

Transitions/Balance & Motion

The best riders in the world, regardless of discipline, have one thing in common: They have a special feeling for balance. A dressage horse has a different balance from a racehorse or an event horse, but balance is the key to every equestrian sport. Achievement of balance is the greatest secret of riding.

The rider who has never experienced balance with his horse won't miss it. With a smile on his face, he is just happy to ride his horse. He's like the driver of an old car who isn't bothered when there is a noise in his car, because it's just one of many noises. On the other hand, the driver of a new Mercedes who hears a strange noise will rush to the garage to explain it to the mechanic. Similarly, if you know what it feels like to sit on a balanced, well-trained horse, it's a punishment to sit on an unbalanced, poorly-trained one.

Transitions are the ultimate exercise for training the horse to better balance and collection. By nature, the horse is balanced toward the forehand, so if you sit on your horse and let him move on long reins, 60 percent of his total weight is on the forehand. That's his natural balance, and there is nothing wrong with that. However, if you go forward to trot or canter, the horse goes more on the forehand, and we want to avoid that.

Transitions, half halts and other dressage exercises train the horse to change his balance in motion, bit by bit, from being 60 percent on the forehand to a 50/50 balance, and finally to a balance where more weight is carried on his hindquarters than on his forehand. This is the principle of improving balance and developing collection--the purpose of dressage.

Riding to a better balance requires quality transitions. Poor transitions that are on the forehand will make the horse worse by teaching exactly the opposite of what we want. Correctly ridden

transitions achieve three objectives: First, they help the horse to understand the meaning of the aids to go forward and come back. Second, they make him physically strong by building muscle. And finally, they develop the balance to allow the horse to carry more weight on his hindquarters--without losing the forward feeling. In this article, I will discuss those objectives and explain how to train correct transitions.

Transitions for Better Understanding

When people don't speak the same language, they often unconsciously start to speak louder. They somehow have the feeling they will be understood if they talk louder and louder. When communication doesn't work on the horse, riders often do the same thing. They kick and pull harder--somehow thinking the horse will understand better.

Initially, horse and rider speak different languages, and the young horse needs to be taught to understand the aids. The trainer must be a good enough rider to convey exact technical information to his unschooled horse by clarifying and refining the aids to go forward and come back. These are the aids for transitions and half halts that will balance and eventually collect the horse. In addition to promoting understanding, the rider also helps the horse develop concentration and discipline.

The rider of a trained horse only needs to give correct aids, and his horse will have a correct reaction because he understands the message. So the young horse needs a higher quality trainer than the schooled horse. This rider must teach the basic skills from which all other learning evolves. (See below, "The Balanced Rider.")

The best trainers have developed the important skill of feeling and recognizing the difference between a horse who does not

understand and one who does not accept or listen. Then that rider trains the dressage horse by building slowly on what the horse understands. In successful training, the horse might recognize 75 percent of his work, and 25 percent might be slightly new to him. He understands the basic principles, and then the rider makes the work interesting by varying it, so the work is difficult but not too difficult. The new work makes the horse curious and keeps his interest and concentration. In the transition work in this article, I will suggest variations in order to keep your horse curious and physically active.

From Canter to Trot

In the transition from canter to trot, the principle of preparation, waiting and final execution of the transition is exactly the same as in the trot-walk transition. The initial shortening of the canter stride--best done on a circle in training--prepares the horse for the transition to trot. Then you do not allow your horse to do the transition. You ask him to stay honest in the hand, and he must wait for your final aid so you can make those in-between steps into a gymnastic exercise that will improve his collected canter.

I make these transitions smooth by thinking about the speed of each gait. If your normal canter is seven miles per hour, and your normal trot is five miles per hour, then you want to slow down the canter speed to five miles per hour, which is a form of collection, before asking for the trot. Then the transition will be smooth because the horse is going exactly the same speed as the new gait.

If the horse breaks to trot too early, it means that he is not accepting the aids for slowing down the canter. Perhaps the shorter strides are too hard for him. If so, the waiting moment in the transition shouldn't last too long. Be pleased with steps that are only slightly shorter and then accept a trot that is a little bit

bigger than you want. In this case, you don't do what is ideal. You do what is possible for your horse. If on the other hand you think he is able to slow down the canter, then you need to get after your horse a little bit and insist on your collected canter.

The upward transition from trot to canter requires that the canter be the same speed as trot, so concentrate on making the first few steps of the canter come from the hind leg. They may be slightly more collected than he can do easily. As a result he will build up speed by himself and end with a more forward, jumping canter.

