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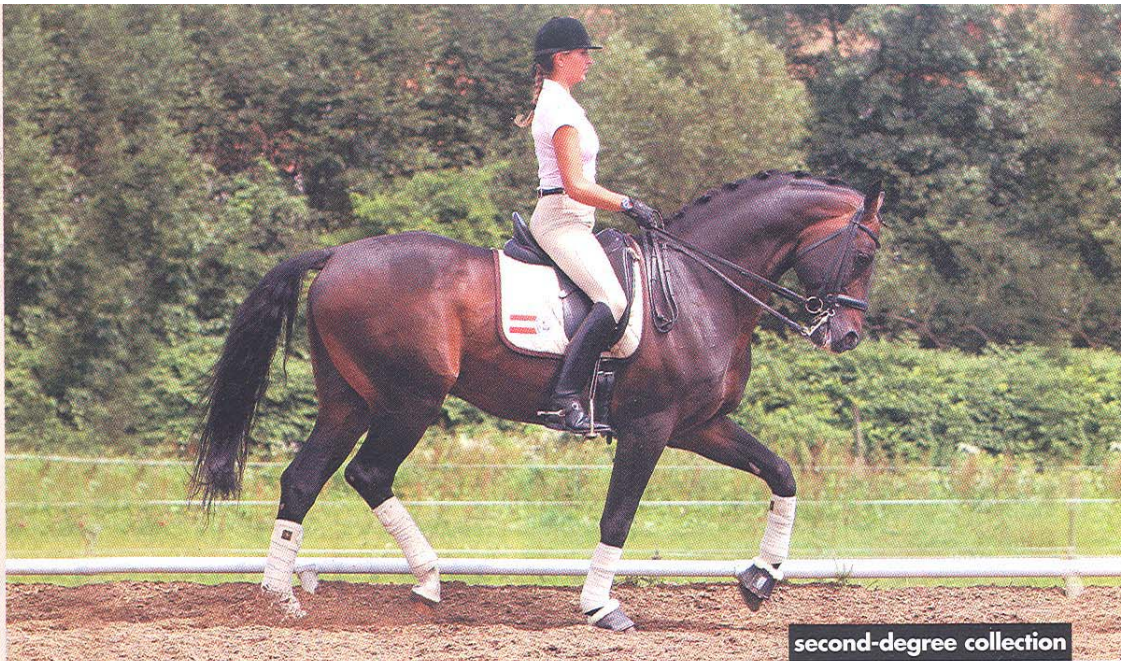




