

AMERICA'S HORSE

Riding DRESSAGE

AQHA Professional Horsewoman Carla Wennberg shows you how to get started in the exciting sport of dressage. Plus, learn how the fundamentals of dressage can help you in other horse disciplines.

By Andrea Caudill

From the America's Horse library

LESSON ONE: *Enter at A*

IF I ASKED YOU IF YOU'D EVER RIDDEN DRESSAGE, WHAT WOULD you say? Would you picture those giant Olympic warmbloods prancing in front of the judges, scoff, and say of course not – there's no place for prancing on a cow horse!

What if I said that if you've ever sidepassed your horse up to work a gate, if you've taught your horse to yield his hind-quarters, if you've spent time perfecting your walk-trot transitions for a flowing equitation pattern or keeping your reiner balanced in his rundowns, you've been doing dressage? And if you're having trouble with any of those things, or if you've had a desire to try riding competitive dressage, then this series is here to help.

Over the next year, I will break down the elements of the United States Equestrian Federation Training Level Test 1.



I would love to see more American Quarter Horses trying dressage as an event, but because dressage is merely the methodic training of an athletic, obedient horse, the exercises we will work on can be used to improve any horse or any riding activity you wish to pursue.

For example: Do you want your reiner, hunter or other performance horse to score more points with a soft, round, balanced circle? Would you rather your trail horse smoothly canter off instead of making a jaw-rattling run into it? Can you get your horse to trot a straight line and halt softly off the seat, or does it more resemble a serpentine-shaped wrestling match?

What Is Dressage?

DRESSAGE TRAINING FOLLOWS A SCALE CALLED THE PYRAMID OF training. It asks a horse to build the athletic skills it needs, step by step, to become better trained. The seven-level pyramid (see illustration on next page) begins with the absolute basics – a horse must first learn to accept handling, accept tack and accept a rider. Obviously, all riding horses must learn this. Next is rhythm, followed by relaxation, connection, impulsion, straightness and, finally, collection. They're important, because taking your time with those steps helps lead to longevity in the horse in both mind and body.

Training Level encompasses the first three steps and the beginnings of the fourth; it is designed to show that the horse can be supple, loose, move with rhythm and accept contact with the bit. Any well-trained horse can do it, but if your horse has had a different career, like an all-around English or western show horse, it will take time to teach him to go to the bit, stay steady in the maneuvers and have the right topline and drive from behind the way we want our dressage horses to do it. I know it sounds really simple, but if he's used to going in a western curb, he is going to be way softer than a horse you're just starting. He has to learn to hold your hands again and stay steady to that feel.

First you have to get a horse moving correctly in rhythm in all three gaits. That's first – there's no getting around it. If you can't show at Training Level that the rhythm of gait is correct – a four-beat walk, two-beat trot, three-beat canter – soft and supple and driving from behind, you can't do any of the other "tricks." Next is training him to be straight in my aids. Meaning that if I ride him forward, he rides from my leg and seat to my hand. He doesn't lean left, he doesn't lean right. Imagine if I'm a reiner doing a rundown, I want my horse to stand up straight and be balanced to go into that correct, straight stop.

Each of the training pyramid steps are demonstrated through the various levels within dressage. Riders can begin at the walk-trot Introductory Level. Similar to AQHA's Introductory Show program or the National Reining Horse Association Green as Grass classes, it allows you to get your feet wet without having to buy a horse, or allows a new horse or new rider to be introduced gradually. The USEF lower levels begin with Training, followed by First, Second, Third and Fourth. The International Equestrian Federation or FEI upper levels are Prix St. Georges, Intermediate I, Intermediate II and finally Grand Prix (the level ridden in the Olympics). Each of the lower levels has three to four tests that get progressively harder, while the upper levels each have one test.

Why Dressage?

WHAT I LIKE SO MUCH ABOUT THIS SPORT IS THAT EVERYTHING is judged – the geometry of the arena, riding circle work correctly, riding to the letters correctly, being straight on the center line, correct on the diagonal, having the horse correct and riding to your hand all the time. It's not that easy, it really isn't.

If you're more of a Type A personality, you love dressage because it gives you and your horse something to work on every day. Most of my friends who take riding seriously have to have something to work on. It's a great challenge and is such a win-win for our horses. Quarter Horses are great because of their mentality and trainability. There are lots of horses that are powerful enough from behind, but as you go up the levels, the shape of the horse will determine how much lightness you can get in the front. Part is conformational and part is your training.

When we show AQHA, we may think of making a very nice finished all-around horse in a year. But due to the structure in dressage, we think about progressing one or possibly two levels per year. Of course, it all has to do with the horse, how much ability he has and how much we're going to push him. But one of the great things about the gradual training is that it helps give us goals while helping a horse use himself athletically and thus extend his career – there are lots of horses in their teens competing in dressage around the world.

My goal when I show my horse is to be perfect in a pattern and score at 70 percent or above if I'm precise and if my horse is doing the movements correctly. But anything above a 60 percent means I'm on the right track.

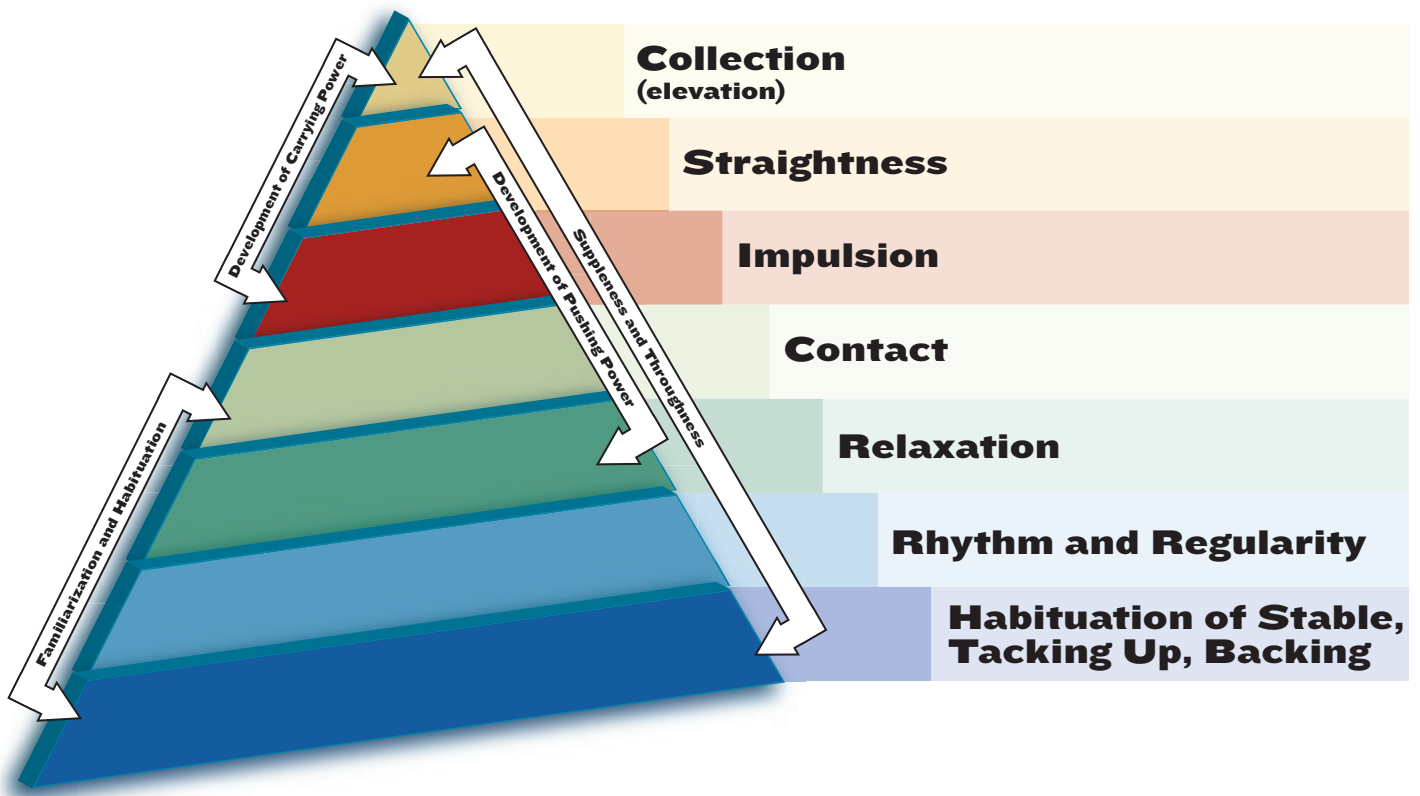
Just Do It

SOME PEOPLE MAY BE AFRAID OF TRYING DRESSAGE. I THINK you have to get out of your comfort zone a little bit and challenge yourself when you ride – that's why I started riding reiners. Maybe I think I'm this big judge, I'm kinda cool, but I go and try new stuff, humble myself a little, and find out I'm not so cool anymore. I think that's a good thing for all of us to learn. We can be great sideline coaches, we can watch other people and say, "Yeah, that's easy!" – but you get *your* butt on that horse and do it!