Transitions Based on Feelings

Transitions are all about feelings, so I have been intentionally vague in my description of the half halt aids because they are also done based on feelings. The half halt supports the balance of the horse in the same way that a tightrope walker uses his arms to keep his balance on the rope. He doesn't plan and decide to move his arms; rather he makes little movements to the left or the right in order to stay in the middle of the rope. That's exactly what we try to do between the hand and the leg with our little half halts. A little pressure on the rein brings the horse's weight more on his hindquarters and a little leg keeps him forward to the bridle. The experienced tightrope walker makes very little movements in the same way that the experienced rider uses very subtle half halts. The inexperienced athletes make their movements too big--which is the reason why they lose their balance.

So we can't exactly say what the aid for half halt is, but there is always that relationship between the leg and the hand, and how that relationship works is the secret of the rider. I want you, the reader/rider, to fill in the blanks with your own feelings that you have with your own horse. If you do five transitions from trot to walk, the support that you give your horse probably will be a little bit different each time. It depends on the degree of your horse's

schooling, his temperament, the circumstances of the moment and also his conformation. The horse is a living creature, so you won't find a button to push and have the same thing happen each time. The main point is the feeling you have, and it is impossible to explain feelings or show them in a photograph.

Once you and your horse get the feeling for the transitions, then you start to make them at an exact letter as the judge would like to see it in the test. It should be noted that the method of doing transitions described in this article is from the perspective of the rider and trainer. If a judge were to do an article about transitions, it would have a totally different approach because the judge is always looking for the final result. If the test asks you to do a transition from trot to walk in the middle of the short side, there is no judge who would be happy if you slow down as I have suggested in this article. He wants to see the trot and then a crisp, clear transition to walk at the letter--without any in-between collected steps. Only when the horse is very well trained and over the back can he perform the transition as the judge wants to see it. This is the last stage in the training of transitions. The development of accuracy is one step farther in the quality, but the rider who always makes it a priority easily loses the quality and correct feeling.

Develop Balance, Collection & Quality

In that moment of waiting and gymnastic improvement, the horse's back is ideally supple and his neck is relaxed so the energy from his hindquarters can go over his back, through his neck and make honest contact with the rider's hands. Then the half halt aids you give with your hands bring the energy back to the hind leg. The energy must not stop with a stiff neck.

Transitions will be useful only when this quality of recycling the energy is working. Without this quality, the transitions are nothing more than using the hand as a brake and using the leg as an accelerator as if the horse were only a means of transportation.

You could do poor transitions hundreds or thousands of times and you would still have the same horse. He might be obedient, but the gymnastic result wouldn't be there.

On the other hand, when that driving and recycling becomes a sophisticated, gymnastic exercise, you still feel as if your horse is able to go forward or come back whenever you wish, and you get a bouncy, dancing, powerful feeling from his back. There is activity not only in your horse's hind legs but also in his whole hindquarters. He takes the same energy that came from the forward activity and puts it in an upright movement that is the beginning of extraordinary collection, which leads to piaffe, passage and pirouette.

Piaffe & Passage

The rider who has trained transitions according to this philosophy has already done the basic training for piaffe and passage. One doesn't just wake up one morning and say, "I think I'll do piaffe and passage today." The experienced rider recognizes the signs when these movements appear on their own. I call that bouncy, upright feeling "the second trot." This second trot is a direct gymnastic result of the transition exercises, and it is the first sign that we can start training the short steps--or half steps--that serve as an introduction to piaffe. When the experienced rider feels that second trot, he says, "Wow! This tells me that my horse is able to do a bit more carrying with the hind legs."

Normally, the horse sequentially learns the short steps first, then the forward-moving piaffe, then the strong piaffe and then, with the same technical support, we ride the horse forward into the passage. Occasionally, if this sequence is difficult for the horse or if he becomes too nervous, we can train the passage first, then collect it to the second trot and then shorten it even more in the direction of piaffe steps.

Cautions & Precautions

In your riding, you may get a variety of reactions from your horse, and you'll want to respond accordingly.

1. Transition a hollow horse on circles. Riders of horses that are inclined to become hollow during transitions would do well to practice transitions on a circle. When the horse is hollow, the rider completely loses his influence over the horse's hind legs. A 10- to 20-meter circle will give the rider more control over the result of his driving aids.

2. Make canter-trot transitions easier. Horses that have been trained to do the transition from canter to walk may try to avoid the canter-trot transition. In this case, it would help to do the canter-trot-canter transitions on a circle because you can control the collection more easily than on a straight line.

3. Pay attention to the walk. If the rider is very successful in building up the activity in the trot, there is the danger that the horse will still be slightly tense when he goes to the walk, which may disturb the rhythm and the quality of the walk. The rider must pay attention to the walk after the transition and take enough time to do a relaxed, clear walk with enough freedom in the neck before he does the upward transition.

4. Relax the horse's muscles often. When a rider does the transitions well, he demands a certain amount of physical strength from the horse. He needs to remember to relax his horse in walk often, or ask for different exercises that will give his muscles a rest. Perhaps your horse is able to do five or 10 transitions, but then he starts to struggle.

