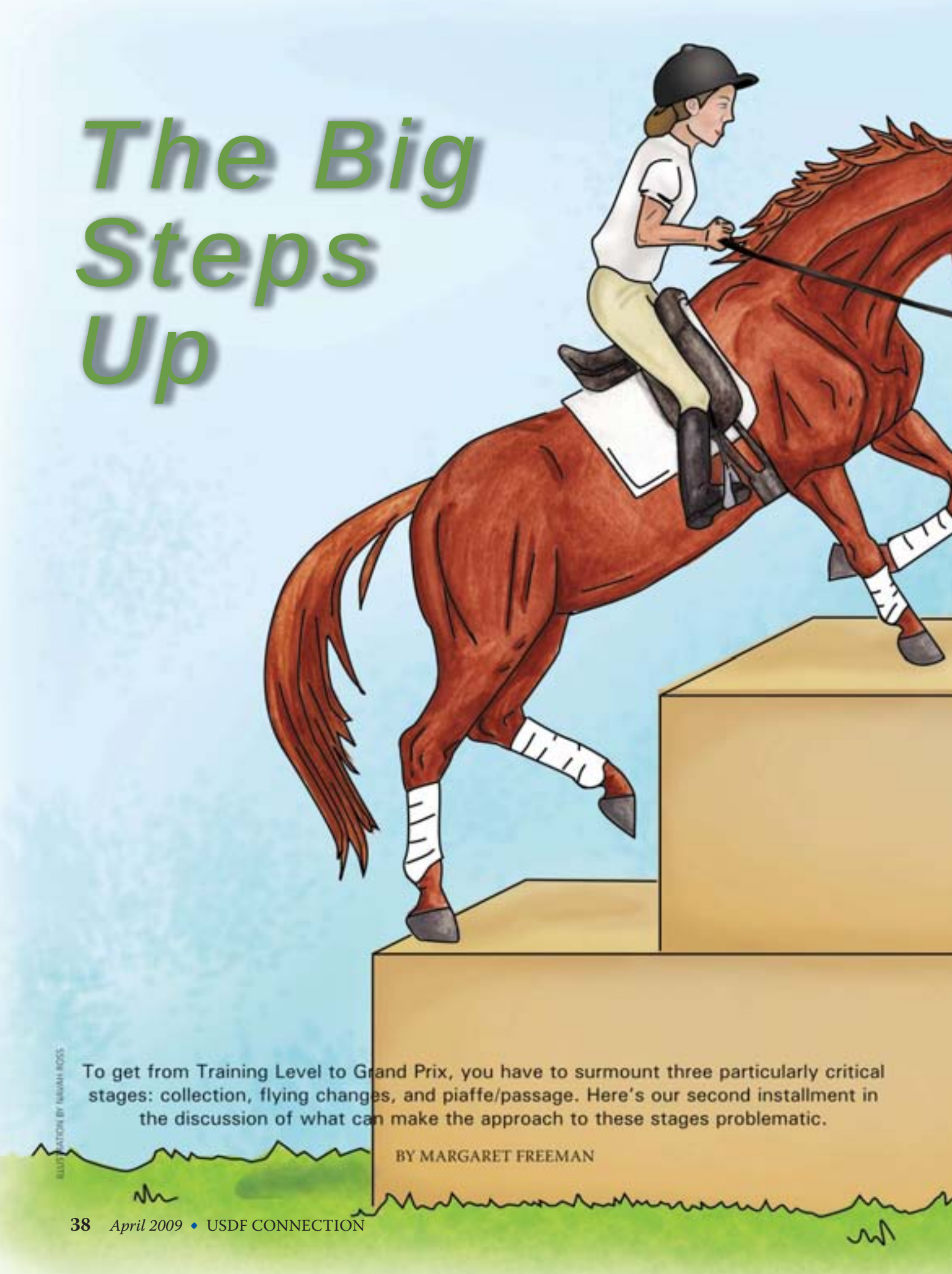
The Big Steps Up



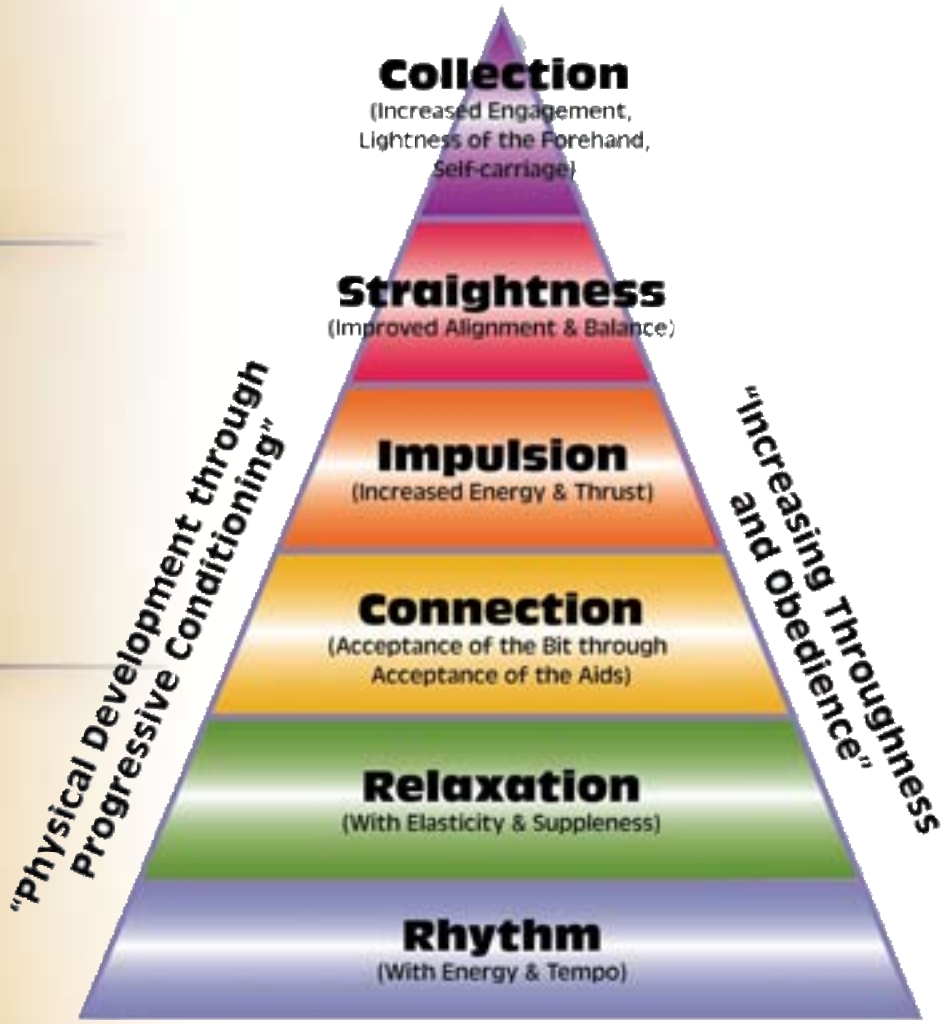
To get from Training Level to Grand Prix, you have to surmount three particularly critical stages: collection, flying changes, and piaffe/passage. Here's our second installment in the discussion of what can make the approach to these stages problematic.

BY MARGARET FREEMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY HANNAH ROSS

While training your horse, you address the six levels of the pyramid of training (see illustration below), starting with rhythm, and you progress all the way up to the final level, collection. You even get good scores at Second Level to prove it. So what's next?

One of the greatest tests you'll face as a trainer is establishing flying changes, as introduced at Third Level. This month, two USDF-certified instructors discuss the physical and psychological challenges of teaching a horse the flying changes of lead in the collected canter.



USDF ILLUSTRATION

Facing Flying Changes

When changes aren't clean and clear, riders often become frustrated and have trouble searching for the solution

Many movements in dressage can vary in degree. You can have more or less angle in shoulder-in, more or less swing in free walk, more or less crossing of the legs in half-pass. But flying changes are like jumps: You either get them or you don't. The horse either changes cleanly in the moment of suspension of the canter stride, or he doesn't.