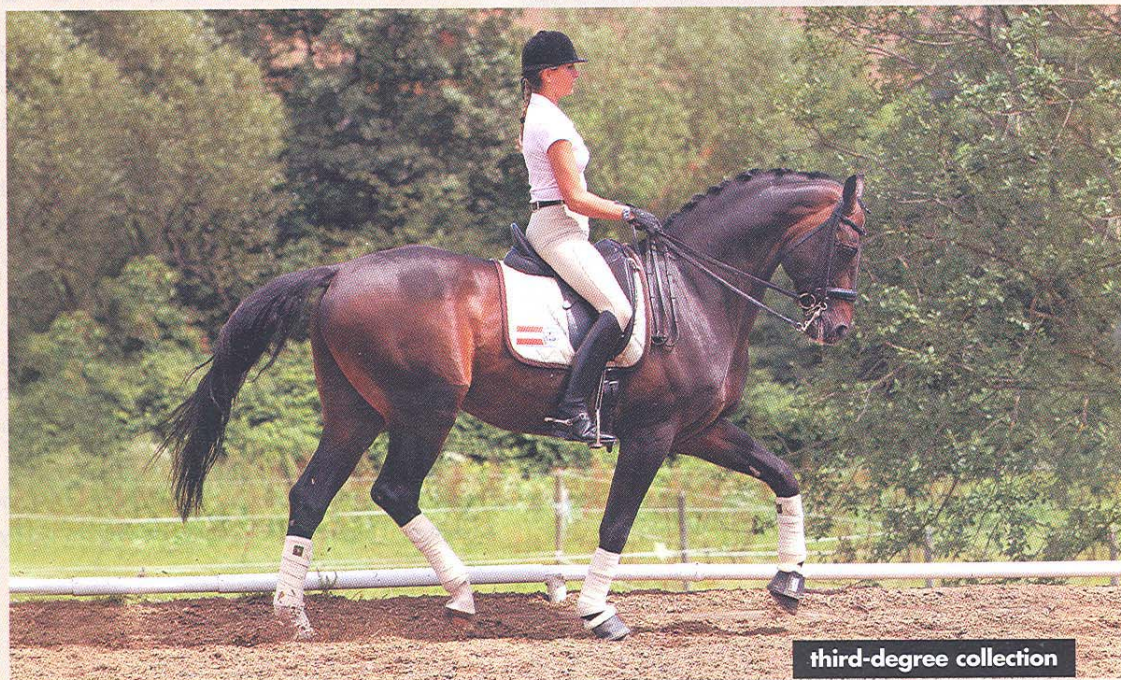
DEGREES OF COLLECTION

The former First Chief Rider at the Spanish Riding School explains the scale for measuring collection.

By Arthur Kottas-Heldenberg with Beth Baumert • Photos by Ewald Willibald



second-degree collection



third-degree collection



first-degree collection

As a judge, I often write at the end of a test: "Your horse didn't have the degree of collection needed for this level." It's helpful not only for riders and trainers, but also for judges to understand the different degrees of collection. These recognized levels begin with first-degree collection, followed by second- and then third-degree collection. When the horse is appropriately collected for the level of his test, the work looks easy. The key to success in dressage is to make it look easy and beautiful. The goal for my colleagues at the Spanish Riding School is not to be able to do the difficult exercises. Rather, they aim for harmony between horse and rider. They want to appear as if they were born on a horse, so the movements must look easy. The goal of all riders should be harmony, which doesn't mean you have to be a Grand Prix rider or even a competitive rider. When the riding looks easy, it's well done. When it looks difficult, then there is strengthening and correct riding to be done. In this article, I will define the levels of collection and give a few exercises to help you on the path to its development.



Arthur Kottas-Heldenburg is the former First Chief Rider at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, Austria. He now gives clinics worldwide and lives and trains horses in Vienna. His 23-year-old daughter, Caroline, is the rider in these photos.

Degrees of Collection

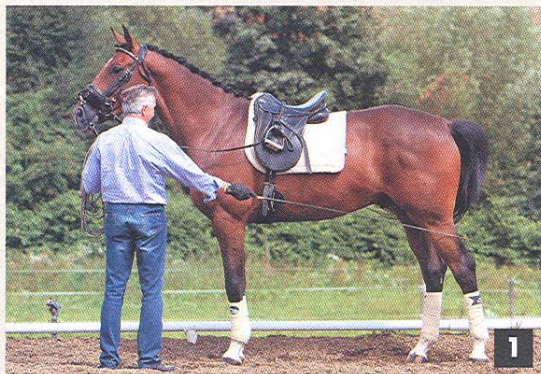
The degree of collection is determined by how much weight the horse carries with his hindquarters. As he carries more weight behind, he grows more uphill and light in self-carriage. He steps under himself and carries enough weight needed for the exercises at his level of training. This is just a matter of progressive strengthening and correct riding. You can see the degree of a

horse's collection by observing how he executes normal transitions. The purpose of transitions is not simply to move from one gait into another, but rather, to get the horse sitting more with his weight back. If you ride a trot-walk or a canter-walk transition, does your horse step under and carry himself gracefully into the walk, or does he push his neck down and plunge onto his forehead? These exercises will

help you identify where your horse is on the continuum of developing collection and show you how to improve it.

