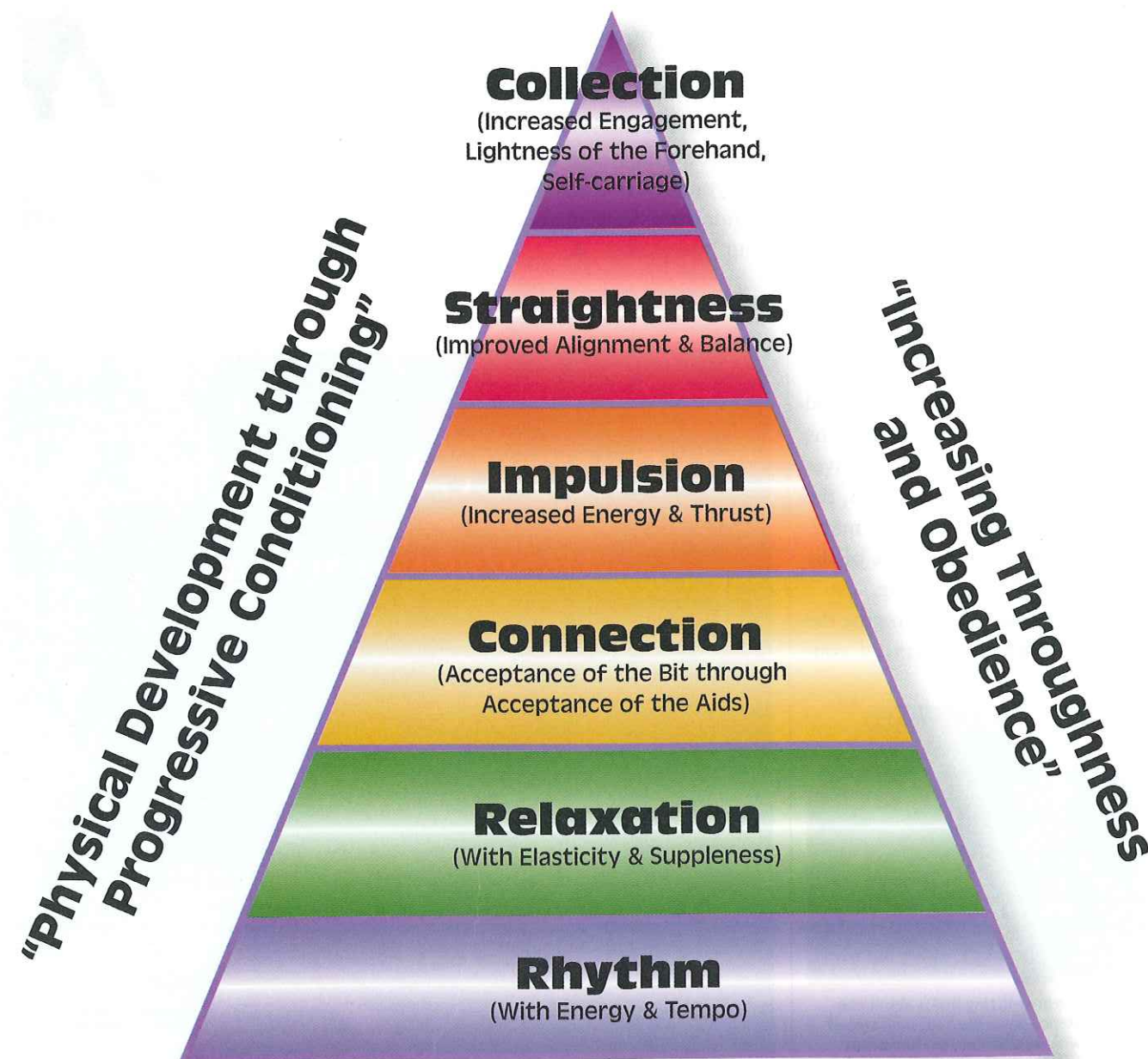


# Rediscovering the Pyramid

YEARLONG TRANSLATION EFFORT YIELDS  
STANDARDIZED TRAINING-SCALE TERMINOLOGY

BY J. ASHTON MOORE



REDEFINED: The newly translated pyramid of training

ILLUSTRATION © USDF

PART OF THE GOSPEL OF THE GERMAN TRAINING SYSTEM, the “pyramid of training” or training scale is internationally accepted as a guideline for the training of dressage horses. Translated into English in several versions, it is also used in the education of dressage judges and instructors.

More than a decade ago, I suggested that the USDF Learner Judge Program (now the “L” Education Program) and the Instructor Certification Program should work together to tidy up the situation of the differing versions and terminology. The idea was to come up with an updated and “official” translation, with some elucidation within the translation.

Members of the two programs held an initial meeting to discuss the idea. The session itself was unsuccessful, except to point out the differences in opinion and usage among different groups and individuals.