Plus, it's really fun to get outside your box and see what you need to do better and challenge yourself. If you're going to be a good horseman, you have to do that. It just takes the practice and the comfort level.

For two years, I worked with the United States Equestrian Team as the reining director. And I was in awe of (legendary Olympians and instructors) George Morris, Guenter Seidel, any of those guys who would come in and teach the developing riders. Do you know, they would come over when we'd do reining demos at different activities and say, "You know what? If we could teach our jumpers to stop and turn like those reiners do that rollback, we would shave off this much

The Training Scale: "Pyramid of Training"



time.” They’d be in awe of that athleticism. My point is good horsemen are going to see other stuff and say, “I can use that. I need to find out why that works so well.” And if you don’t do that, you miss so much opportunity – I don’t care what kind of horse you ride.

My partner in the photos that will illustrate this series is my 2003 gelding Larks Chaos. “Red Lark” is a son of American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame stallion Rugged Lark, and his maternal great-granddad is famous Thoroughbred racehorse Alydar, the last horse that won the famed Triple Crown. I bought Red Lark from breeder Carol Harris, who owned Rugged Lark. Red Lark was formerly a hunter. He certainly has the mentality for dressage, he’s got the conformation, but we were a little light on practice. When these photos were taken, I had about two months of dressage riding on him.

So I encourage you to hoist your saddle – no matter what type it is – over the back of your favorite Quarter Horse and join me every month to practice these maneuvers. I hope I will see you in a dressage arena soon! 🐾

AQHA Recognition

If you choose to show your American Quarter Horse at recognized dressage events, there are a number of awards you can earn from both AQHA and USDF. Horses, owners and riders must have the appropriate registrations or memberships.

U.S. Dressage Federation Awards:

- **Adequan/USDF Year-End Awards:** Given to the top U.S. horses and riders in their respective divisions – the “world show” awards of the dressage world.
- **Adequan/USDF All-Breed Awards:** This division recognizes horses from participating breed organizations – of which AQHA is one – with special awards.
- **Rider Awards and Horse Performance Certificates:** Given to riders and horses after accomplishing certain criteria through the levels.

AQHA Awards:

- **High-Points** – Awarded at each of the nine USEF-USDF Regional Championships to the three high-point Quarter Horses in championship classes for open, amateur and youth.
- **AQHA Points** – Awarded beginning at Training Test 4, based on the percentage score and changed into points using a specific conversion chart.

For more information, visit AQHA's Web site at aqha.com, USDF's Web site at usdf.org or go to americashorsedaily.com to see an excerpt from “The USDF Guide to Dressage” by Jennifer O. Bryant. This book is a great getting-started resource and can be found at a variety of online booksellers, including amazon.com.

LESSON TWO: *Proceed Working Trot*

TRANSITIONS ARE HOW WE GET FROM GAIT TO GAIT, BUT IN dressage, they are not just a means to an end, but a training tool.

When I bought “Red Lark” (registered as Larks Chaos), he was a hunter ridden almost without contact. When I put him into contact almost all the time, he leaned on the bit at first, then tried moving his head behind the vertical to get away from the contact. It took months to convince him to stay steady. When he gets heavy on the forehand, I don’t want to wrestle with him, I want to use transitions. Transitions say: “Hey buddy, let’s do something else.” Instead of letting him pull on my hands, wrestling with him and making us both mad, I’m going to say, “OK, let’s try going to a trot!”

Good upward transitions consist of energy from behind, straightness and *forward impulsion*.

Walk-Trot

WHEN I ASK FOR A TRANSITION, I WANT MY HORSE TO BE MORE “up” in the bridle – that doesn’t mean his head’s up, it means he’s lighter on his forehand, soft, feeling my hands. As soon as he starts to lean on my hands, I’ll use leg to push him up to that contact and transition to a trot. If he gets heavy in the trot circle, transition right away back to a walk. Make sure his rhythm and tempo stay the same, but you don’t want to give him an opportunity to lean for long. It sounds so simple, but you want to keep a steady feel from the hind end to the front, and stay soft and balanced – no throwing his head upside down, hollowing his back or sucking back. I’m *not* shoving him into a frame, I’m asking him to move forward into a balanced outline and stay there steady. It takes a

This **Will** Also **Help...**

- A horse that pulls on the bridle.
- A horse that rushes his transitions.
- Sharpen your horsemanship or equitation patterns.
- Get rid of trot steps in a reining lope departure.
- Balance a young colt just starting under-saddle training.

while, even with the best-minded horses, to be confident in all those things.

Begin on a 20-meter circle (approximately 66 feet). Find a spot to practice transitions. Horses learn by repetition, so when he gets to that spot, he knows “I’m getting ready to trot now.” I use that anticipatory energy, and when he does it correctly, I praise him. Once he gets it, I’ll go trail ride. I love taking a horse out because it helps with the forward energy. Pick a tree or rock as the “letters” in your outdoor dressage arena and practice the perfect transitions.

Remember, your training *has* to stay consistent. The horse can’t follow the contact if he doesn’t trust your hands. If you lose your temper and seesaw on his face, you’ll pay for it. That’s just the way it is. I learned early not to take out frustration with my aids. This training doesn’t come overnight.

Halt-Trot

IN TRAINING LEVEL TEST 1, WE HAVE TO GO FROM A HALT TO A trot after the first entry and salute. The halt-trot transition is

When practicing trot-canter transitions, first the horse must be in a forward tempo.



1



If I feel my horse leaning on my hands and bracing (Photo 1), I want to lighten him using a transition. ... I ask him to trot forward with energy (Photo 2) ... and the transition will help him soften and rebalance (Photo 3).

2



3

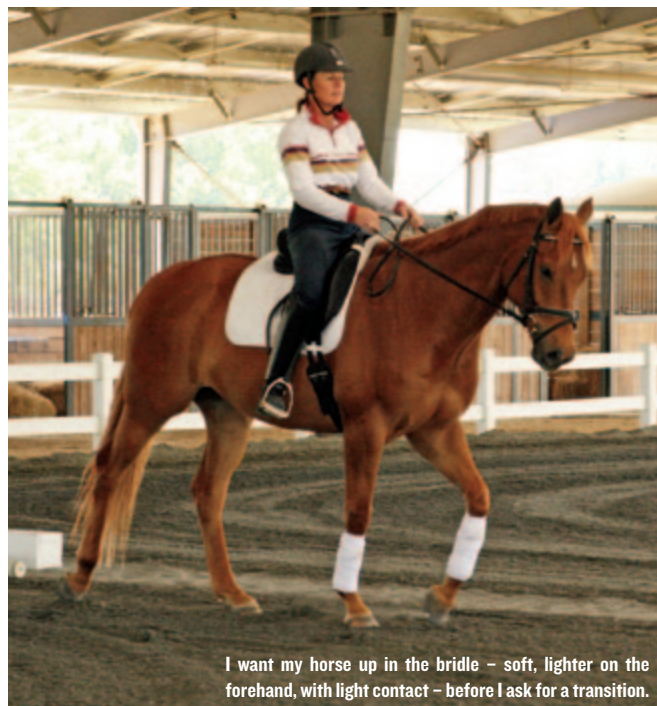
fairly hard because of the spring, the forward impulsion and the straightness required. Use your eyes and look forward to a point ahead of you and feel if your horse is being straight or leaning. Then you need to create the RPMs. It's like when you first teach your horse to lope off, sometimes you're going to have to be pretty abrupt with your cues before you can be softer. Depending on how sensitive he is, wake him up a little with your leg, spur or dressage whip and say "Jump, let's go!" Next time, it's a softer push and squeeze.

Like the walk-trot, pick different points in the arena. Trot a large circle, halt at a point, then trot again. If your horse is really listening and jumping into it, let him know he did it correctly and go on to the next step. If he's not, you need to drill it a little bit until he tunes in.

Trot-Canter

WE START OUR DRESSAGE HORSES WITH A TROT-CANTER TRANSITION instead of jumping from a walk to a canter. When they gain the strength, we will do walk-canter transitions. In the trot-canter transition, the main thing is keeping a steady rhythm throughout. Don't let your horse suck back, and don't let him rush.