First-Degree Collection

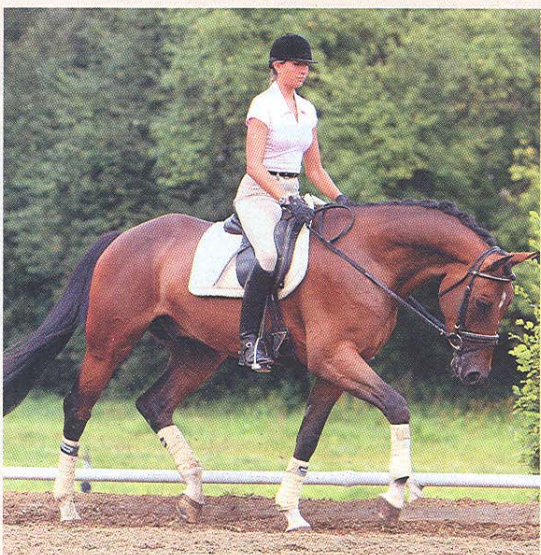
The horse with first-degree collection is usually a 4- or 5-year-old that does working walk, trot, canter and, perhaps, some lengthenings. When he does a canter-walk transition, we are satisfied with him even



EXERCISE 1: WALK-HALT-WALK TRANSITIONS IN-HAND

When a horse is 5 years old, I don't think about high-level movements, but I do think about laying the foundation for them by improving the horse's outline. In the walk, I want to be sure that the horse is always pushing with the hind legs, not pulling with the forelegs. I do baby gymnastics in-hand, using walk-halt-walk transitions. I make the side reins the right length so that the horse has an appropriate outline. Then, without the weight of a rider, I teach my horse to stop with the hind legs square and under him so he learns to take the weight back equally (photo 1). I walk a small circle and then halt. If the left hind leg is out, I touch it with the whip (photo 2). Then, when he steps under, I pat him, maybe give him a sugar and try it again. This way, the horse learns to be always under and square from the beginning. We hope he will have the same reaction in all transitions and in half halts.

The horse pictured in exercises 1 and 2 and in the photo on p. 28 is Willibald's Raubritter, a 5-year-old Oldenburg gelding owned by Ewald Willibald of Vienna.



EXERCISE 2: SPIRALING & STRETCHING

With the young horse, I ride large circles. Then, with each round, I make the circle slightly smaller around the center. When I feel the horse is challenged such that he is not in a good trot or canter anymore, then I spiral out to the large circle again. Then I ride a few strides of medium trot or canter. The principle is to ride your horse forward, keep him straight and try to bend him to the same degree in both directions. If you feel your horse should be more active, ride him forward, back and forward again.

Young horses are not strong enough to always carry themselves with a high topline, so we stretch them frequently, maintaining the same rhythm and speed.

though he takes one or two trot steps before walking. When he comes down the centerline in a test, he may halt with a hind foot one or two shoe-lengths too far back. If he stays steady on the bit in the halt, and then takes one or two steps of walk before picking up the trot, he will get a score of seven or eight. If this same performance is in a Prix St. Georges test, it can't score better than a six.