At the 2005 USDF convention, the faculties of the “L” program and the Instructor Certification Program met to discuss the topic of the training scale once again. The members present agreed that there was indeed confusion, and that it was time to look into it. A joint working group was formed, and I became its chair.

My German is not fluent, and so I asked for several native German speakers from both groups to be included in the working group. The working group consisted of certification faculty members Gerhard Politz, Liselotte Fore, and Cindy Sydnor; and “L” program faculty members Peter Lert, Axel Steiner, and Alexandra Howard. With four native German speakers among us, we were ready to tackle the complicated and subjective issue of translating the verbiage of the German training-scale elements.

After a year’s time, our task is complete. In this article, I’ll present the revised terminology and definitions, which debuted at the U.S. Equestrian Federation dressage judges’ forum in April.

## Lost (and Found) in Translation

Our mandate, the group agreed, was to review the German-English translations of the training-scale terminology, espe-

cially in regard to its accuracy and nuances, and in keeping with the ever-increasing body of knowledge about equine biomechanics. We did not try to change the meaning of the original German; we strove only to improve and standardize the translation and to make it more user-friendly.

In an effort to clarify the thinking behind the translations, Gerhard Politz wrote a general premise and brief explanations for each step of the pyramid. Let’s take a look at each level of the pyramid in detail.

### 1. Rhythm (German: *Takt*)

**PROBLEM:** Some of the old translations interpret *takt* as simply “rhythm” or “regularity.” The difficulty is that a horse can be in a “rhythm” (a pace or an amble, for instance) but not a correct rhythm vis-a-vis dressage. As a result, “rhythm” was variously interpreted to mean or include “soundness,” “purity” (correct rhythms for each gait), and “tempo.” The term rhythm usually (but not always) also was presumed to include the concept of energy.

**SOLUTION:** Keep the word rhythm and add the two modifiers of energy and tempo. Rhythm refers to purity and soundness and is clearly defined in the English dictionary. It addresses the biomechanics of the gaits. Regularity has more than 20 English dictionary definitions, and an unsound horse can be “regularly irregular” or “regular but not pure.”

**NEW TRANSLATION:** *Rhythm (with 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 level of training.

### 2. Relaxation (German: *Losgelassenheit*)

**PROBLEM:** Some versions of the training scale refer to this component simply as “relaxation,” “suppleness,” or “looseness.” Relaxation and suppleness are not the same issue or concept. Relaxation is a mental state, and also can refer to a slack condition of the musculature. Relaxation can be an induced or improved state, depending on the training. ➤



Suppleness is an innate condition of the body: the mobility of the joints, determined by the mechanical mode (the state of the muscles, tendons, and ligaments, and by the mechanical configuration of the joints themselves). A horse's degree of suppleness can be changed very little, and only over a prolonged period.

Relaxation can improve the horse's ability to demonstrate his innate suppleness, and it makes him more able to be influenced by his rider.

Elasticity is an active condition (think "recoil") and can be either active (use of the muscles) or passive (stored in the structures of the horse's body, such as the tendons of the foreleg). A horse can be supple but lacking in elasticity (think "saggy" or "droopy"). He also can be elastic but with limited suppleness (think "sproing-y" but short-strided).

Looseness can mean anything we wish, but the term comes closest to relaxation. Slackness also may be implied.

Because the pyramid addresses training more than innate physical ability, we settled on relaxation—the quality that training can most immediately address—as the primary term.

**SOLUTION:** Use "relaxation," with the modifiers elasticity and suppleness serving to clarify that this is not a state of slackness, sagginess, or limpness.

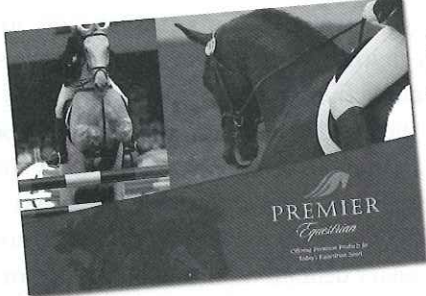
**NEW TRANSLATION:** *Relaxation (with Elasticity and Suppleness).* Relaxation refers to the horse's mental state (calmness without anxiety or nervousness), as well as to his physical state (the absence of negative muscular tension). Usually the mental and physical states go hand in hand. The horse learns to accept the influence of the rider without becoming tense. He acquires positive muscle tone so that he moves with elasticity and a supple, swinging back, allowing the rider to bend him laterally as well as to lengthen and shorten his frame.

A horse showing the correct responses when allowed to chew the reins out of the hands is relaxed.

### 3. Connection (German: *Anlehnung*)

**PROBLEM:** In some of the old translations, this concept was expressed as "contact." Contact simply means that the reins are not slack and has no bearing on the horse's way of going. The intent, from the original German, is to signify acceptance and accommodation of the contact (leading to getting the horse "on the bit" and adjustable in balance).