As I'm trotting, first I want to know that my horse is on my aids, meaning he's balanced in the trot, he's soft, he's steady. Doing trot-canter in a forward tempo, takes *work* for



I want my horse up in the bridle – soft, lighter on the forehand, with light contact – before I ask for a transition.

Recognizing Quarter Horses in Dressage

AFTER NINE YEARS OF STUDY AND THE EFFORTS OF COUNTLESS individuals, dressage became an AQHA-approved event in January 2010. Here are some fast facts:

AQHA dressage classes will be held within existing classes at competitions recognized by the United States Dressage Federation or licensed by the United States Equestrian Federation. The AQHA classes begin at Training Level Test 4.

Since the American Quarter Horse show industry has always been a point-driven system, AQHA has created a conversion table to change dressage scores (given in percentages) into AQHA points.

To be eligible, the horse must be registered with AQHA and the exhibitor must have a current individual membership.

Open, amateur and youth eligibility is based on AQHA criteria.

There is an \$85 competition license fee, good for the lifetime of the horse, paid to AQHA.

Additionally, AQHA is recognizing the three high-point American Quarter Horses at each of the nine USEF-USDF Regional Championship shows in 2010 and has also created a high-point recognition program for the open, amateur and youth divisions in each level of dressage competition.

a horse. Initially, he may want to put his head up and lift his front end, which forces his back down. Then he loses the forward impulsion and the push of the hind end, and he rushes. Let the transition be unbalanced at first, get the job done, then when he canters off, ask for *more* forward energy. That will help his confidence, and you can build from there.

My goal is to have the ideal trot rhythm, then move my horse to my outside leg and steady him to my outside hand. When I cue him with the outside leg he goes “OK!” and jumps forward using his topline, staying soft and round and maintaining that same rhythm we had in the trot. As in the walk and trot, if he gets heavy, make a transition. Don’t give him the opportunity to lean on you for long. Stay consistent, because he has to learn to carry himself and find balance in

every gait. Remember every horse is different and some may take longer, but if you keep that consistency, you will reap the benefits.

Checkup

NOT EVERYONE HAS AN INSTRUCTOR AVAILABLE TO THEM. YOU can train on your own, but I recommend finding a ground person to help describe what’s going on. The question to always ask is, “What is the horse telling you? When you transition, does he move forward off your leg or does he suck back? Does he move into your contact or avoid the bit?”

The big thing in this level, the foundation for *all* the levels, is teaching the horse to stay soft and supple in his back. As soon as he tenses his back and neck and you let him do it, it turns into a bad habit. 🐾

LESSON THREE: *At C, Medium Walk*

THE OTHER HALF OF AN UPWARD TRANSITION IS A DOWNWARD transition. The trick is that both of them need to have the same basic elements – rhythm, relaxation, softness and forward energy. Yes, even slowing down has to be done in forward! Think about (or find some photos to study) how a good reining horse stops. You will see that even though that horse is in the process of a downward transition, his body is still forward. He has softened his joints and collected himself, and his front feet are maintaining the same rhythm he had when he was loping. A downward transition without forward energy is a horse that throws his head up in the air, drops his back and bang! jams down on his forehand, bouncing you all over the place.

As we discussed earlier, when I am training “Red Lark” (registered as Larks Chaos), I use transitions between gaits to help improve his balance and help him begin to shift his weight off his forehand. What goes up must come down, so let’s discuss how to get downward transitions.

Teach the Transition

IF RED LARK BECOMES UNBALANCED AT THE TROT, INSTEAD OF letting him pull on my hands, I go to a downward transition.

When you ask for a transition to the walk, you don’t want him to throw everything to the forehand. To cue him at first, I lighten the weight of my seat and close my leg to balance him, then I use a half-halt squeeze/release with my seat and my hand to maintain his energy and prevent him from leaning. When I started out, I used a voice aid to help him, even though that is penalized in the dressage competition arena. I put those aids together, and he’d come back into better balance, and then I’d praise him.

Now all I have to do is close my leg – we have to keep the forward impulsion – soften my seat, steady my hand and he goes right down. The forward energy keeps him from throwing himself to the forehand.

I did transitions repeatedly, trot-walk-trot-halt-trot-walk until my horse went, “I got it” and began to lighten his forehand and move forward into the contact.

Once you get that accomplished, you have to get the transition in a certain place, like at a dressage letter, without letting your horse lose his softness, forward energy or rhythm. That’s part of what you’re getting judged on when you ride the dressage test – those soft, forward transitions. In the United States Equestrian Federation Training Level Test 1, you’ve got to do a lot of trot-walk transitions and a lot of trot-canter transitions.

Practice!

AS A RIDER, YOU HAVE TO BE CONSISTENT. AS SOON AS YOU FEEL your horse start to lean or brace, add a transition, even if it is just for a moment. I transition to a walk step then immediately return to trot. If he stays heavy, I leg-yield out for a step or two (we’ll discuss this further in the July issue), then soften again. The goal is to improve the horse’s responsiveness to our aids and lighten the forehand.

Once you get those elements of a transition, you can begin to string them together – walk-trot-walk, trot-walk-trot-canter-trot-walk-halt-trot. Start at a walk on a 20-meter circle; then at every half circle, transition up to a trot, then back to walk. Then start to transition every seven strides, then five strides, then three strides while maintaining the rhythm, softness and forward. If you can keep all that organized, you can keep moving up the ladder steps.



Red Lark has gotten unbalanced in his trot and heavy on his forehand, so I’m going to transition ... to a walk by using my leg to keep him forward but softening my seat and saying “Whoa.”



This Will Also Help...

- A horse that pulls on the bridle or tosses his head.
- A horse that rushes or throws his head up in transitions.
- Sharpen your horsemanship or equitation patterns.
- Get rid of trot steps in a reining departure.
- Balance a young colt just starting under-saddle training.



We rebalance in a walk step ... and immediately trot off with a lovely, forward rhythm.

LESSON FOUR: *Circle Left 20 Meters*

THIS SOUNDS PRETTY ZEN, BUT, TO DO A CORRECT CIRCLE, YOUR horse must be straight.

What that means is, the horse must move from the cue of your inside leg to your outside rein while remaining soft and not leaning in or out. You're riding a curved line, but the horse must continue to be aligned between the aids. Straightness and teaching the horse to move from the hind end to the front end, to your hand, takes a little effort.

Circle work is very important, and it has two elements. Part 1 is putting the horse on the aids correctly. Part 2 is riding a properly shaped circle.

Part 1

WHEN I RIDE THAT CURVED LINE, I'M LOOKING FOR A HORSE that is bent through the ribcage and soft to the inside rein. I'm looking for a horse that has good forward rhythm at the trot or canter – the gait has energy, it has uphill balance, it's soft. He's not leaning on the forehand or leaning on his rider's hands.

If you're going to the left, your inside (left) leg is at the girth, and it pushes the ribcage to the outside. You always want to think of your horse bending around your inside leg. Your inside (left) hand should always be your softening



Here, Larks Chaos is curved around my inside leg, properly bent to the circle.



If your horse is leaning in to the circle and dropping his shoulder in a "motorcycle turn," then he's not correctly responding to your inside leg.

hand, keeping his jaw soft and not letting him lean. If you have your horse properly bent off your inside leg, he doesn't lean to that inside hand. If he is leaning, he's dropping his shoulder in more, and he gets heavier – he's not moving off that inside leg. Your outside (right) leg controls his ribcage and hip and keeps them from moving too far out. Then your outside (right) rein controls the neck and the shoulder from leaning too far out.

So to have the horse on your aids, you are pushing him with your inside leg to create that roundness, while holding the horse steady with the outside aids to describe the size of the circle. You're creating that balance by closing that door with the outside aids, then squishing him out against them – like a big PlayDoh horse – with your inside aids. Remember PlayDoh is pliable but has to hold its own shape. Don't push him out *too* far, or he'll fall apart. We want to make sure the horse can move in and out of the circle with a lateral movement, and we'll discuss this in the next article.

At Training Level dressage, you have the option to sit or to post the trot, but you should post, and you have to learn your diagonals. They are for balance – the horse's outside leg takes a longer step, and you're moving up and down with the outside front leg. The rule is "rise and fall with the leg on the wall," which means you stand in your stirrups when his outside front leg goes forward. For me, missing a diagonal is like missing a lead. It's part of feel, part of balance for the horse, and if you're wrong, it can mess up your horse.

