

## Real Horses with Real Problems

*Training doesn't always go by the textbook. Here's how to use dressage to help horses with their issues. Part 4 of a series.*

# The Heavy and the Light

By Lendon Gray, Lilo Fore, and Beth Baumert  
Photographs by Beth Baumert

**T**he goal of this series is to help readers train the horse with real-life problems. The horse that's either heavy in the hand or too light in the hand is challenging for many riders, and this month we'll focus on these two issues.

be "downhill," with the croup higher than the withers. Likewise, even if his topline looks favorable, a horse can propel himself downhill when he has long, thrusting hind legs and short front legs. Or he could be thick in the area of his jaw, making flexion difficult.



WHERE IT BEGINS: A good seat enables the rider to have light hands

Horses can be heavy for a number of reasons. First, a horse's conformation may predispose him to being heavy in the front. He might have a low-set neck or his topline might

Second, the horse may be uncomfortable somewhere in the hindquarters and therefore be forced to load the forehand in order to compensate. Still another possible cause is a bit

that is ill-fitting or not the best one for his mouth.

Some horses are heavy because they're accustomed to being hung on by a rider. A horse will never be lighter than his rider. It's common to hear that a horse is "pulling" when, in fact, from the horse's point of view, he is pushing on the bit. It is the rider who does the pulling or holding. The horse in this situation needs to be re-trained to push "away" from the bit (see "Pushing off from the Bit: *Abstossen* on page 16) rather than pushing "against" it.

The too-light horse who won't touch the bit is equally or more difficult than the heavy one. Communication is impossible with the too-light horse because he doesn't connect honestly to the bit when the rider closes the leg.

Ideally, the horse's energy should travel from his thrusting hindquarters through his back and to the bit. Then the energy should recycle, transferring some weight from the front end back to the hindquarters. This circle of energy is ongoing. Let's take a look at how that happens.

### The Circle of Energy

Imagine that energy had a color and you could see it. As we've explained, the horse's energy should travel from his thrusting hind leg, through his back, to the bit. However, if the energy went only from back to front and stopped there, then the horse would lean on the bit and be heavy. That's what happens when a rider drives the horse forward and forgets to half-halt. Most riders understand that the energy needs to get from the hindquarters to the bit, but some forget that there must also be a connection through the bit to the hindquarters.

When the rider uses rebalancing half-halts as frequently as the driving aids, the horse's energy recycles. The energy reaches the bit and the horse "pushes away from the bit," causing the weight to transfer back to an engaged hind foot. Then the forehand lightens. The German word for this



**PASSIVE CONTACT:** Annie Morris demonstrates passive contact aboard Forte, an eleven-year-old Oldenburg gelding by Florestan and owned by Molly Brewer. Annie is following Forte's mouth lightly, with neither slack in the rein nor pressure on the reins.

concept is *Abstossen*. When the horse pushes off from the bit, he continues to reach forward, but the energy “bounces off” the bit and transfers to an engaged hind leg that is flat on the ground and carrying weight. Then the horse thrusts again to perpetuate an ongoing cycle of energy.

If the horse is too light in the hand, the all-important connection to the bit caused by the thrusting hind leg never happens honestly. The energy never gets to the bit, or it gets to the bit and the horse evades the contact by curling or coming behind the vertical and dropping the contact.

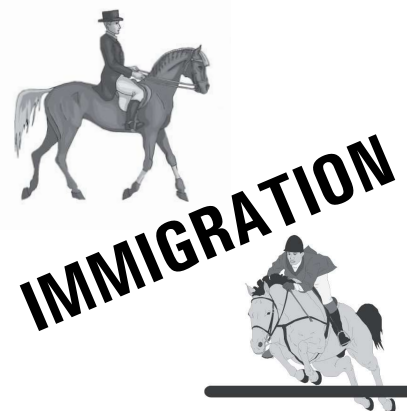
When it comes to fixing both the heavy and the light horse, the rider has to get the circle of energy going. Some riders need to do more driving, and some need to do more half-halts. But all riders need to use both, and the exercises that we'll give you in a moment will help retrain both heavy and light horses. But first, check out

your responsibilities in helping to ensure success.

