Through the Levels in Pictures

An illustrated guide to the gymnastic development of the horse

By Betsy Steiner with Katherine Walcott
Dressage illustrations by Jean Abernethy

Although the dressage tests may seem to focus on movements, don’t think of the movements as ends in themselves. Instead, use them as indicators of your training: Is your horse balanced and supple enough to do a 20-meter circle? How about a 15-meter circle? Ten meters? Eight?

Dressage is about allowing the horse to become more athletic and gymnastic as he moves up through the levels. As his musculature develops, his outline also changes. His hindquarters sink as he pushes more from behind. His forehand lifts as his front end gets lighter. His topline becomes rounder as he becomes more compact. We in dressage refer to these changes as the development of collection.

The horse at leisure on a trail ride has an elongated, relaxed outline: His head is down, his weight is level from forehand to hindquarters, and his back is relaxed and lengthened. His carriage may be relaxed, but it’s not particularly athletic: Any sudden change is going to require a flurry of activity in order for him to react.

At the other end of the spectrum is the horse in the ultimate state of collection. When I picture collection, I think of the iconic baroque painting Napoleon Crossing the Alps by Jacques-Louis David (pictured at left). The horse, crouched on powerful hindquarters, is ready to move in any direction at a moment’s notice.

Recognizing that a picture is indeed worth a thousand words, I wanted to show the gymnastic progression of dressage by depicting a horse at each level (Training through Grand Prix) performing a gait or movement that embodies that level’s particular stage of athletic development. Here’s what the artist and I came up with.

Training Level
Movement pictured: Stretching circle.
Training Level is all about keeping a tempo. The horse should be able to walk, trot, and canter while staying soft, supple, and in contact with the bit. The rider should be equally soft, supple, and effective.

First Level
Movement pictured: Lengthen stride in trot.
In the past, the sitting trot was optional at Training Level but became mandatory at First Level—thus producing the biggest hurdle for most riders at this stage. Rising (posting) trot becomes optional at First Level with the new 2011 US Equestrian Federation clinic

COLLECTION: Depicted in the early 19th-century painting Napoleon Crossing the Alps
dressage tests, but it is still appropriate to address sitting trot at this point in the training, especially as it relates to an important new movement at this level, the trot lengthening.

The sitting trot allows the rider to influence the horse through subtle shifts of weight and to push the horse forward. Once mastered, the sitting trot can be more comfortable and more secure than posting, although this may be hard to imagine for riders who are struggling to learn.

For the horse, First Level is about learning to push from behind. The increased thrust from the hind legs requires more balance and flexibility. To continue the “school days” analogy, First Level is when the homework goes from copying simple exercises to requiring original thought. Horse and rider are no longer beginners. It is time to pull the socks up and get to work.

Movements introduced at First Level: Ten-meter trot circle, fifteen-meter canter circle, trot and canter lengthenings, leg-yield, change of lead through the trot, counter-canter.

Second Level

Movement pictured: Shoulder-in.
At Second Level, the trot and canter work goes from working to collected, meaning that the horse is required to

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Show a beginning degree of compression of his outline, with more spring and thrust from behind.

Here’s how I explain the concept of collection: Imagine holding a long, springy dressage whip with both hands, one at either end of the whip. Hold one hand still; this end of the whip represents the front end of the horse. Now move your other hand closer to the still hand; this represents your horse’s hind end coming up and pushing more from behind. As your hands move closer together, the whip will assume a bowed shape—and so does your horse’s back as he collects. This rounding—being “strung like a bow”—represents the contained energy that is developed during collection.

Although horse and rider have been using lateral work for exercises at home, Second Level is where lateral movements are demonstrated to the public for the first time. Therefore, the rider must have more control over her horse’s shoulders and hindquarters, in order to keep them properly aligned and moving in the desired direction. The horse, likewise, must have more engagement from behind.

 Movements introduced at Second Level: Ten-meter canter circle, medium gaits, simple change (change of canter lead through the walk), rein back, shoulder-in, travers (haunches-in), renvers (haunches-out), turn on the haunches.

Third Level

Movement pictured: Flying change of lead.

Dressage truly begins here. A rider of moderate skill crossing over to dressage from another discipline should be able to master the tests and movements through Second Level in a reasonable amount of time. Riding at Third Level, however, requires a specific education in dressage. Prior to Third, the emphasis has been on rhythm and suppleness. Now, with increased requirements for collection, extension, and lateral work, horse and rider must become athletes. Furthermore, they must be athletes trained in specific skills.

A signature movement that is introduced at Third Level is the single flying change of lead in the canter, meaning that the horse changes the footfall pattern from one lead to another while in midair, without breaking gait or altering the canter rhythm. Doing so requires a sophisticated degree of collection, balance, and responsiveness to the aids.

 Movements introduced at Third Level: Eight-meter circle at trot, extended gaits, half-pass at trot and canter, single flying change, release of the inside rein (überstreichen) at canter, release of both reins at canter.