We agreed that the term selected must express more than the inert acceptance of a taut rein: It must also include the horse's active reaction to and accommodation of the con-



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tact, in concert with the other aids and influences to produce good carriage and adjustability. As used in the training scale, “connection” includes the ability to demonstrate self-carriage through *überstreichen* (release of the rein) and to stretch forward and down into contact without loss of balance (from the German *Zuegel aus der Hand kauen lassen*).

**SOLUTION:** Use “connection” with the modifiers acceptance of the bit and of the aids, to clarify that the concept intended is not a tight rein, an inert state, or a fixed carriage that lacks adjustability.

**NEW TRANSLATION:** *Connection (Acceptance of the Bit Through Acceptance of the Aids)*. The energy generated in the hindquarters by the driving aids must flow through the whole body of the horse and is received in the rider’s hands. The contact to the bit must be elastic and adjustable, creating fluent interaction between horse and rider with appropriate changes in the horse’s outline.

Acceptance of the bit is identified by the horse’s quietly chewing the bit. This activates the salivary glands so that the mouth becomes moist, and production of saliva is evident. The softly moving tongue should remain under the bit.

The quality of the connection and balance can be evaluated by *überstreichen*—releasing the reins (to demonstrate

self-carriage)—or by allowing the horse to chew the reins out of the hands (to demonstrate relaxation).

#### 4. Impulsion (German: *Schwung*)

**PROBLEM:** A lack of clarification that impulsion is not an issue of speed, and that it applies only to gaits with a phase of suspension. The horse can have increased impulsion with decreased speed.

**SOLUTION:** Keep the word impulsion, with the modifiers and the explanation clarifying that it is not about speed. Impulsion is not just “pushing power”; it includes “carrying power” as well.

**NEW TRANSLATION:** *Impulsion (Increased Energy and Thrust)*. Impulsion is the term used to describe the transmission of an eager and energetic yet controlled propulsive thrust generated from the hindquarters into the athletic movement of the horse. Impulsion is associated with a phase of suspension, such as exists in trot and canter but not in walk. It is measured by the horse’s desire to carry himself forward, the elasticity of his steps, the suppleness of his back, and the engagement of his hindquarters. Impulsion is necessary to develop medium paces and, later on, with the added ingredient of collection, extended paces. ➤

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## 5. Straightness (German: *Geraderichten*)

**PROBLEM:** The term straightness has been used to mean many things, and it has been poorly defined and variously interpreted.

**SOLUTION:** Keep the word straightness, with the modifiers added to address the several aspects of straightness as addressed in the USDF Glossary of Dressage Judging Terms. As reprinted in the 2006 *USDF Directory*, straightness indicates:

1. Parallelism to required line of travel (e.g., haunches neither left nor right of center line or circle line), or to line of reference (e.g., in leg-yielding, haunches neither leading nor trailing).
2. Alignment of the horse's body parts from poll to tail (e.g., not a popped shoulder or twisted neck).
3. Directness of line of travel (e.g., not weaving).

**NEW TRANSLATION:** *Straightness (Improved Alignment and Balance)*. A horse is said to be straight when the footfalls of the forehand and the hindquarters are appropriately aligned on straight and curved lines and when his longitudinal axis is in line with the straight or curved track on which he is ridden. By nature every horse is crooked—hollow on one side and stiff on the other side—thereby using one side of his body somewhat differently from the other. This also causes uneven contact in the reins. Appropriate gymnastic exercises develop the horse's symmetry. This allows him to engage both hind legs evenly and prepares him for collection. This process improves the lateral as well as the longitudinal balance of the horse.

## 6. Collection (German: *Versammlung*)

**PROBLEM:** The comprehensiveness and elements of “collection.”

**SOLUTION:** Addition of the modifiers to address some common misconceptions about collection. Note that some of the modifiers address the elements included, while others address the elements or modifiers as “improved” or “increased.” This choice of terminology indicates that these concepts are not new introductions; rather, they indicate an increase in qualities that have been developing systematically during the application of the principles embodied in the pyramid.

**NEW TRANSLATION:** *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 topline is stretched. He shows shorter yet powerful cadenced steps and strides. Elevation must be the result of, and relative to, the lowering of the hindquarters. This is called *relative elevation*. A training problem is indicated if the horse raises his neck without displacing 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.

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### To Benefit the Horse and the Sport

Students of dressage should also note the wording along the side of the pyramid graphic. The pyramid of training is not only a general guideline to the progressive training of the horse, but it is also important in protecting the horse's physical and mental well-being during this progressive training.

My thanks to the dedicated members of this group, who contributed their time; language skills; and training, teaching, and judging skills to this project. I, for one, will find this version of the pyramid of training much easier to apply to judging and teaching, and a great improvement in our collective ability to communicate about the basics of dressage training. ▲

*USEF “S” dressage and “R” sport-horse judge J. Ashton Moore is a faculty member of the “L” Education Program and a member of the USDF Judges Committee. He lives in San Juan Bautista, CA.*