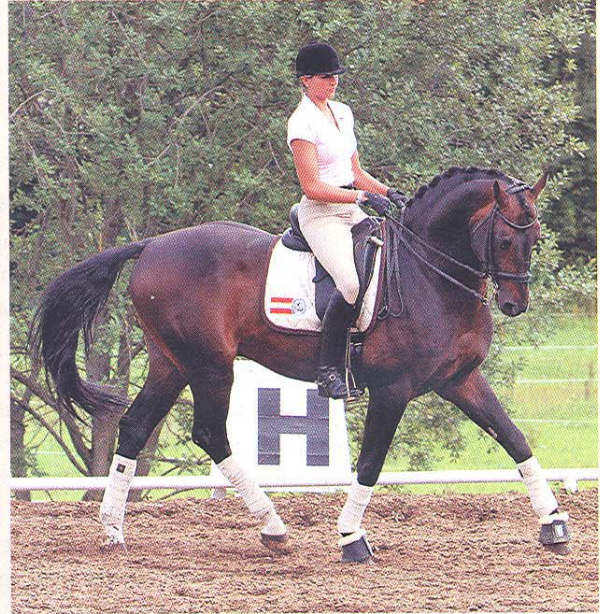
Exercise 1 is a simple but important in-hand exercise that teaches your horse to bring his hindquarters under and square in all downward transitions and half halts so that he learns to engage both hind legs equally. Exercise 2 shows how to develop engagement by riding a large circle and then spiraling the circle in until the weight-bearing becomes challenging. Then you will spiral out again.

Second-Degree Collection

The horse with **second-degree collection** does collected trot and canter. He can go from a three-beat canter to a four-beat walk with no trot steps. The horse is collected in his whole body, not just short in the neck. Whereas, we always want the poll to be the highest point with the nose in front of the vertical, at this point in the horse's training, he isn't always strong

EXERCISE 3: THE 20-METER SQUARE

In the 20-meter square at trot, Caroline rides Exupery into the corner with enough collection and bend that he takes a bit more weight on his inside hind during the turn. Then she rides forward out of the corner. To understand the aids for the corner, the rider has to know how to ride straight with the hind legs going in the direction of the forehand. Because the horse's hips are wider than his shoulders, the forehand needs to be ridden toward the inside about the space of one shoe. Without this "shoulder-fore" position, the shoulders would be too close to the wall and the horse would need to bend much more in the corner. Ride with two reins, the seat, two legs and weight. As Caroline rides into the corner, she uses her inside leg and both reins. She keeps the same weight in both seat bones but with a bit more in the inside stirrup (without leaning to the inside). Then she uses her forward-driving seat, legs and reins in the direction of the turn. The horse feels this and he will follow. If she has a problem in trot, she will do it in walk. Later, she can do the exercise in canter. The more advanced the horse, the deeper the corner can be, until she can do a quarter pirouette in each corner with straight lines between them.

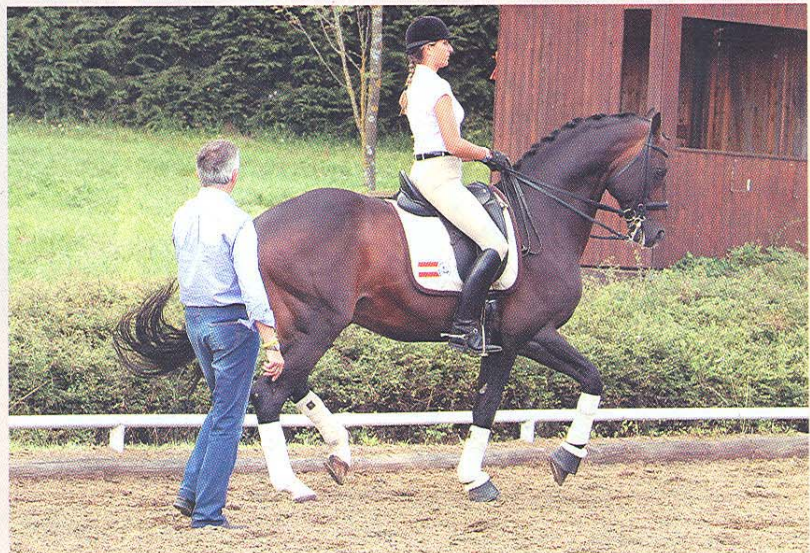


In exercises 3–6 and on p. 29, Caroline rides Exupery, a 12-year-old Oldenburg stallion owned by Manfred Nettek of Ashanti Farm in Gordonsville, Virginia.