Fourth Level

Fourth Level continues to build on the intermediate-level development and skills that were introduced at Third Level. The turn on the haunches progresses to the walk pirouette, and working and half-pirouettes in canter are introduced. All of these movements test the horse’s ability to lighten his forehand and carry weight over his haunches, particularly his inside hind leg.

Although it can’t be depicted in a single illustration (which is why we haven’t shown one for this level), the sequence (tempi) changes of lead are another major step up in Fourth Level. Building on the requirements for the
single flying change, tempi changes require the rider to maintain the horse’s rhythm, tempo, balance, and straightness to an advanced degree.

**Movements introduced at Fourth Level:** Collected walk, “very collected canter,” counter-change of hand (“zigzag”) in trot, walk pirouettes, working and half-pirouettes at canter, tempi changes every fourth stride and every third stride, shoulder-in on center line.

**Prix St. Georges**

**Movement pictured: Extended trot.**

Welcome to the majors! Although the requirements at Prix St. Georges do not change significantly from those at Fourth Level, the attitude at this first FEI level does.

The test differences themselves are of the subtle variety: movements placed at a more challenging location in the arena, for instance, or five tempi changes every fourth stride instead of three. But the horse is not meeting anything new and startling.

The rider, on the other hand, is wearing a shadbelly for the first time. The psychological effect of dressing like an Olympian cannot be overstated. Furthermore, the judges expect a sharper performance at the FEI levels than they do from the lower levels. Gone is the more accepting attitude of Fourth Level. Imprecise moments that were OK (if not great) before are now penalized. As an example, the word “immobility” now appears between the halt and the salute.

Although it’s by no means new to the PSG horse, I’ve chosen the extended trot as the illustration for this level because, to many people, it’s the quintessential upper-level dressage movement—especially as it’s usually pictured, with rider in shadbelly and top hat.

**Movements introduced at Prix St. Georges:** None.

**Intermediate I**

**Movement pictured:**  

**Canter pirouette.**

Intermediate I takes the difficulty and precision required at Prix St. Georges and bumps them up a notch. The full pirouette in canter is now required, and tempi changes progress from threes (every third stride) to twos (every other stride). The placement of the pirouette on the short diagonal, followed by a flying change and immediately another short diagonal and another pirouette, are an advanced challenge to the horse’s and rider’s ability to remain in balance.

The full pirouette is a true test of a horse’s collection, balance, and strength. The FEI rules call for the horse to remain nearly in place, with the inside hind leg describing a circle “as small as possible.” Six to eight canter strides are required: Fewer strides indicate that the horse is not taking sufficient weight behind and instead is swinging his forehand around, while more than eight strides indicate that the horse is “stuck,” with a loss of energy and impulsion.

**Movements introduced at Intermediate I:** full pirouette, two-tempi changes.

**Intermediate II**

**Movement pictured:** Piaffe.

As Fourth Level was preparation for Prix St. Georges, so Intermediate II is preparation for Grand Prix.

The Intermediate II level was created because the move from Intermediate I to Grand Prix was thought to be too much of a jump in difficulty. At I-II, the classic elements of the Grand Prix test are introduced, and some allowance is made as horses and riders work to grasp the concepts. For example, at this level horses are allowed to cover a certain amount of ground when performing the piaffe. At Grand Prix, the piaffe must be performed in place.

We’re depicting the piaffe at this level because it is generally the first to be introduced, before passage.

**Movements introduced at Intermediate II:** Piaffe, passage, one-tempi changes (flying changes at every stride).
Grand Prix

Movement pictured: Passage.
The Grand Prix level includes two tests: the Grand Prix and the Grand Prix Special. (There is also the GP Freestyle.) In international competitions, such as Olympic Games and World Equestrian Games, the first is used for the team competition. The Special is used for individual medals.

Grand Prix is a busy level. Every step is preparation for or execution of a movement. A horse and rider may be able to do the list of required movements, but can they do them in quick succession? For example, given a sufficient ramp-up, a horse may be able to perform half-pass “zigzags” back and forth across the center line. But can he do them after the passage and just before a whole slew of tempi changes? As for the rider, is she fit and alert enough to able to push and then, a moment later, be ready to give?

Grand Prix is always evolving. After getting 20 Grand Prix-level tests under her belt, a rider may feel that she is only just starting to understand how to ride at this level. In addition, every Grand Prix horse is a new challenge.

A Gymnastic Progression

I hope that these illustrations and brief explanations have given you fresh insights into the athletic demands of dressage. Training a dressage horse to the highest levels takes patience and time, and the process cannot be rushed. Learn to appreciate your horse as an athlete and you will become more sympathetic to his needs and a better horseman as a result.

Well-known trainer and rider Betsy Steiner is a veteran of international dressage competition and a sought-after clinician. The developer of Equi-lates, her system of Pilates for equestrians, she is the author of A Gymnastic Riding System Using Mind, Body & Spirit, the only American dressage text to be translated into German and used by the German Equestrian Federation.

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