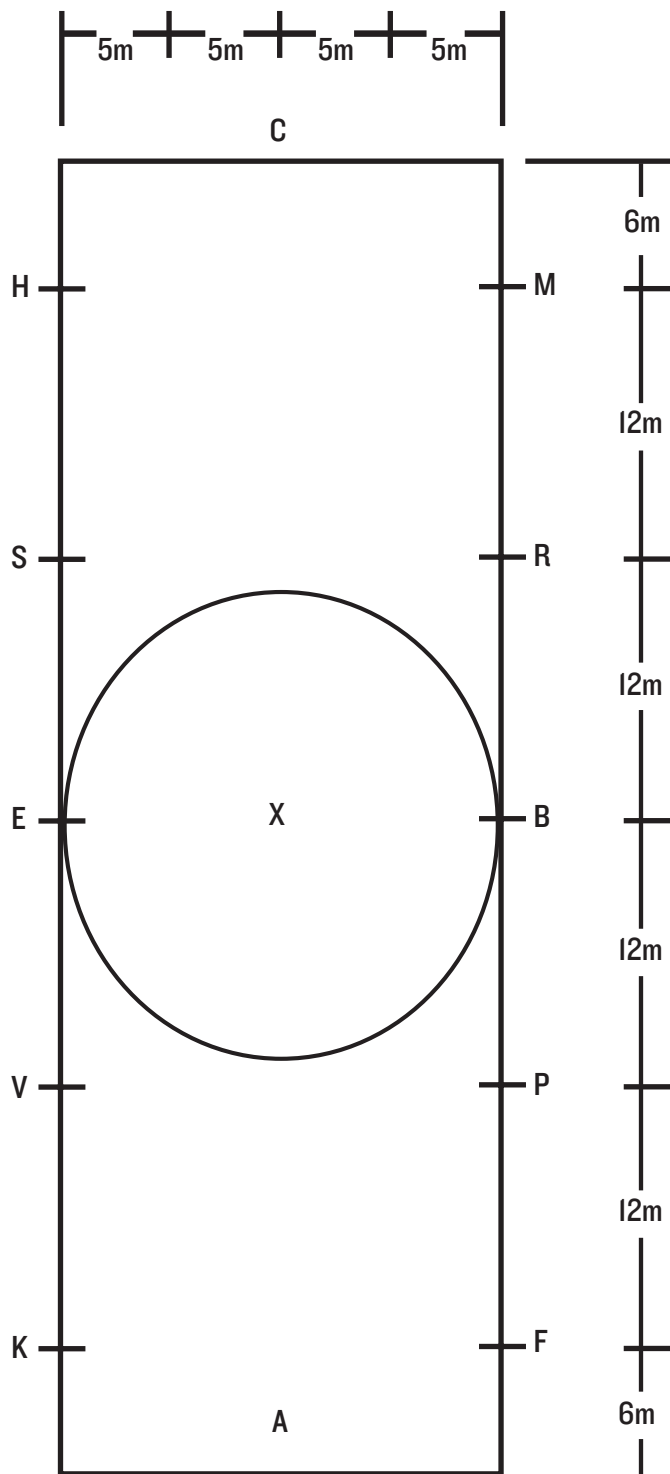
Part 2

I CAN'T TELL YOU HOW MANY PEOPLE CAN'T MAKE A ROUND circle. Recently, I was at a show, and I watched a *lot* of Training and First Level dressage tests where they rode foot-balls. They weren't paying attention, and they weren't using their visuals to make that roundness. In Training Level, we ride a 20-meter circle. You have to practice that. I give myself a visual by going out to the arena and measuring out 20 meters (which is approximately 66 feet for us Americans), then use my foot to scrape the circle in the dirt.

If you're using a traditional dressage arena (that measures 20 meters across), your circle will meet the arena wall for a stride at B and for a stride at E – if he's balanced, touching that side should not be hard. Then you need to find the other marker points. In the small arena (20x40 meters), I have to figure out where that spot is 10 meters out from X. In a large arena (20x60 meters), it's a little easier because you can use R-S and P-V (which are both 12 meters from B-E) as a guideline for where you should ride (just to their inside). You have

to know the precise feel for that circle, because, believe me, when they say "20 meters," they *mean* 20 meters! The judge is looking for a number of things when he evaluates a circle. He wants you to be precise – ride to your letters, ride the correct size of the circle. And while you're doing that, you have to keep yourself balanced in the center of the horse and keep the horse on the aids. The horse should be rhythmical, round in the circle, have a soft balance to the mouth and a round topline. 🐾

Standard Dressage Arena



This Will Also Help...

- Show horses that try to dive into the center of the ring.
- Hunter under saddle horses that need to stay straight on the rail.
- Canter circles in any discipline where horses might try to drop a shoulder.
- Maneuvering around obstacles on the trail. (It will help you keep your horse between your legs, not leaning on them.)

LESSON FIVE: *At E, Circle Left*

I WAS TAUGHT THE SPIRAL EXERCISE. IN ONE OF MY VERY FIRST dressage lessons many years ago, and every single dressage trainer I've had since – and I've invested a lot of money taking a lot of lessons – has done spiral exercises at some time with me. I've used it with every horse and at every level, English or western. It's the most effective way I've learned to get a horse laterally supple, and at Training Level, it's an easy way to teach the horse to leg-yield.

It can be done at any gait, and it will help your horse learn to balance himself, to be steady and trust your aids instead of artificially framing him up. We're going to begin the exercise on a 20-meter circle, tracking left (see Lesson 4 "Circle Left 20 Meters") at a walk. Your inside (left) leg aid should be at the girth, because the ribcage has got to stay moving to the outside. The softening rein is your inside (left) rein. Your outside (right) rein controls the shoulder and the neck to stay steady and balanced, and your outside (right) leg controls the ribcage and the hip from moving too far out.

Lateral First

WHEN WE FIRST ASK OUR HORSE TO MOVE AWAY FROM OUR LEG, his response is usually "huh?" To help him understand, first squeeze your calf. If he steps away from your leg, reward him and release your leg. If he doesn't respond, don't reach for spurs – try to teach respect of your leg without that. So first squeeze, then kick him. If he moves away, reward him. If not, go to a *whap!* with your leg. Then return to asking with a squeeze. If you have to, you can use spurs or a dressage whip to reinforce your initial squeeze.

When he understands the cue, we ask for those initial lateral steps. Most horses will want to just go sideways and not keep the impulsion going forward. They say "I understand what you want – to go sideways!" but they miss the forward part and lose the impulsion.

To keep the hind legs active, you have to combine the two. If your horse is just moving sideways off your left leg, then you're not using your right leg enough, and not allowing



Spiraling Red Lark in to a 15-meter circle requires him to put more weight on his inside hind leg.

enough forward motion with your seat. You have to allow the forward movement, through your seat and keep your inside leg more active, with your outside leg balancing. The inside rein is the softening rein, and the outside rein is the steadying rein. If a horse feels like he wants to suck back and get stuck, I always ask for more forward.

Let's Spiral

ONCE YOUR HORSE HAS GOT THE HANG OF COMBINING SIDEWAYS and forward, it's time to spiral. Your goal is to move between a 20-meter (66-foot) and a 15-meter (49-foot) circle. That's about as small a circle as a Training Level horse is able to travel while staying balanced. As he progresses in training and collection, you can spiral down to a much smaller circle.

Keep a soft bend to the inside and move laterally for two to three steps. With the correct lateral movement, you will feel the horse moving sideways *and* forward. Spiraling out of a circle gets a horse to soften and relax, while spiraling into a circle teaches collection. You will generally find it harder spiraling in, because the horse has to work harder; he has to put more weight over his inside hind leg, and he has to hold his inside bend and make that circle smaller. He has to use his body and his topline more, and he may resist that level of work.

When he reaches the size of circle I want, then I half-halt and adjust my outside aids to say 'OK, now let's continue forward on this circle.' Then I'll do it again.