EXERCISE 4: HALF STEPS

If the horse is sensitive when I touch the hind leg in Exercise 1, then I can ask him to go forward in short, active walk steps. I touch each hind leg—left, right, left, right—for two or three steps, and the horse will typically start short, active diagonal half steps. Then I pat him and repeat the exercise.

Often I work the horse together with an experienced rider. Horse and rider circle me, and before they come to the wall, we ask for a few short half steps. The rider uses her leg, seat and rein aids, and I try to help engage the hind leg with a whip from the ground.



enough in his back to show that ideal.

Corners and circles are very helpful in building the horse in bend and collection. I'll never forget watching riders at the Spanish Riding School when I was young. They were riding very clear corners and straight lines and then corners again. A few weeks later I saw beautiful half passes and half pirouettes that looked so easy because the horse was trained to take the

weight back in the corners. **Exercise 3** shows you how to help your horse develop more weight-bearing in the hindquarters by riding corners on a 20-meter square. The required bend in this exercise improves his ability to step under himself and through his body, and it makes him stronger. **Exercise 4** is an extension of Exercise 1. When your horse's hind legs come under equally, you can ask for half

steps in the rhythm of trot so he learns to be active in shorter strides.

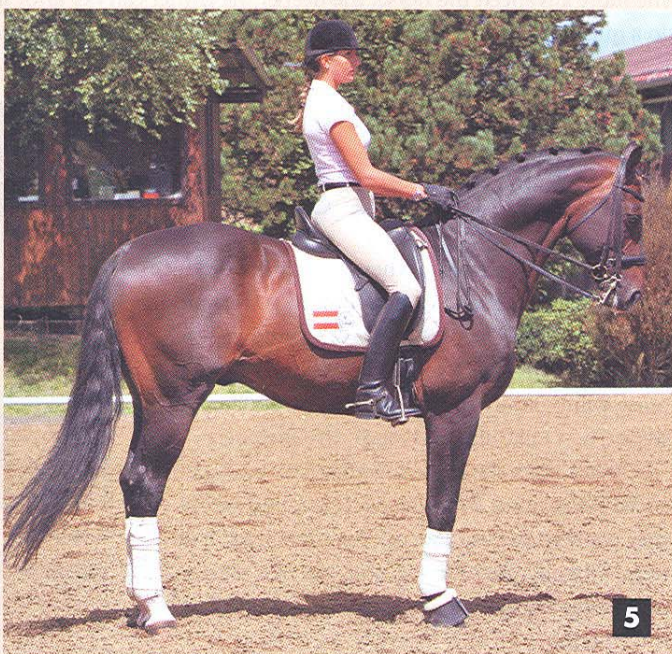
Third-Degree Collection

The horse with **third-degree collection** carries a minimum of 55 percent of his weight on the hindquarters and a maximum of 45 percent on the forehand. He is now an uphill-going horse that grows in the withers, not just in his neck position.

EXERCISE 5: ADVANCED CANTER WORK

To develop the canter stride and make the horse sensitive to the rider's leg, Caroline starts Exupery on a circle around the centerline in a slight haunches-in position (**photo 1**) and spirals to make each round a bit smaller. They reach a full pirouette (**photo 2**) and then ride out in leg yield onto a large circle (**photo 3**). Then she does a few strides of medium canter to refresh the gait (**photo 4**). Next she halts (**photo 5**) and does a rein-back (**photo 6**). Her horse should step diagonally and carry weight behind. She should not feel him come onto the forehand. Then she departs again into canter and repeats (**photo 7**).

Caroline does this work in both directions and expects her horse to maintain a nice topline. At this point in the training, the highest point should always be between the horse's ears, and he should not be behind the vertical.