For this reason, riders get a real kick out of doing clean and clear flying changes and eventually sequence (or "tempi") changes—flying changes every fourth, third, or second stride or at every stride. It really does impart the same sense of joy as skipping, and this time you're doing it on a beautiful 1,200-pound horse, not just on your own two feet.

CH-CH-CHANGES: *A Third Level flying change as performed by Jennifer Griger on Bentley. Clean, straight changes at this level bode well for a horse's future FEI career.*

Because riders find changes so much fun, they can also become more frustrated than usual when the changes don't quite work, when the horse changes late behind, or can't match the rider's count in the tempi sequence changes, or shoots wildly into the air and then lands in a heap, or maybe doesn't even change at all when asked.

Are flying-change problems rider-created, or do some horses just find flying changes harder than others? We'll answer our own question: More often than not, the problem is with the rider—specifically, with the riding of the canter stride. In this article, our experts explain how and why things can go wrong, and what you can do about it.

Rider Issues

"The problem with changes isn't the flying change; it's the canter quality," says Sarah Geikie, of Lebanon, CT, a faculty member of the USDF Instructor Certification Program and an FEI "C" dressage judge. "I see a lot of riders at the lower levels who have insufficient working canters, and it then becomes difficult to develop a collected canter."

"The main problem with the rider is that people forget to ride the canter from the hind legs," says Becky Langwost-Barlow, of Preston, MD, a certified instructor/trainer through Fourth Level. "People tend to pull the horse into the lead with the rein but forget that the canter starts behind them. People take the horse to the lead with the rein as opposed to riding the horse up into the change from the new outside leg and keeping the horse's shoulders up through the change."

"It takes a long time to get sophisticated enough to actually teach flying changes to a horse," Langwost-Barlow says. "It's one thing to do the changes on a horse that actually knows what it's doing. A lot of people can master that pretty simply. But to bring a horse along, first of all attention has to be brought to making sure all the canter departs are really loading the hind legs, really jumping up, really pushing into the bridle, knowing that you can accelerate and decelerate without the neck really changing but the canter still jumping and staying active."

"The success for flying changes is in the preparation," says Geikie. "The rider essentially needs to understand the preparation and the aids. But the rider may lack either the training or experience for knowing what's required from the horse. He may have the wrong idea of what the aids are and how he should set the horse up. And there may be position

problems where the rider isn't straight and thus can't create a straight horse."

"Riders need to really focus on riding very accurate lines—diagonals, or short diagonals or center lines—and knowing that they can hold the horse on those lines without the reins," says Langwost-Barlow. "They're then keeping the horse in front of the seat and the outside leg. When the rider is able to do that, the changes become more correct and more 'up.'"

Starting the Changes

Although you might assume otherwise, it can sometimes be easier to teach the changes to a horse that doesn't have huge gaits and thus doesn't have some of the balance issues of a big mover.

"I see it go both ways," says Geikie. "I've seen horses with little suspension in the canter that are so obedient and on the aids that they do perfect changes. They're not brilliant, but they're clean and correct. Then you see the big elastic movers, where there's more horse and more gait to organize and balance, particularly for the average rider, and the changes can be more problematic."

"As a trainer, sometimes I'll go to the flying change a little earlier than I normally would, just to make the horse a little quick," says Langwost-Barlow, "especially if it's a really intelligent horse that tends to be a little lazy or bored. I don't do them a lot, but I'll play with them for a while and then put them away for a few months. For some horses, this works out and they need it, and with other horses I don't do it at all and I take a long time before I address the change."

"There's a certain phase, close to the beginning when we're teaching the changes, where you have to create the right balance for the horse to a large degree," says Geikie. "They want to anticipate. Once the light bulb goes on, they want to do them right and they want to do a million of them. It's critical at that stage that you don't do a lot of them. You discreetly, playfully, just kind of slip one in to one direction and then one to the other direction until the horse is easy, calm, relaxed, with no drama about it.

"The thing I find most interesting is that the rider has to get there sooner or later," says Langwost-Barlow. "You can't avoid it forever. You have to put it into the repertoire. The horse has to learn it as well, the mechanics of it."