Once you've mastered the foundation of spiraling the horse in and out of a circle, begin to increase the difficulty

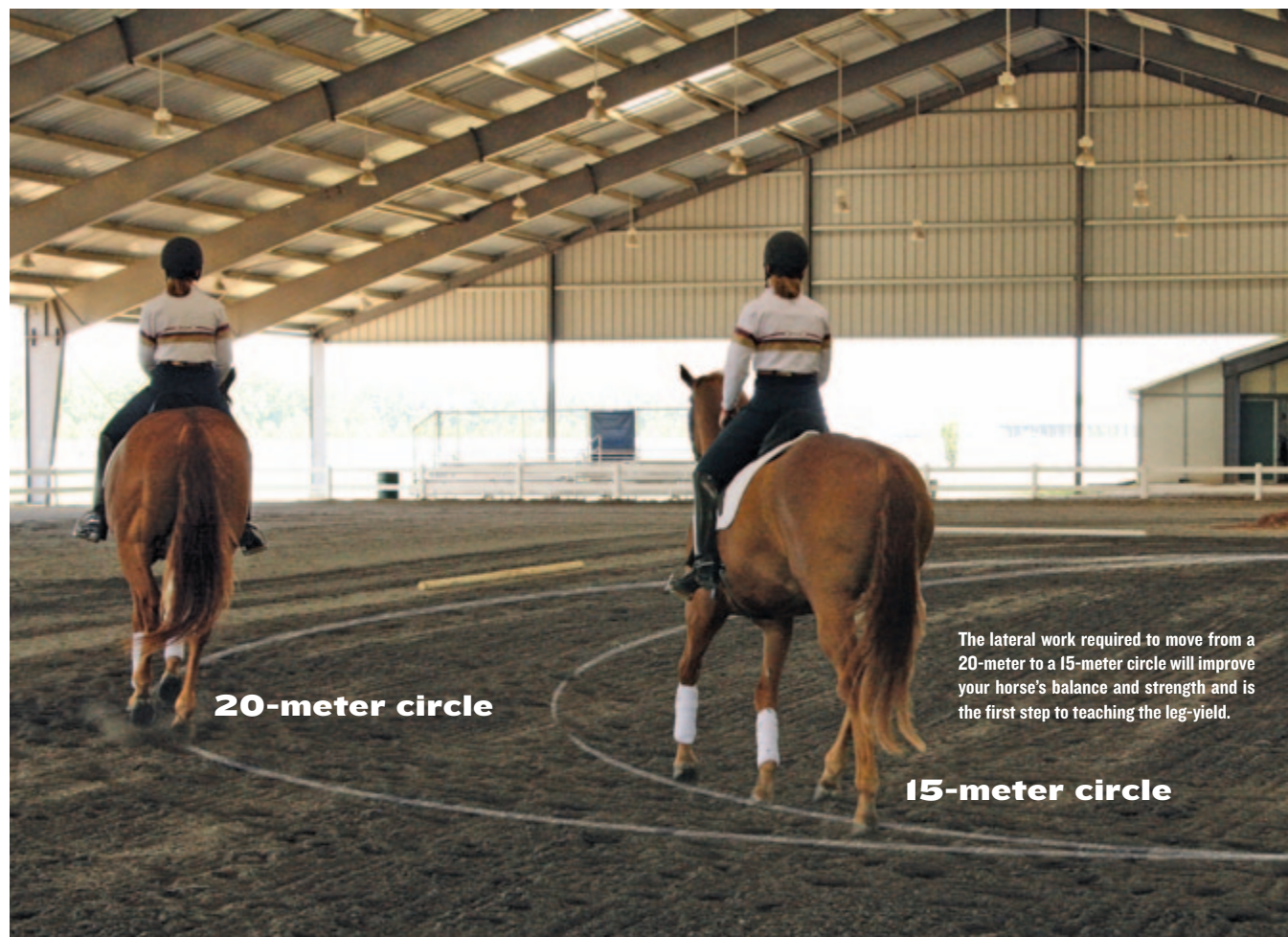
by asking the horse to repeat the exercise at a trot (or jog) and eventually a canter (or lope). It is much harder for the horse to be balanced at the canter, so be sure to progress slowly and keep your circles large enough for your horse's level of training.

Once you've mastered the spiral, you can use it to help with other problems. For example, if your horse is stiff in the shoulders, neck or jaw, you can counter bend him and move laterally to soften them, or you can work to improve your circles and transitions. If my horse gets heavy on his forehead in the canter to the right, I spiral in (to the right) a little, then transition down to the trot to put his weight onto that inside hind leg. Make sure the trot stays in forward motion by giving a mini half-halt before cueing the trot, then add leg for forward energy. If he gets too quick, I'll slow his rhythm by slowing my posting.

This is also the first step of leg-yield work (which will begin in First Level). It's much easier to first train a horse leg-yield going into and out of a circle than it is going straight. 🐾

This **Will** Also **Help...**

- Improve transitions.
- Get your horse more balanced and responsive.
- Move your western pleasure horse on and off the wall.
- Maneuver your roping horse in the box.



20-meter circle

The lateral work required to move from a 20-meter to a 15-meter circle will improve your horse's balance and strength and is the first step to teaching the leg-yield.

15-meter circle

LESSON SIX: *At A, Down Centerline*

TRAINING YOUR HORSE TO TURN A CORNER MAY NOT SEEM LIKE a big deal. Until, of course, you're trail riding on a narrow, winding path, and the turn your horse is negotiating has a big, solid tree in it. Then – I promise – the value of being able to bend your horse around your leg and preserve your kneecap will become very obvious.

In dressage Training Level Test 1, there are more than a dozen corners to turn through.

To teach that turn, we start out on a straight line. Make sure your horse has alignment, which means that he's going forward between your aids. No lagging back, no bulging with his belly or shoulders against one leg or hand. If he's lagging back, we need to create more RPMs (refer to "Proceed Working Trot") or if he's bulging, we have to put him back between the aids (refer to "Circle Left 20 Meters" and "At E, Circle Left"). To get a turn, you have to plan early, and if you don't use your eyes and your body language to find the turn, you're going to be late every time.

Creating the Bend

LET'S SAY WE'RE ON THE ARENA WALL GOING TO THE RIGHT. When I start approaching F, I ask for the correct bend (to the right) as I hit F. I start looking where I want to go, just like when I showed in horsemanship. This really helps my horse, and I've had plenty of judges say they love the way I use my eyes (it's just stuff I learned showing my Quarter Horse!).

When I ask for bend, my inside leg (the right leg in this example) becomes a little stronger, and my outside (left) aids hold my horse steady. His head and neck should bend slightly so I can see his inside eye, but no more. I want him to shift his ribcage to the outside and bend around my inside leg. His legs have to follow the path, and the rest of his body needs to stay aligned without leaning out or leaning in.

If he leans his shoulder in, it means your inside leg is not working. If he remains straight (with no bend), he might be listening to your outside aids but not your inside aids. It goes back to the lateral work – the bend in the circle. He has to understand when you push him over with your inside leg, it means "ribcage over." Then hold him with the outside aids.

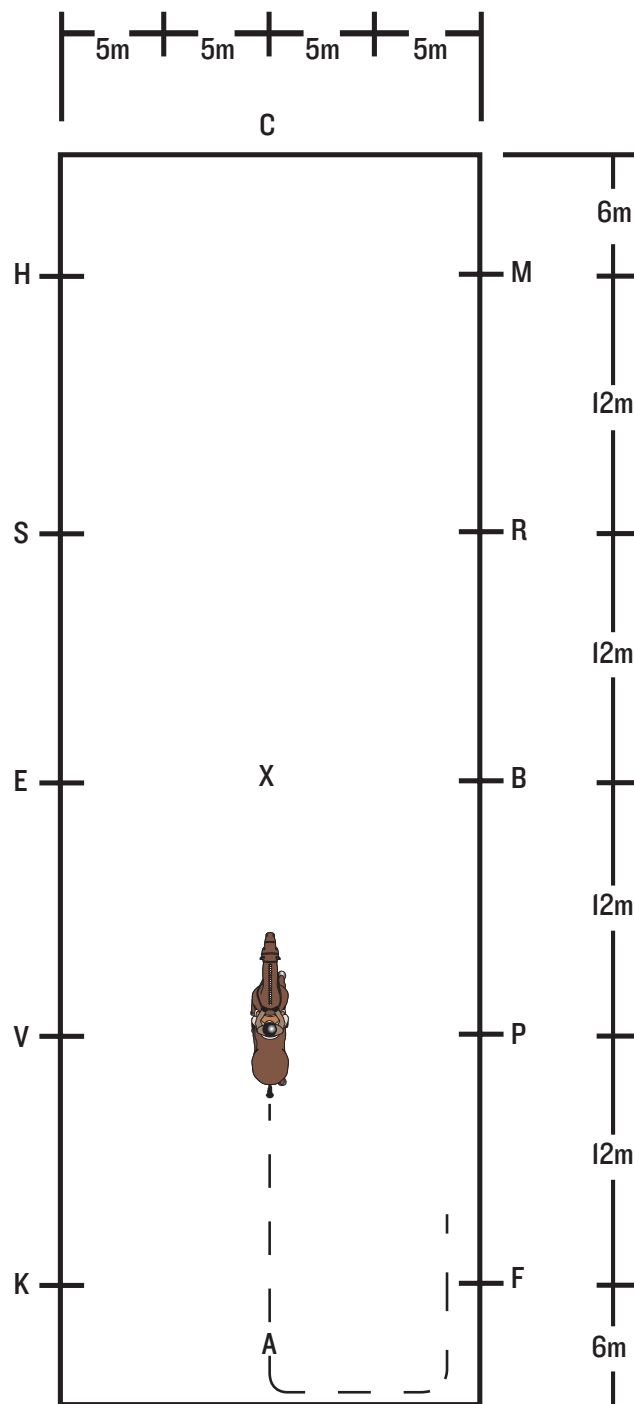
Practice

IMAGINE THAT WE'RE EXECUTING THE FIRST PART OF TRAINING Level Test 1's maneuver 13 – "At A, Down Centerline." I bend through the corner after F, straighten him, then bend him again at A to turn up the centerline. When you're