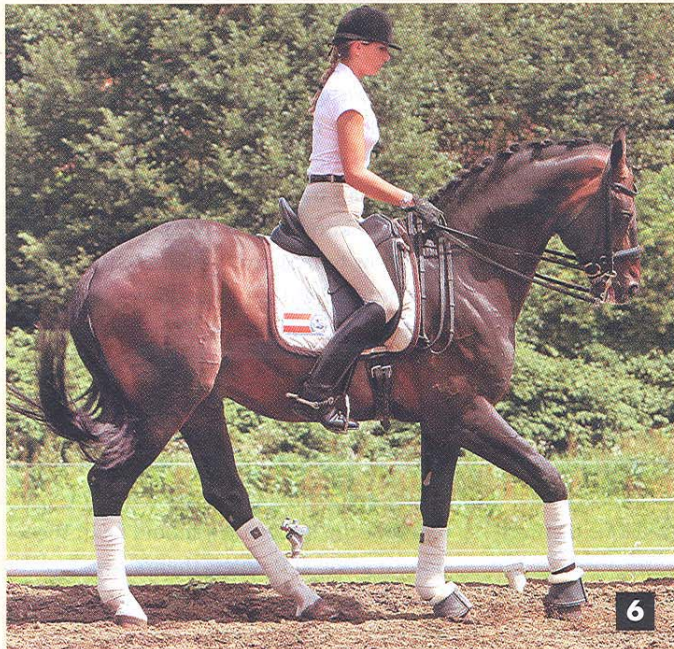
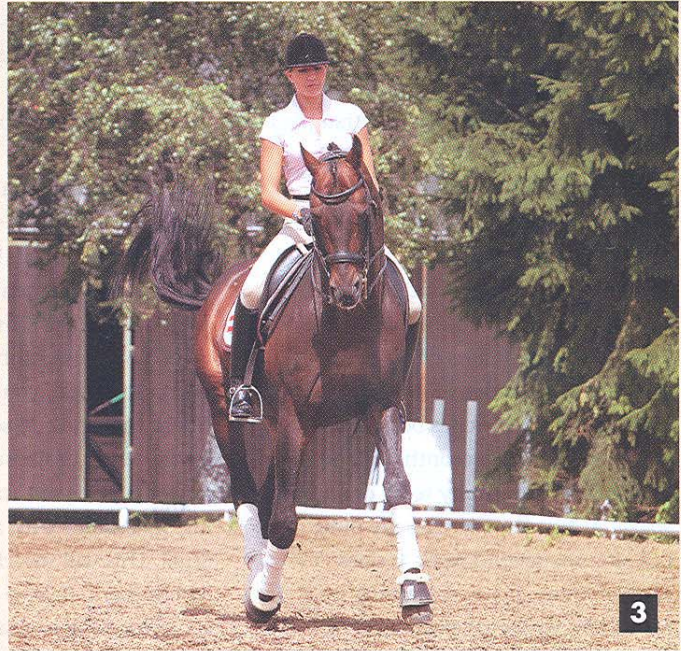
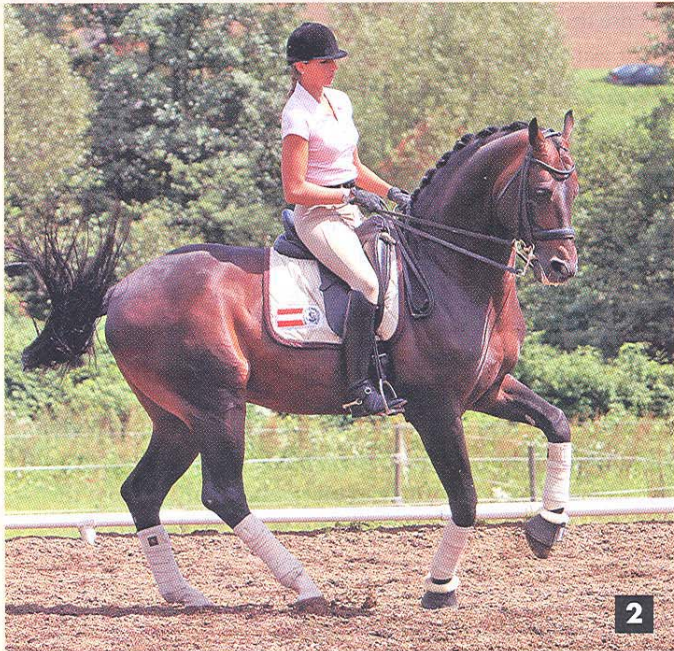
He is brilliant and light like a dancer. As a high level horse, he can do pirouettes, zigzags, piaffe and passage with no problem because he is strong enough in the back and hindquarters.