Addressing Problems

"A lot of nice horses get along for a while at the lower levels on the natural quality of their gaits rather than on correct training," says Geikie. "As a result, they're not truly in the

correct balance in order to do a flying change, so they aren't comfortable. The horse doesn't have a sufficient canter to do a correct flying change. Or sometimes a horse with a good canter may be consistently late behind in the changes. In that case, it's more of a rider problem. The rider is unbalanced, not straight, or not preparing the horse correctly, or some combination of those things."

"A lot of issues they have in training—late behind, or late up front, or the horse throws the shoulders one way and the haunches the other way—start to disappear by riding straight lines without relying on the reins," says Langwost-Barlow. "As the rider makes sure that she's really holding the haunches and allowing the horse to jump up and forward, a lot of those questions get answered almost on their own. It all starts to make sense. When a rider doesn't have clean changes, nine times out of ten they're pulling the horse into the change."

In the case of a horse whose changes are consistently late, Langwost-Barlow also looks to the quality of the canter. "I'm a freak about counter-canter," she says. "I do a lot of extended canter, and counter-canter, and tight circles in counter-canter, and counter-bending, and knowing that I can push the leading shoulder up and really get the outside hind leg to come under so that I can get more activity. I pay attention to the hind legs more than anything else. The neck is really not part of the issue, if I can help it."

USDF FILE PHOTO

LEAPIN' LIZARD: *Horses new to flying changes may anticipate the move and display a little more exuberance than is ideal*

Dealing with Anticipation and Tension

Many horses find performing changes as exciting as their riders, particularly at the start of training, and literally throw themselves into the air. That excitement can turn into tension that remains months or even years later unless care is taken in the early stages.

"For some horses, that period of time is short, and for some maybe a little longer, and they get over it," says Geikie. "You can then gradually start to incorporate schooling more changes and start to do tempis and fancy stuff. Most horses go through that. It takes care and real observation on the rider's part to recognize that's a normal part of the horse's learning phase and to handle that particular area cautiously. I can foresee, at that point in the horse's education, that if he is drilled, you can create a lasting problem for sure. Be happy with a little success, and praise often."

"A lot of horses get very hysterical when they anticipate the changes," says Langwost-Barlow. "It sounds like a contradiction, but you have to take the time to get the horse more honestly in front of the leg and more over the back. As they get more in front of the leg and trust being out there more, the problem can rectify itself. You can't put a timetable on that. You might have to go a certain distance and then go back.

The Big Picture

Some riders wonder why, if they're only schooling, say, First Level, they should concern themselves about understanding more-advanced principles of dressage training. USDF Instructor Certification Program faculty member and FEI "C" judge Sarah Geikie explains:

"In America, people are happy if they can achieve Training or First Level. That's their goal. That's what they train themselves and their horse for. Whereas, when you go to Europe or talk to Europeans, they are going to ride Grand Prix. Period. End of story. Their whole thought process from day one is that they're working step by step to graduate to Grand Prix. It's a different mindset, a different way of looking at it.

"When riders in this country are at Training Level, they have to begin with the end in mind. They need the big picture and to think, "OK, I'm doing transitions and half-halts this way so that, by the time I'm doing Grand Prix, my horse will, for instance, have an easy piaffe."

"When teaching changes, I find that if things are going pretty well and they're starting to understand it, I won't touch if for a while," Langwost-Barlow continues. "Then, when I go back to it again, it's usually better. I find that fascinating. The changes get more confident. If it's not a thing to be afraid of any more, then the horse is willing to offer it."

"When a horse and rider can't quite figure out the changes, it's usually because the rider tries too hard," Langwost-Barlow says. "People are anxious to get into the ring and to move up, and sometimes that's a shame. The horse is really good at slapping us back down and saying, 'OK, now you have to go back and do your homework. It's been fun, but now you have to do it right.' Sooner or later, when people get to that point, then they'll do things better."

"Don't rush learning changes," she says, "because when you get it, OK, you've got it. You then really enjoy every day. It's a blast. When you get to this point, it's really fun."

Next month: The last major step, to piaffe and passage at Intermediate II.

Margaret Freeman, of Mt. Kisco NY, is a USEF "S" dressage judge and a USDF silver medalist.