To Learn More

- About dressage tests, the United States Equestrian Federation offers downloadable tests: www.usef.org/-/IFrames/breeds-disciplines/discipline/alldressage/dressageTestMov.aspx
- About getting started in dressage, check out this excerpt from "The USDF Guide to Dressage," by Jennifer O. Bryant: americashorsedaily.com/get-started-in-dressage/

Standard Dressage Arena



This Will Also Help...

- Save your kneecaps on a trail ride.
- Keep your show-ring trail horse centered on a trot or lope circle over poles.
- Maneuver through a herd of cattle.
- Keep a reiner upright in lead changes and approaching a rundown.
- Lift your pole bender's shoulders.
- Get more space between you and the western pleasure entry in front of you by riding deep into corners.

coming through the first corner, you need to be thinking about turning at A and going up that centerline. To do that, I'm looking at C and focusing on C the whole time. My eyes and my body language are all taking me to that centerline.

If you can go from a straight line to a bending line and ride correctly through that corner – not cutting it off – it shows how much balance you and your horse have. That doesn't mean you go way into the corner and back out of the corner,

but you ride that corner in a bend. If you've got a greener horse who's not as balanced, you're not going to ride as deep into the corner; you'll have to cut it.

You'll find as you go up the levels in dressage, you have to use those corners for balancing. You train your horse for extensions of gait by balancing in the corner. He comes back to you like a coiling spring, steady back, steady back, then you come out of the corner onto the diagonal line and say "Go." 🐾



I'm a few strides past F, and you can see I've already asked Red Lark for bend (Photo 1) ... he responds to my aids by turning his head so I can see his eye, moving his ribcage out and stepping underneath himself with his inside hind (Photo 2) ... and he comes out of the turn still forward and on the aids (Photo 3).

LESSON SEVEN: *HXF, Free Walk*

THINK ABOUT THE TIME YOU SPENT AN AFTERNOON STACKING hay for the winter. At the completion, did you stop, take a deep breath and stretch your back? Did you feel a little bit better? That is the purpose of the free walk in dressage. It is very important, especially at the lower levels of dressage, when we begin to ask our horses to start picking themselves up off the forehand. Done properly, that requires them to use their back muscles. We ask those muscles to tense and work, but we also want them to release and relax.

Free walk is not just walking on a loose rein. The medium walk in dressage has a little march to it, a little more frame, a little more feel, a little more power from behind. Then when we ask the horse to move to the free walk, we let the horse stretch his head down, really elongate the frame and lengthen his stride. It is very purposeful and forward. He also must use his hind end, to reach that hind foot up so that it ideally oversteps the front hoof print, but maintains the constant 1-2-3-4 rhythm.

If your horse has been allowed to walk lazy and slow – maybe he's coming from a different career, or you just like to meander when you trail ride – we're going to have to create more RPMs at the medium walk. I have to tell my horse, "C'mon, let's get more energy. But let's not make your legs quick." We want to hold a soft contact with his mouth, then use our seat and legs to encourage his hind legs to step up and push his body forward into the frame. But we don't want him to step faster – we want those legs to step farther. When he gets it, praise him.

My favorite way to create that energy is to take him out for a trail ride. Feel how he responds to a "Let's go!" out there, then recreate it in the arena. I free walk across the diagonal of the arena (as the free walk is written in Training Level Test 1), to give me lots of room to stretch and go forward.

This **Will** Also **Help**...

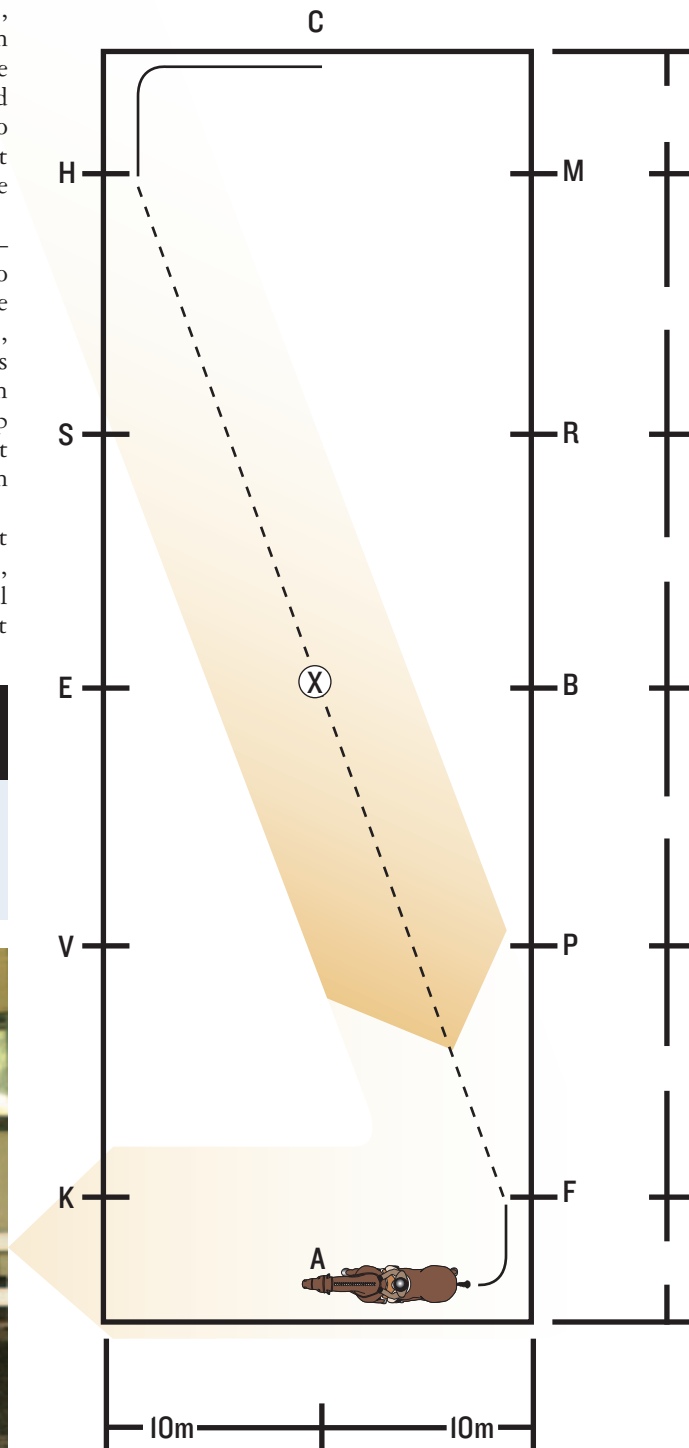
- Equine athletes in other disciplines who will benefit from stretch breaks.
- Trail horses who meander too slowly down the trail.



ANDREA CAUDILL

To start the free walk, I let my hands move with my horse, loosen my hips, push with my calf and start to feed him my rein an inch or two at a time (not pitch it to him, keep contact, but gradually loosen the reins). He should push his nose down and forward, following the contact of the bit. Beware of letting his head get too low. This isn't a how-low-can-you-go contest; too low will cause him to fall on his forehead.

Standard Dressage Arena



The point is for him to stretch over his topline – to push his nose down and out, but most important, step energetically, reach up and walk with a bigger step. You want him to get comfortable with reaching his whole body forward.

If he doesn't get it, I laterally soften him with my leg aids (see Lesson Five "At E, Circle Left") to say, "Now move a little right, soften, move a little left, soften," and keep moving him forward into the contact until he starts to stretch. When he does, I tell him, "Yeah, that's right."