The old masters said you could safely put a full glass of water on a horse's croup in piaffe because the croup should not jump up and down. In piaffe, at the highest degree of collection, the horse lowers

the croup, and the hind legs lift only one hoof distance—or 10 centimeters—off the ground. In competition where the footing is too deep, the judges might not think there is enough activity, but 10 centimeters is actually considered the ideal. The horse in piaffe not only takes clear diagonal steps but he swings through his body with the correct degree of collection as evidenced by taking a minimum of 55

percent of his weight on the hindquarters.

It is common for advanced horses to try to take strides that are too big or too slow. Exercise 5 is an extension of Exercise 2. It will help your horse carry himself in the canter by working him between pirouette and medium paces on a circle. Exercise 6 is for the very advanced rider with a horse that is improving his transitions between piaffe and passage.



EXERCISE 6: TRANSITIONS TO IMPROVE PIAFFE

This exercise is for the experienced rider who is trying to improve his horse's transitions between passage and piaffe. Sometimes the horse goes in slow motion rather than actually passaging vigorously forward. The piaffe can easily cover too much ground with hindquarters that have become disengaged. A good exercise to maintain activity in a closed outline is to ask the horse for transitions between trot, stop, rein-back, trot, stop, rein-back, trot, stop, rein-back. I use the term "stop," because I do not mean to do a nice, square halt. Rather, I just want my horse to stop and back. Later, the rider can ask for piaffe, rein-back, piaffe, rein-back. This exercise causes the horse to sit more behind. I recommend the exercise only for advanced riders because it must be understood that piaffe and rein-back are never backward. They are always ridden forward.



Build Strength

Ideally, dressage builds the horse's muscles in the same way that human bodybuilding develops strength, until the work is easy. It takes two or three months before you can see the results of correct bodybuilding. For example, I have just started with my skiing exercises because I am going skiing in two months. I bend my knees when I brush my teeth or when I shave. At first the exercises are difficult, but after the second week, it doesn't hurt anymore. If you're training for a marathon, you don't push for 30 km (18.6 miles) in the beginning. Step-by-step you build condition until 30 km isn't too difficult. An experienced marathon runner might be able to run 45 km, so then he finds 42 km (26.2 miles) easy.

It's the same for the horse. You don't ask your horse for a counter canter if he can't do a correct true canter. If the horse can't do counter canter in less than a medium canter, you don't ask for a simple change. If you wait until you can collect the canter a bit more, then the change will be much easier. It's simple to make the work easy for the horse. Think like a horse and you will understand.

Horses with common collection problems—such as being wide behind or taking short steps without carrying weight behind—can be improved with strengthening. However, if you're a horseman, you are always on the lookout for situations

that might indicate a physical problem.

The horse can't talk, so you must feel for him. For example, if he always stands with his hind legs out behind him, he may have a problem in his back. Pay attention when you brush his back to see if he shows discomfort. If so, you can do the following: Check the saddle to see if your weight falls in the center of the saddle instead of too far back. Ride your warming up and cooling off sessions with a longer neck than usual. This will stretch the muscles and loosen them. Be sure the warm-up session is not too long so that he's still fresh when he gets to the real work. Do easy work for a few days. Give him a massage or call the veterinarian, but don't be too quick to give your horse injections. Think of what you would do if it were you.

