a supple back and well engaged hindquarters – and by the ability of maintaining the same rhythm and tempo and natural balance even after a transition from one trot to another.” [USEF Rule Book DR 103]

Training Advice

“To perform a forward transition into trot, the aids are the same as for the transition into walk, only stronger. In trot, the rider’s seat should accompany the horse’s movements. This is achieved through controlled tightening and relaxing of the back muscles. The seat and aids are used to monitor and maintain the rhythm and impulsion of the trot.” [Principles of Riding, p 93-94]

Source: Principles of Riding



Paces of the Trot

Working Trot

“This is a pace between the collected and the medium trot in which a horse not yet trained and ready for collected movements shows himself properly balanced and, remaining on the bit, goes forward with even, elastic steps and good hock action. The expression ‘good hock action’ does not mean that collection is a required quality of working trot. It only underlines the importance of an impulsion originated from the activity of the hindquarters.

Medium Trot

This is a pace between the working and the extended trot but more ‘round’ than the latter. The horse goes forward with clear and moderately lengthened steps and with an obvious impulsion from the hindquarters. The rider allows the horse remaining on the bit to carry his head a little more in front of the vertical than at the collected and the working trot and allows him at the same time to lower his head and neck slightly. The steps should be even and the whole movement balanced and unconstrained.

Collected Trot

The horse remaining on the bit moves forward with his neck raised and arched. The hocks being well-engaged maintain an energetic impulsion thus enabling the shoulders to move with greater ease in any direction. The horse’s steps are shorter than in the other trots but he is lighter and more mobile.” [USEF Rule Book DR104]

“Most common faults are too prolonged moment of suspension, hind legs which drag, and loss of rhythm. Suspended strides are corrected by riding transitions into different variations within the pace and into different gaits. Loss of rhythm and running strides mostly occur in tight turns or small circles. The rider prevents this by improving collection with forward driving aids and by riding less tight turns for the time being.” [Advanced Techniques of Riding, p 34]

Extended Trot

“The horse covers as much ground as possible. Maintaining the same cadence he lengthens his steps to the utmost as a result of great impulsion from the hindquarters. The rider allows the horse remaining on the bit without leaning on

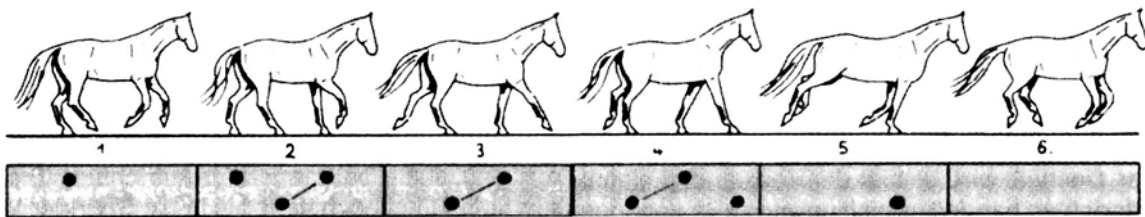
it to lengthen his frame and to gain ground. The forefeet should touch the ground on the spot towards which they are pointing. The movement of the fore and hind legs should be similar (parallel) in the forward movement of the extension. The whole movement should be well balanced and the transition to collected trot should be smoothly executed by taking more weight on the hindquarters.” [USEF Rule Book DR104]

The Canter

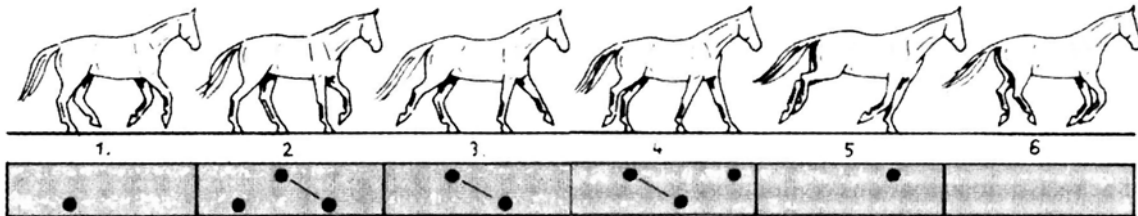
Definition

“In the canter the horse moves in three-time in a series of leaps, during each of which there is a moment of suspension.” [Principles of Riding, p 95] The footfalls are: outside hind, followed by simultaneously the outside fore and inside hind, followed by the inside fore, followed by a moment of suspension with all four feet in the air before the next stride begins.

Source: Principles of Riding



Right canter



Left canter

Collection

“Increased engagement and lifting of the forehand, with shorter steps relative to the other paces of the gait, while maintaining energy and self carriage. The horse’s outline becomes shorter from bit to hip, with the neck and wither stretched and arched upwards. (Note: It is a common misconception that the hind legs step further forward under the body in collection. This is not consonant with the shorter strides required in collection. At the trot and canter the hind feet are picked up relatively sooner after passing under the hip, and spend relatively longer on the ground (support phase) than in the other paces of the gait.)” [USDF Glossary of Judging Terms]

Engagement

“Increased flexion of the lumbosacral joint and the joint of the hind leg during the weight-bearing (support) phase of the stride, thus lowering the croup relative to the forehand (“lightening of the forehand”). Engagement is ‘carrying power’ rather than ‘pushing power’. A prerequisite for upward thrust/impulsion. (Note: Engagement is not flexion of the hocks or ‘hock action’ [as seen most clearly in gaited horses or hackneys] in which the joints of the hind legs are most markedly flexed while the leg is in the air. Nor is engagement the length of the step of the hind leg forward towards the horse’s girth – that is ‘reach’ of the hind leg.)” [USDF Glossary of Judging Terms]