Once he has stretched, you need to return to a medium walk, and that can be just as hard because you've told him "OK, life is good, just relax," and then you take up the rein again and he thinks "What?" So, slowly creep up the rein, ask for more stride as you reach the arena wall and push him

up into your hands. By the time you turn the corner, you should have that uphill, balanced walk again.

When we show, the judge wants to see a difference from medium to free walk back to medium. When you do the medium walk, you don't want him to get quick and anxious, you want him to respond when he feels your hand and leg by saying "OK, I'm pushing to your hand now, lifting up and putting the weight back on my hindquarters." In the free walk, he should think about getting to stretch, marching up with a big step, relaxing his neck and keeping the rhythm.

When he has mastered the free walk, it will give you an opportunity to give your equine athlete a stretch break. The next step is to do so at a trot, which is a required movement starting at Training Level Test 3. 🐾

LESSON EIGHT: *At X, Halt and Salute*

BECAUSE OF THE SKILLS I DEVELOPED RIDING WESTERN, ALL THE horses I've gone up through the levels with in dressage get 8s and 9s on our centerline and halts. It's about collecting, balancing and pushing, and that's something I've learned all my life in a western saddle.

In Training Level Test 1, both halts are at X on the centerline. We need to start by nailing that trot down the centerline. Earlier, we talked about bending through corners to accurately hit the centerline. Once we're on the line, I imagine I'm in a tunnel. I focus all my aids – eyes up! – as if we're in a tunnel, and the horse has got to stay in that tunnel, on those tracks the whole time. If he is leaning, it's going to show up in the stop. When he is on the aids, when you have the power from behind, when he is straight and you say "Whoa," everything just flows, beautiful and soft.

Everyone is stronger on one side of their body than the other. Everyone leans left or right, and you have to learn to feel that. As you ride, think, "Is this straight?" Review: "Are his neck and shoulders straight? His ribs? Is he leaning left or right?" Then close those aids and straighten him. Practice until you have an "aha!" moment.

Getting the Halt

THE HALT IN THIS TEST CAN BE DONE THROUGH THE WALK, which to me is harder than one where a horse drops his butt and stops like a cow horse. But in dressage, we want it soft, too, and balanced.

With everybody I've ever helped (including myself), when you transition from a trot to a walk to a halt, the horse always stands behind himself because you have a tendency to pull the reins, and he drops on his forehead.

Here's the trick: Start shortening the horse's stride a few strides before X. So you're going to trot in, down that tunnel, and think "Trot! Trot! ... Shorten, shorten shorten ... Whoa." (Don't actually say "whoa" out loud in competition, or you'll be penalized for using your voice!)

I ask the horse to shorten his step by closing my leg more, pushing a little more with my seat and ceasing the motion with my hands. I use a light squeeze-release feel to tell him not to go as forward with his body, that he has to start rocking his weight back to his hind end. You're asking him to shorten his step, but you keep the energy by using your leg and seat. Be careful not to get him so short that he marches up and down. Riders who want to collect too much too early tend to force the horse behind the vertical, and sometimes he gets lateral (interrupting the correct footfall).

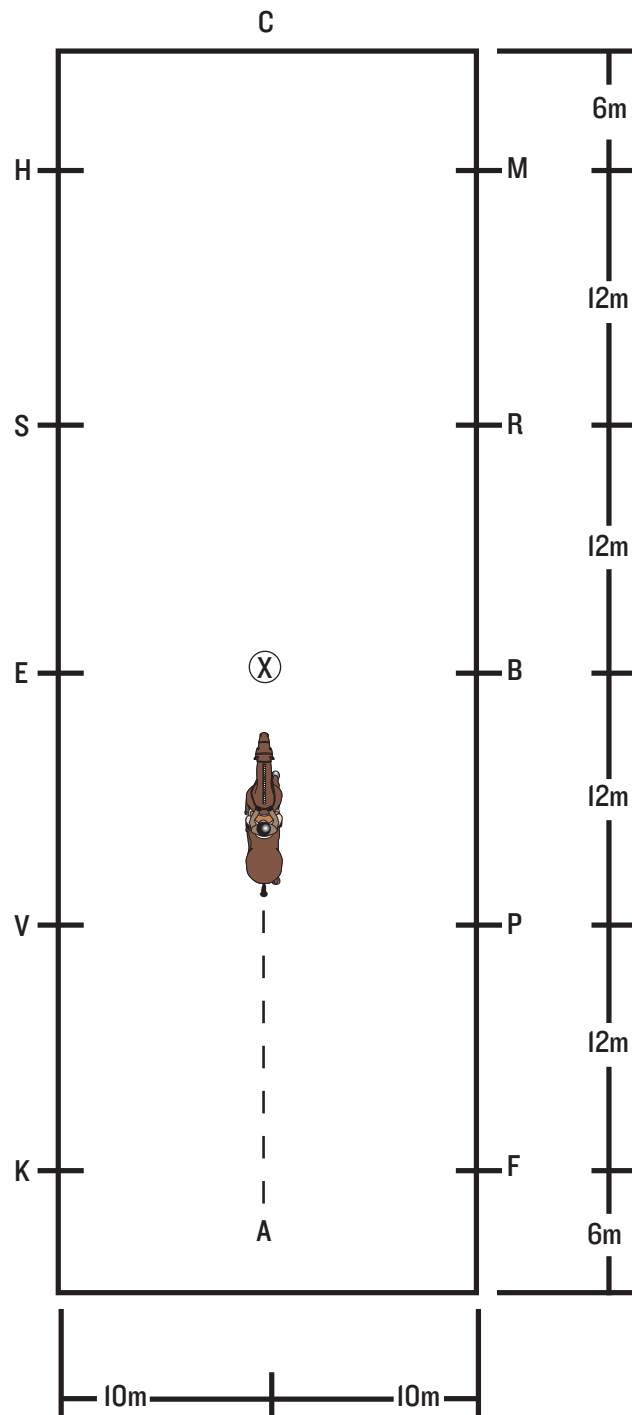
So I'm going to shorten the step, then cease the motion – that is what tells him to halt. If you feel his hind legs behind your seat, step him up a step or two. A correct stop has all four feet square – that means he's balanced.

Once you halt, you have to salute. Take a deep breath and slow your mind down, then drop your chin toward your chest, take one hand off the rein and drop it by your hip. If you're carrying a whip, remember to salute with the other hand! A man should remove his hat with his free hand after halting and hold it while saluting.

Practice

SOMETIMES A HORSE GETS KEYED UP WHEN I ASK HIM TO HALT. He knows something is about to happen, and he's pumped up

Standard Dressage Arena



This Will Also Help...

- Any horse who tends to fall on his front end in the halt.
- Any rider, because straightness is a crucial part of fine-tuning any style of riding.

because I'm pumped up. So I need to teach him to wait. After I come to the halt, I take the reins in one hand and, in practice, I pet my horse, wait, let him sigh and take a breath, then I salute.

I practice trotting down the centerline. Once I get the straightness, then I add a transition. First, I do a trot-walk-trot transition at X. If he's listening, if he responds quickly to my aids coming back to the walk, next I'm going to ask for a walk to halt and, if he succeeds, trot to halt. If he stays

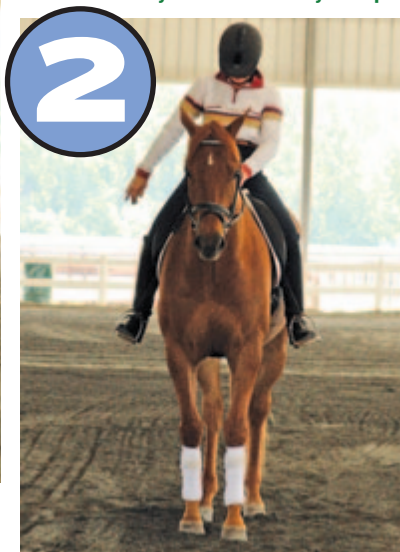
balanced, he gets praise: "Good boy!" If he puts his weight, *whump* onto his forehead, I'm going to transition – trot again! (see Lesson Two "Proceed Working Trot") – and try again.

Practice the halt until your horse is comfortable. Always keep that energy level up, because next you have to practice springing off. When you cue him to walk or trot off, you don't want him to putter through it – you want him to spring off, *go*! Continue focusing on that tunnel and that straightness. 🐾



The entry should be straight and forward ...

When you salute, drop your chin to your chest and move your hand back to your hip ...



The halt should be square and balanced.