### The Rider's Responsibility

Regardless of whether your horse is too heavy or too light, you must make certain that you can ride with *passive contact*; that is, you are able to follow your horse's mouth lightly, with no slack in the rein *and* no pressure against the mouth. Most riders have no idea how strong they are. They put pressure on the mouth most of the time and give to soft contact occasionally. Make it your goal to do the opposite. Keep a soft connection most of the time and your horse will be more responsive to the stronger connection of a half-halt. Rein aids are best “heard” when they come from soft, quiet hands.

The best way to develop light hands is to take lunge lessons or to ride on a loose rein. Focus on developing an in-



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dependent seat. If you can follow the horse with your seat, you'll be comfortable with having no weight in your hands. The benefit to the horse is that he starts to focus on your seat and to balance under you. Then it's easier to ride from your seat. Although your horse may need some retraining, he can't lean on light hands, and he won't be inclined to evade light hands.

**Try this:** Practice transitions from medium walk to halt, using less and less hand. Start by riding on a fairly loose rein. Move your seat in smaller and smaller steps until your horse halts. Use your voice if you need to. Then if you need to use your hands, half-halt for one stride to make your horse stop. If you persist in trying to make these transitions from your seat,

your horse will listen to your body language more and your hands less.

### The Balanced Horse

The rider has to help shape the horse in such a way that he is able to "listen" to the seat. Listening to the rider's seat is easy when the horse's hind feet step under the seat—under horse and rider's center of gravity—and engage, or carry weight behind.

There are two ways to get your horse to step under your center of gravity:

1. Most horses are inclined to step wide—to the left with the left hind leg, to the right with the right hind leg, or both. For this problem, use the shoulder-fore exercise (see below) to help your horse step under his center.

## Pushing off from the Bit: *Abstossen*

**A**bstossen is a German riding term meaning "to push oneself off." The official instruction handbook of the German National Equestrian Federation, *Advanced Techniques of Dressage*, states: "Pushing off from the bit is a sign that the horse is fully accepting the contact.... [The horse] yields to the contact by bouncing back lightly and almost imperceptibly from the bit. The rider feels the contact become even lighter and more refined.... In a correctly trained horse which 'comes through,' bouncing back or pushing away from the contact is...a frequently repeated process...."

When a rider is well trained, the aids are very subtle and they happen every step of the way. At every stride the rider's seat and leg give a small aid to encourage the horse to seek the contact by engaging his hind legs, lifting his shoulders and the base of his frame, and stepping into the bit. There is a moment when the horse is strong, and then the educated horse "pushes away," which shifts weight to the hindquarters and causes the horse to become lighter in the hand.

If the uneducated horse is a bully, the experienced rider allows him to hit the bit, which causes a bumper-car effect. The positive tension of the rider's core and tummy muscles blocks the horse when he hits the rein and reminds him not to run through it. This effect is caused not by a pulling rein but rather by the horse's hitting the bit. When this happens, the horse is set back and rebalances onto his hind legs. His response is, OK, I hear you. No falling into the contact; no pushing onto the forehead. Then he adopts a more polite attitude by reaching more respectfully to the bit.

A horse in motion is in a precarious balance. With every step he has to balance the rider's weight, and it is not possible for him to stay the same. The horse in motion must be helped by the rider's constant, light, balancing aids that invite him to push lightly away from the bit while still seeking it.

—Lilo Fore



SHOULDER-FORE FOR BALANCE: "Thread" your horse's inside hind leg into the space between his two front legs. This positioning enables your horse to travel in balance.

2. Most horses are also inclined to travel with the hindquarters out behind, thrusting onto the forehead. Use walk-halt-walk transitions and our transition exercise (see below) to help your horse step under his center.

**Try this:** In your walk-halt transitions, think that the purpose of the downward transition to halt is to close your horse's outline from behind. The effect is that his back comes up as he steps under your seat.

### Exercises

**Shoulder-fore.** Shoulder-fore isn't exactly an "exercise"; it's how you ride in balance all the time. Begin in walk, riding straight toward a mirror or toward a helper who can give you feedback.



SELF-CARRIAGE TEST: Annie does *Überstreichen* (momentary release of the contact) to check Forte's balance

With very slight flexion to the inside, ride your horse's inside hind foot into the space between his two front legs. "Thread" the inside hind into that space.