Aids

1. “Before the transition or strike-off into canter, the rider needs to prepare the horse by performing one or more half-halts to bring the hind feet further forward under the center of gravity. In this way more weight is transferred onto the hind legs, making it easier for the horse to strike off into the canter.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 95] “At the departure the horse must think forward. Call him to attention by a half-halt.” [*Practical Dressage Manual*, p 74]
2. “Place more weight on the inside seat bone.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 95] “Sit inward, lower your inside knee.” [*Practical Dressage Manual*, p 74]
3. “Use the inside leg at the girth to push the horse forwards.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 95] “Keep your inside leg at the girth.” [*Practical Dressage Manual*, p 74]
4. “Place the outside leg in a ‘guarding’ position about 10cm (4 inches) behind the girth to prevent the outside hind leg from stepping sideways and to make sure it steps forward in the direction of the center of gravity. The role of the rider’s outside leg is particularly important, since in the phase of the canter when only one of the horse’s hind feet is on the ground, this foot can only bear the weight correctly if it is underneath the center of gravity.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 96]
5. “Keep the outside leg behind the girth and urge him into canter by squeezing with both legs. Do not forget to squeeze with your outside leg. He starts the canter with his outside hind leg. If he gets used to the signal with the outside leg, it will be easy, later on, to teach him flying changes.” [*Practical Dressage Manual*, p 74]
6. “The strike-off is asked for by a combination of the outside leg aid and the inside seat bone being weighted and slightly pushed forward. This is important for the future, as good flying changes of leg only come from changes ridden from the seat bones.” [*Dressage for the Young Rider*, p 89]
7. Note: some books recommend use of the inside leg as the primary aid. “When striking off into the canter from the halt, the outside leg is applied lightly behind the girth in order to announce the movement – lightly. The strike-off is demanded by the inside leg, supported by the rider sitting more firmly on the inside seat bone.” [*Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, p 156]
8. “Flex the horse to the inside by ‘asking’ with the inside rein. Use the outside rein to regulate the amount of flexion and to prevent the horse falling out onto the outside shoulder.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 96] “Squeeze the inside rein a little more than the outside. Do not bend the horse outward.” [*Practical Dressage Manual*, p 74]
9. “As soon as the horse strikes off into canter, ‘let the stride through’ by yielding slightly with the hands, especially the inside one.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 96]
10. “As soon as he strikes off, relax your inside hand so he can reach forward with his leading leg.” [*Practical Dressage Manual*, p 74]
11. “The weight and leg aids are then used to push the horse forward and keep the canter going. The rider goes with the movement from his hips, while keeping his upper body as still as possible. The rider’s inside hip should be slightly in front of the outside one but the outside shoulder should not be ‘left behind.’ The seat should remain softly in the saddle and not bump up and down.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 96]
12. “The hands should keep an even contact with the horse’s mouth during the canter. Correct half-halts are particularly important along with the driving aids they serve to maintain the spring and impulsion and to keep the horse ‘together.’” [*Principles of Riding*, p 96]

Paces of the Canter

Working Canter

“This is a pace between the collected and the medium canter in which a horse, not yet trained and ready for collected movements, shows himself properly balanced and remaining on the bit, goes forward with even, light and cadenced strides and good hock action. The expression ‘good hock action’ does not mean that collection is a required quality of the working canter. It only underlines the importance of an impulsion originated from the activity of the hindquarters.” [*USEF Rule Book DR105*]

The working canter is the foundation pace in which the muscles are developed for extended and collected canter.

Medium Canter

“This is a pace between the working and the extended canter. The horse goes forward with free, balanced and moderately extended strides and an obvious impulsion from the hindquarters. The rider allows the horse remaining on the bit to carry his head a little more in front of the vertical than at the collected and working canter and allows

him at the same time to lower his head and neck slightly. The strides should be long and as even as possible and the whole movement balanced and unconstrained.

Collected Canter

The horse remaining on the bit moves forward with his neck raised and arched. The collected canter is marked by the lightness of the forehand and the engagement of the hindquarters: i.e., is characterized by supple, free and mobile shoulders and very active quarters. The horse's strides are shorter than at the other canters but he is lighter and more mobile." [USEF Rule Book DR105]

"The most common fault is the four-beat canter. In a clear three-beat canter, the diagonal inside hind leg and outside foreleg touch the ground simultaneously, but in four-beat canter, they are disunited and touch down one after another. Increased forward driving aids and transition to other variations within the pace can help to rectify this fault.

Another fault is a crooked canter, with the canter on two tracks. Straightening the canter is achieved by cantering in shoulder-fore position and increasing the forward driving and controlling aids. The rider strives to bring the horse's shoulders in front of its inside hip, and with the outside leg he encourages the horse's outside hind leg to jump further underneath the body towards the center of gravity with each stride." [Advanced Techniques of Riding, p 35]

Extended Canter

"The horse covers as much ground as possible. Maintaining the same rhythm he lengthens his strides to the utmost without losing any of his calmness and lightness as a result of great impulsion from the hindquarters. The rider allows the horse remaining on the bit without leaning on it to lower and extend his head and neck; the tip of his nose pointing more or less forward." [USEF Rule Book DR105]

"In the medium and extended paces, the horse covers more ground owing to the more powerful thrust of the hindquarters. The increased flexion of the haunches allows the forehand to swing forward with greater freedom. The horse should be seen to lengthen its frame, while remaining in self-carriage. The nose should come slightly more in front of the vertical. The poll remains the highest point." [Advanced Techniques of Dressage, p 32]

Cross-cantering is incorrect. It is when the horse canters on one lead in front and the other lead behind, also called disunited or cross-firing.