ANDREA CAUDILL

LESSON NINE: *At A, Down Centerline*

WE HAVE LEARNED SOME OF THE BASICS OF DRESSAGE AND HOW to use them to improve ourselves and our horses. I hope that you've been able to apply those principles to whatever disciplines you enjoy, but if I've piqued your interest in the sport of dressage, here are a few tips on getting ready to show a Training level class.

The Rider

THE RIDER MUST WEAR CONSERVATIVE ENGLISH-STYLE CLOTHES, including a riding coat of a conservative color (black is preferred, but any dark color is acceptable), with a tie, choker or stock tie and gloves (white is preferred). Your breeches must be white or light colored (such as beige). English riding boots (black or dark brown) are preferred, however, if you don't want to invest in these yet, you may wear short boots with half-chaps, gaiters or leggings made of a leather or leather-like material in a color matching your boots. It is always a good idea to wear a safety helmet while riding, but you may also wear a hunt cap, derby or top hat.

Where I live, it gets so hot in the summer that the judges often waive the coat rule. When they do, you're allowed to ride in a short-sleeve shirt, but you must wear a shirt with a collar. If you ride without a jacket, don't wear the choker or stock tie.

The Horse

THE HORSE CAN USE EITHER A DRESSAGE OR HUNT SEAT ENGLISH saddle. Either way, use a conservative-color square pad (I recommend plain white). The horse must wear a snaffle bridle with noseband. There are a number of legal and illegal bits and nosebands, so check the rules to make sure your equipment is approved. Additional training aids, such as martingales and leg wraps, are not allowed. The mane should be braided, as this allows the judge to see the horse's neck.

Memberships

YOUR MEMBERSHIP NEEDS WILL VARY DEPENDING ON YOUR showing goals. However, if your plan is to enter your American Quarter Horse in a dressage class at a United States Equestrian Federation-licensed/United States Dressage Federation-recognized event, these are the items you will need:

- Current AQHA membership
- AQHA Dressage Competition License
- USDF participating membership (for owner and rider)
- USDF horse registration (either one-year or lifetime)
- USEF membership (for owner and rider)

If you are competing for year-end awards, you will also need a USEF horse registration.

If you want to test the waters before you jump in, some shows have begun offering "opportunity" classes. These classes, held at regular shows, allow you to try a class without requiring you to have all the memberships in place, but do not count toward year-end awards. Check the show's prize lists for availability.

Find a Show

UNLIKE MANY HORSE SHOWS, DRESSAGE SHOWS REQUIRE YOU TO enter weeks before the event because there are scheduled ride times for each test. That means that before you get to the show, for example, you know that you'll be riding at precisely 9:42 a.m. and 1:15 p.m. (It's great if you're like me and like to know what time you'll be arriving home after the show!) Thus, you have to pick which tests to ride. You are allowed to ride up to three tests per day at the lower levels, but I recommend starting with one or two so you don't get overwhelmed at the start.

Before you enter the show, make sure all your memberships are in order. Once those ducks are in a row, you can usually print show entries off a website. Make sure you fill in your entries completely. It can be intimidating at first, but most show managers have e-mail addresses and are good about answering any questions you may have. 🐾



Carla Wennberg and Larks Chaos

TOBE SASKOR

LESSON TEN: *Leave Arena on a Loose Rein*

YOU AND YOUR EQUINE PARTNER HAVE MASTERED THE MOVEMENTS all year and you're ready to give showing dressage a try, and you're signed up. Now comes one of the most important parts of a successful show – mental preparation. What I love about dressage is the precision of the test. Especially at Training Level, it is important to have an obedient, good-moving horse, but a precise test will make the difference between a good test and a “WOW” test. That preciseness comes with planning.

Prepare to Ride

THE FIRST STEP TO MASTERING SOMETHING – DRESSAGE, WESTERN riding, trail riding at a state park – is to understand the rules. The United States Equestrian Federation rulebook says the goal for Training Level is “to confirm that the horse's muscles are supple and loose, and that it moves freely forward in clear and steady rhythm, accepting contact with the bit.”

Find the coefficients in your test (these are the movements you are getting scored more on). In Training Level Test 1, the free walk is a two coefficient – that means whatever points you get will be multiplied by two in the final score – to show that the horse is relaxed and forward, his steps are even and he's stretching over his topline. That's very important at this level.

It can be tempting to jump right in the deep end when you start. When I first got into showing, I just wanted to do the fun stuff like change leads and spin. Thank goodness my mentor said “No, we're going to do the basics.” Now I teach my students the same thing. Read and really understand the purpose, and it will help you become a better horseman. You need to learn to crawl before you walk and walk before you can run.

The second step in mastering your ride is to visualize every detail of what you want to happen – the round 20-meter circle, the loose-rein lead change, or your horse calmly crossing the creek. I visualize and I make my kids visualize the horsemanship: the movements, the transitions, how do you actually get from one letter to another. Know precisely where you're going and how you're going to get there. If you're a visual person, look at it. If you're a kinesthetic person, walk it.

Where are the danger zones? Break down each part within the test – where are you going to give the cue to get the transition at the letter? I make the extra effort because if you don't, those are points you're just giving away. If you're not prepared for that transition at the letter and change three strides late, they might give you a 5 instead of an 8.

Bring a Friend

YOU ARE ALLOWED TO HAVE A “READER” – SOMEONE WHO CALLS the test out loud for you as you ride it. I prefer to memorize my test, but it is nice to have that backup of someone calling the movement one or two moves ahead of what you're doing, in case you have a brain freeze.

Hints for Showing:

- When I warm up right before my test, I do a lot of trot-walk, trot-halt transitions. I check: Do I have my brakes? My “go” button? Is my horse on my aids? Then I ride that test in my mind one last time before show time.
- Focus your energy forward. Most of my students don't ask for enough energy. They quit riding because they're too busy worrying. Get your energy forward and push that horse.
- Judges like seeing good rides, and they want to give you the points you deserve, so don't feel intimidated by them. They are just a mirror of what you're doing, so ride confidently.
- Training is a never-ending process, and your score doesn't define you. Consider it an instant lesson, a critique that gives you a guide to improve next time.
- Breathe! I've had students come out of the arena almost blue because they didn't take a breath. That tension transfers to the horse.
- Have fun!

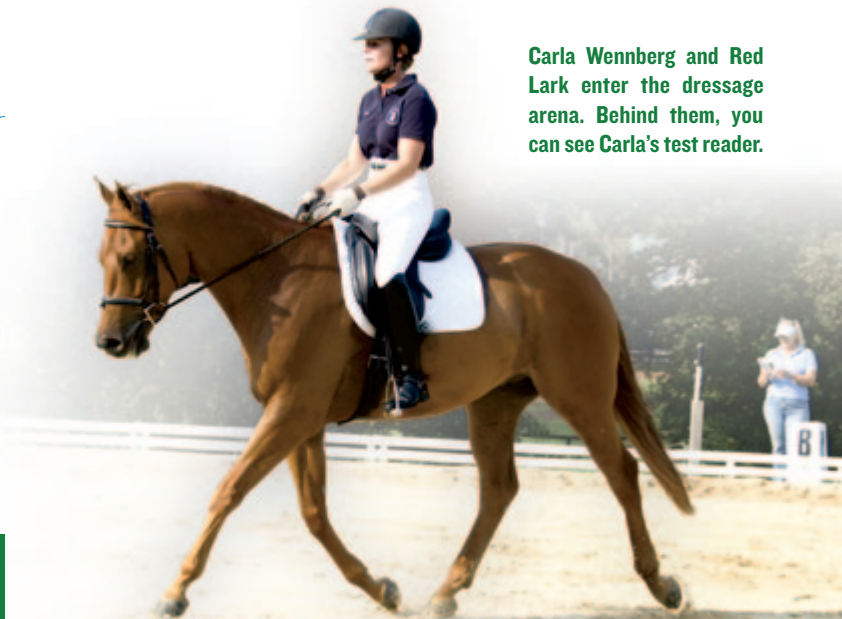
So remember: Dressage is good for you; it's good for the horse. This work – collection, lengthening, shortening, balancing – relates to every aspect of what you might do, from riding a hunter to chasing a cow to creating a better trail-riding partner. Just give it a try! ☐

TRAINER BIOGRAPHY

CARLA WENNBERG is an instructor at St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, North Carolina. She was honored by her AQHA Professional Horsemen peers as the Professional's Choice AQHA Professional Horsemanship of the Year. She was a youth world champion and is both an AQHA judge and National Reining Horse Association judge and actively competes in both dressage and reining competition.

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Carla Wennberg and Red Lark enter the dressage arena. Behind them, you can see Carla's test reader.



TOBE SASKON