Create Self-carriage

Self-carriage comes from the connection created by active hind legs that send energy through a swinging back into the rein contact and then back to the hind legs. Whether you have a very green horse or a very highly trained horse, you always want a soft contact that is like an elastic band.

Riders often misunderstand the term "light." It does not mean riding with loose reins. Your horse must be connected. If you give the rein, the horse should seek it and stretch. With a proper connection, you ride the whole horse, not part of the horse. The rider with a correct

connection controls the hindquarters and, therefore, controls the whole horse. The end result is a collected horse that bends his hocks, swings through his back and takes his weight back. If you know how to train the piaffe, passage and pirouette, it can only be the result of your ability to develop quality collection. The horse can't do those movements with elegance or harmony without the strengthening of the hindquarters in correct collection.

Manage Time

Take time but don't waste time. I remember talking with the late Herbert Rehbein about how long it takes to develop a horse. We agreed. It doesn't depend on the wish of the rider, but rather, it is the horse that tells the rider how much and how fast he can train. Of course, the trainer needs to know how to develop the horse and how to look for the signs. Otherwise the horse might get to be 15-years-old, and his rider would say, "The horse didn't tell me." Horses should do the right exercises at the right age. Children usually start the first grade as 6-year-olds. If a child gets to be 9 and he's still in the first grade, something is either wrong with the child or the teacher. He should be in the fourth grade at 9 unless there's a reason.


When you buy a very nice horse at the auction, you hope that correct training and time will make him, not just brilliant

and forward as he was at the auction, but also collected. Some horses are only for the small tour (through Prix St. Georges) because they have big movement and a limited ability to collect. You can train some horses quicker than others, but you must never forget that the horse decides the rate of progress, not the rider.

A Matter of Feel

The key to success for a rider is in the development of a good seat. The experienced rider doesn't sit *on* the horse, he sits *in* the horse and *feels* the horse. He has a feeling for the speed, the rhythm and the outline. He can feel his horse's feet, so he never has to look back to see if his horse has halted square. He also has a feeling for how much he can ask of his horse on a given day, which means he is willing to change his plans. If the canter felt lovely, and the simple changes were smooth yesterday, you may have planned to try the flying changes today. But if the canter feels awful today, you have to change the plan. Maybe you did a bit too much yesterday or, perhaps, the weather is too hot today. The horse is not a machine. I always feel that when I take one step back I can then, as a result, take two steps forward.

The horse is your partner, perhaps for as many as 20 years. He should love you not because you come to him with carrots but because you sit well and can communicate with your aids. That's a matter of coordination with your seat, your leg, weight and rein aids. The feeling rider never creates more speed with the leg and seat than he can control in the front. Likewise, he never uses so much hand in front that he compromises his horse's forwardness. These skills are evidence of the rider's feel.

The developing dressage rider has to follow his own path and not be a bad copy of someone else. He should watch many riders and look for different ways of thinking. There are many roads to Rome, and each rider has to develop his own feel and style so he can find the right road for himself. 

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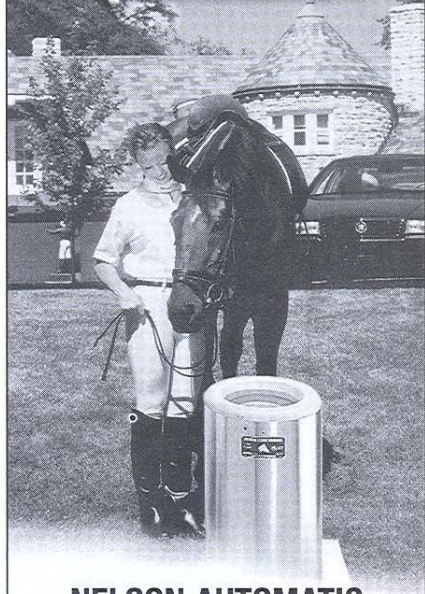
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