

From Field to FEI: The Young-Horse Years

Part 5: *The three-year-old year*

By Scott Hassler with Emily Covington

Photographs by Richard Malmgren

Last month, I spoke about the first rides on your young horse: the initial rides, going outside, and getting him confident and used to the rider.

Now we can talk about starting dressage work—or, more accurately at this stage, basic flat work. The goals are to get the young horse “thinking

ten think of balance as forehead-to-hindquarters (longitudinal), but lateral balance (left and right) is equally important. The goal is for the horse to be centered between the rider’s aids. As I’ve mentioned previously, I find most horses to be “left sided,” cantering more easily on the left lead than on the right, for instance.

I am involved in many of our national young-horse programs, so I will be a bit careful here, but I am glad that we do not have a national championship for three-year-olds. Other major sport-horse-breeding countries do offer this, but the US has not done so to date. I hope that we continue not to do it, as I don’t think it’s a good goal for a three-year-old.

Developing the Horse’s Back

Horses can move incredibly on the lunge line. You can think you have the next Olympic winner. Then, when you get on, the gaits may get quick or the horse becomes stiff or insecure in the contact as a result of general insecurity or tightness in the back. That’s why, for me, the key piece at this stage of training is the development of the back—showing the horse how to use it correctly.

A three-year-old doesn’t yet know how to carry weight. Carrying weight doesn’t mean that the horse accepts the rider on his back. It means that he has movement through his back—that he is absorbing you. We want the horse to be like a sponge through his back, with relaxation and swing. He must learn to develop the movement and elasticity in his back, but sometimes this doesn’t happen in the three-year-old year.

What I strive for with a three-year-old is that he is comfortable and accepting of the rider’s seat, with no difference in his back from rising to sitting trot. There should be no change in the horse’s expression, relaxation, tail carriage, ears, or eyes when you go from rising to sitting.

Introduce the sitting trot by sitting for only three strides or so, then rising again. I gradually work up to 20 or 30 strides of sitting trot before I rise again. Always be conscious of how long you are sitting the trot and why you are sitting.

I do not recommend sitting the trot on a three-year-old for extended periods of time. I’m also not a fan of lengthening the trot at this stage because doing so can get you in trouble. Let’s say you have a horse with a re-



IN BALANCE: A young Wamberto (*Rousseau x Voltaire*) displays a nearly ideal outline in sitting trot under rider Susanne Hassler

forward” from the leg and to understand acceptance of contact. Eventually, acceptance of contact will become connection, which is the third level in the pyramid of training.

The three-year-old also needs to start learning about balance. We of-

When things go well and are straightforward, this can be a very fun time. Take your time to develop confidence with the young horse in all you do. Even with the uncomplicated young horse, I’m not a fan of putting a lot of pressure on them at this stage.

ally gifted trot: forward, an expressive front leg, a good hind leg. The lengthening seems to come easily, so you decide to go for it and show that off. After a while, your horse might find out that this is not so comfortable. Now he starts to trot wide behind. Once he learns to trot wide behind, it becomes very difficult to teach him not to do so, and to carry himself straight. It is always better to build gradually.

You also want to go easy on your young horse's back in the canter. In the beginning, don't try to sit deep and "into" his back. As time goes on, you can begin to explore sitting more deeply, little by little. As always, your rate of progress depends on how well your horse accepts the new concept.

Your previous work, alternating between sitting and rising trot, can have the additional benefit of helping to develop balanced, rhythmic, correct trot-canter transitions. The sitting-to-rising work softens the back nicely and prepares the horse for the rider's aids to lift him up into the canter.

The Mental Side

Various insecurities—such as stubbornness, shyness, or fear of other horses—may show up in the three-year-old year, which is why I think this is one of the most critical training stages. If a behavior or a fear becomes established now, it will be very difficult to change when the horse is older. We see many horses, even at CDIs and advanced classes, that are shy and scared of other horses coming toward them, in the warm-up or on the grounds. Consider all of the basics, including your horse's sensitivities and overall makeup, in your work with him. Don't simply decide to go to horse shows because your horse has incredible gaits. As a trainer, you must think not about what you want but about your horse and what he needs.