You probably don't have to stop transition work for the day, but you may need to rest for a few moments and come back to the work later. On the other hand, if your horse never gets tired, he will never get stronger. It takes experience on the part of the rider to recognize the fine line between exercising too much and not enough.

5. Control the horse's elasticity. Correct transitions help to develop a very elastic horse, but elasticity can be used against the rider as a means to evade the influence of the aids. Do not think that a horse uses all of his good qualities to please the rider. Most of the time, the horse would prefer to use elasticity to make his own life easier--to escape the discipline that the rider wants. Elasticity, when it is present either by nature or from training, must be controlled. When the rider can control his horse's neck and head position, the horse cannot use his elasticity against the rider. In fact, when the rider controls both the rhythm and the position of his horse, he controls the balance of the whole horse.

6. Demand prompt transitions. We want the horse to have a prompt forward reaction to the leg. I often say that the riders who work the hardest have the laziest horses. They make them lazy because they are trying to do the work for them. They make the horse used to the legs in the same way that he has become used to the girth. Horses are usually very sensitive. When the rider gives a message with his leg, it will be heard if the leg is quiet when the rider is not giving a message.

7. Contain the front end. On the other hand, the activity you create in the hind legs always has to be controlled in the front. Some riders use too much of a driving leg and make their horses too forward. The horse that is running away makes his body, including his topline, stiff--which makes it impossible for him to bring his hind legs under. The more the rider pushes, the more

the hind legs go the wrong way. Instead of carrying, they push. Then the rider is inclined to pull and upset the horse in the mouth. This horse may become scared because he feels that he is in an impossible position. There always must be a relation between whatever the rider asks for with his legs (energy, collection, extension, speed .) and the amount he is able to control in the front. That relationship always must be there.

8. Avoid over-collecting. It is possible for a horse to collect too much. Some horses take too much weight on the hind legs, and they can't connect it to the contact of the hands anymore. The horse in this situation is behind the leg; he gets hotter and hotter and can blow up like a bomb. These are the horses that rear or throw themselves sideways because they have to go somewhere.

9. Support rebalancing.. Some horses evade the task of rebalancing by diving into the rider's hands and becoming heavy. Most of the time it is because they are out of balance in that moment and are running away, tense in the topline and unable to engage. Then the rider feels forced to pull or hang on the rein. In so doing, he blocks his horse in the back and the hind leg, making it impossible for his horse to comply--even if he understands and wants to. Often the rider can make a heavy horse slightly rounder in the neck--which may relax his whole topline and make it easier for half halts to come through. This problem also can be caused by a lack of support from the rider at the moment when the horse really needs help and support in finding his new rhythm. The rider must ride during the transitions and be careful not to abandon his horse. Instead of pulling and then losing the contact, the rider can ask for a downward transition with a few short half halts that are supported with a little leg and a supple seat. If the horse is not listening to the half halts, the rider can make a halt, let him relax in the halt and try again.

10. Think forward. Another horse may evade by dropping the contact in the transition--or coming behind the bit--in which case the rider must refresh his horse's forward desire.

In principle, you can use this system to improve a horse of any quality. If you have the ambition to be a great competition rider and you invest this training into a horse that has quality by nature, he can become a super horse. If you start with a normal horse, you will enjoy the result of your training, but even after a great deal of progress, he may not be as good as a horse who has that quality by nature. That situation can be disappointing when you are competing, but you can't blame the judge or the trainer or yourself because everyone probably is doing a great job. And you can't blame your horse for what Mother Nature has dealt him. Regardless of a horse's degree of talent, the judge easily notices the correct training one way or another. If you train well, you make an average horse into a good horse, and a good horse into a better horse and a better horse into a super horse.

The Balanced Rider

Riding a well-trained, balanced horse is much easier than riding a poorly trained or untrained horse, so a correct schoolmaster is a tremendous support for the beginning rider who is trying to develop an independent seat. The correctly trained horse gives his rider correct feelings from the beginning. Then the rider can teach that feeling to his next horse. Riders who learn from schooled horses again and again become very good riders.

I have heard people say that you become a good rider when you can ride bad or difficult horses. This is the worst possible advice, but perhaps it is said to encourage a rider who has bad feelings on horses so that he won't give up. A rider like this starts by struggling with an untrained animal that bucks or has a stiff back and a hard mouth. When this incorrect feeling is the rider's first

information, it will be hard for him to acquire a correct feel later, just as it would be hard to acquire a musical ear if one had to play an untuned piano.

When the rider starts with the wrong information, he may build up some character, but it takes years to change his bad habits. This rider knows that he doesn't like what he feels, but he doesn't know what he's looking for.

When the rider has the correct information and feelings from the beginning, then he can build on that. Once he learns to keep his balance with a schoolmaster, he can maintain it when a young horse loses balance in a difficult situation. This rider is confident enough in the correct feel that he can support his horse and lead him back to a balanced position.

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