Now be sure that the outside hind is aligned with the outside fore. It will want to go out, but don't let it.

Do this in both directions. Then try it and trot and canter.

Be patient with yourself and with your horse. This isn't easy, but once you find it, it is much easier to keep. Your horse loves to be balanced, and this alignment places his inside hind foot directly under your center of gravity, where he can carry himself—and you—easily.

**Transitions.** Whether a horse is heavy, light, or just right can be a matter of elasticity or rigidity. There's nothing more reliable than transitions to make your horse elastic. You can use your imagination to develop transition exercises that help your horse with his specific issues, but here's an

example of one you might start with:

Ride a precise 20-meter circle, inside-leg-to-outside-rein, concentrating on shoulder-fore and consistency of the frame and the energy. Walk one-quarter of the circle and trot three-quarters. Repeat in the other direction. Next, trot one-quarter of the circle and canter three-quarters. Repeat in the other direction.

Feel that your horse engages (carries weight with his hind legs) in both the upward and downward transitions.

**Überstreichen.** Encouraging a heavy horse to be lighter can be as simple as giving the reins to let him know that you won't provide a shelf for him to rest his head on. Americans have adopted another German word for that: *Überstreichen*. The USDF definition is "the brief release of the contact, wherein the rider in one clear motion extends the hand(s) forward along the crest of the horse's neck, then rides for several strides without



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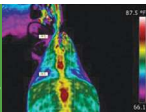


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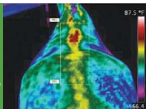


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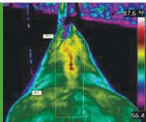
"Day 0, patient shows inflammation over the wither base, low thoracic spine and sacrum as indicated by increased heat in red and yellow regions."



"After 7 days wearing the Back on Track sheet, there is a significant reduction in inflammation over the sacral region, as seen by a disappearance of the red area."



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contact. Its purpose is to demonstrate that even with loose rein(s), the horse maintains its carriage, balance, pace, and tempo." *Überstreichen* is required in many dressage tests to demonstrate self-carriage, and it is also a training tool that explains self-carriage to the horse.

### Finding the Feel

How do you know whether your horse is offering the right amount of contact? Horses vary. Some are comfortable with more pressure than others, but your horse should feel committed by consistently drawing on the rein—and no matter what, he should be adjustable and elastic. ▲

*Next month:* The tense, quick horse.

*Olympian, trainer, instructor, and clinician Lendon Gray owns and operates Gleneden Dressage in Bedford, NY. She is an examiner in the USDF Instructor/Trainer Program, and she*

*has a long history of involvement with various USDF and US Equestrian Federation committees, among others. In recent years she has made headlines for her work with her organization Dressage4Kids (Dressage4Kids.org), which produces the annual Youth Dressage Festival and several unique dressage educational programs for youth. In 2011 she was inducted into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame.*

*Liselotte "Lilo" Fore is a USDF Instructor Certification Program examiner and a faculty member of the Canadian judges' program. She has trained many horses to the Grand Prix level and has won numerous national and FEI-level titles. She has been a USDF Adult Clinic Series and USDF National Dressage Symposium clinician. Earlier this year she was promoted to FEI 5\* dressage-judge status, its highest ranking. She owns and operates the dressage training and breeding facility Sport-horse America in Santa Rosa, CA.*

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## Bits for Heavy and Light Horses

The horse that is too light in the rider's hand might benefit from a bit that is more inviting. Lungeing the light horse in side reins adjusted to the proper length (so that he is on or slightly in front of the vertical) often helps this type of horse to accept contact with the bit.

For the horse who is heavy as the result of conformation or long-term heavy riding, a slightly stronger bit might be considered, but with an important caveat: For this to work, the rider must be totally consistent, with an elastic leg and hand.

—Lendon Gray

*Beth Baumert is a Fourth Level USDF certified instructor/trainer based at her family's Cloverlea Farm in Columbia, CT. She works with horses and riders from Training Level to Grand Prix. Beth was the technical editor of Dressage Today magazine for sixteen years. She is on The Dressage Foundation's Board of Directors and currently serves as vice president. Her website is CloverleaDressage.com.*

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