Growing Pains

Horses don't always stay perfectly balanced through their three-year-old year. Some three-year-olds are already very mature and stay that way—uphill



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Photo by Tiffany Busch



EXPOSURE: The young dressage horse needs to become accustomed to riding with other horses, riding outside, seeing wildlife, encountering farm equipment and people, and everything else he'll see at the shows

build, a nice wither, and off you go. Others can be croup-high or narrow in the chest, which are indicators that they're not yet fully developed.

You need to be able to "read" your horse and adjust your riding and training to suit his needs. We must be careful that we are not in a hurry, or have a goal in mind that isn't fair to the horse. The three-year-old horse does not need a ton of riding or concentrated work. As riders and trainers, we need to relax a little bit. We're not looking to get this horse into the Olympic Games in a couple of years. This is the year to have a lot of variety and to move your youngster toward acceptance of the work program.

You may make good progress for a quite a while and then suddenly realize that your young horse is high behind or growing again. If this happens, it's OK to slow down. Perhaps it would be better for the next six weeks or so to do some hacking and let him grow a little bit. Make the riding sessions



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more about exercise than about dressage training.

There can be a number of growth-related challenges. You may notice that your youngster is really on the forehand all of a sudden, or that he's begun to forge. Sometimes these are truly just growth stages, and you need to back off a bit. Obviously, in the case of forging, you will want to check with your farrier (and use bell boots for safety). If you suspect that something more serious is going on, have your veterinarian check it out.

Laying the Foundation

In the end, you want to add more confidence and exposure in this year, and to instill the fundamentals that you will need later in your young horse's dressage training. Balance, connection, correct use of the body, and responsiveness to the aids are all goals.

At the same time, let your three-year-old be a young horse. He needs variety, and you can still allow him to

be a playful child. As you approach the four-year-old year, you will need this positive foundation to continue successfully. ▲

Next month: The four-year-old year.

Scott Hassler has been the US Equestrian Federation's national young dressage-horse coach since 2006. He co-chairs the USDF Sport Horse Committee and is a member of the USEF Dressage Committee, the USEF Breeding Committee, and the USEF Strategic Planning Committee. He is the director of training at Hassler Dressage at Riveredge, Chesapeake City, MD; and he has coached numerous champions from the FEI Young Horse classes to Grand Prix.

Emily Covington works for Hassler Dressage in the fields of media and design. She is an active rider and has started and trained many young dressage horses.

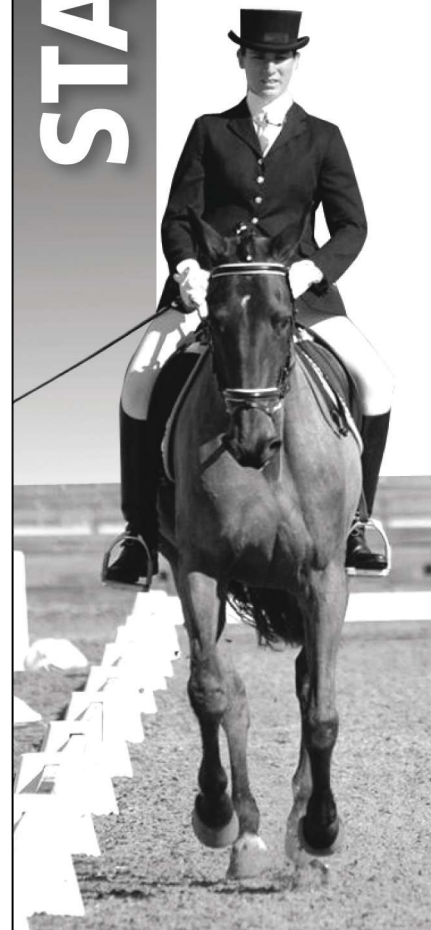
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