

Planning a Practice Ride

5 – 10 min. WALK WORK

Walk warm up. Start on a long rein and slowly take up light contact. Work loops of the track, 10m & 15m circles, turns down the center line, leg yielding. Work should develop rhythm & relaxation. Ensure the walk is forward & marching without losing the clear 4 beat rhythm.

10 min. TROT & CANTER WARM-UP

Work many large circles, loops, transitions & changes of bend/rein. Encourage forward, active gaits. Work on developing rhythm, relaxation & connection. Ensure that the horse is pushing forward from the hindquarters. Do not fuss with the contact; work to develop an elastic, light feel on the reins. You want to feel the horse stretching forward into the contact, not the rider pulling back on the reins.

10 min. 1st WORK

Improve upon something your working on in your lessons that you already do well. Possible exercises include trot - halt transitions, smaller circles, lengthen/shorten, etc. Ensure that you maintain rhythm, relaxation, connection as you introduce more difficult work. Exercises should help to improve impulsion and straightness.

10 min. 2nd WORK

Work on exercises that you are still finding challenging in your lessons. Possible topics include walk-canter transitions, leg yielding, 15m circles in canter, etc. The more challenging the exercise, the more difficult it will be to maintain rhythm, relaxation and connection. Work is only productive if you maintain these principles. Don't aim for perfection in one ride. Aim to get a few steps of proper leg yielding, or one 10m circle in trot; don't keep asking for more if it's only getting worse. If it starts to fall apart and you've lost the basics principles, go back to a simpler exercise before attempting something more challenging again

5 – 10min. COOL DOWN

You always want to finish on a positive note. If you and your horse struggled during your 2nd work, ride a simple exercise you can do well before you end your ride. As a reward for their hard work, allow your horse to stretch down long and low, slipping the reins through your fingers and work some circles on both reins. Long & low work helps to stretch and relax the horses back muscles. Ensure their rhythm stays slow, regular and relaxed. Finish with a few minutes of walk on a loose rein.

Practice Ride Dos & Don'ts!

DOS

- DO have specific exercises planned. You need to be able to ride transitions and school figures at specific points in the ring.
- DO have the exercises you work in your warm-up, 1st work and 2nd work relate. i.e. You work 20m circles in your warm up, 15m circles in trot in your 1st work and 10m circles in trot in your 2nd work.
- DO be prepared to improvise or change your plan if things aren't going well.
- DO practice sitting trot and no-stirrup work but NOT until your horse's back muscles are warmed up (15 – 20min into your ride)
- DO aim to ride at least 100 transitions per ride. That's nearly 2 per minute! Transitions (both between & within the gaits) help to increase your horse's suppleness, develop connection & engagement and keeps your horse focused.



This horse may look fancy at first glance, but don't let the dramatic front leg extension fool you! This horse's hind end is trailing behind, his back is hollowing and he is carrying too much weight on the forehand. The rider has pulled his head in by force and the horse is incorrectly bending at the 3rd vertebrae instead of at the pole. This horse is also over bent, with the nose behind the vertical.

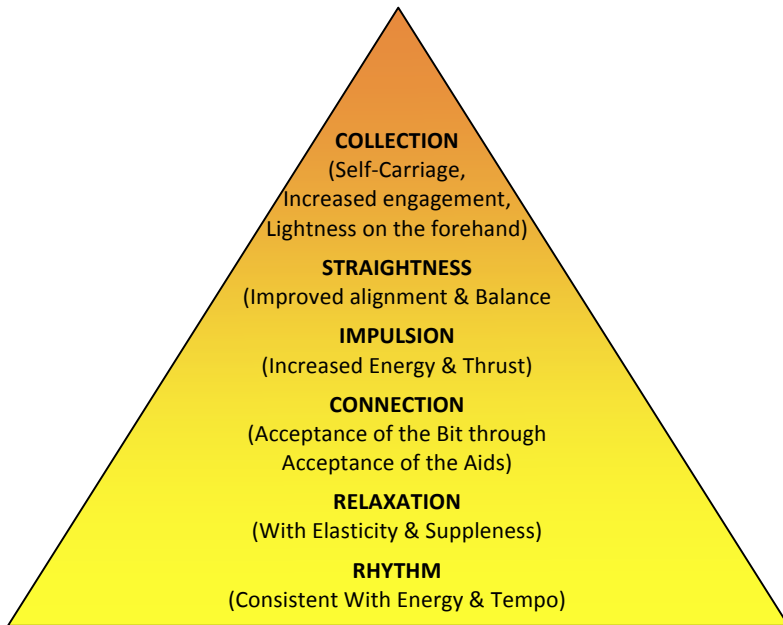


This horse is carrying himself very well. His hindquarters are engaged (hocks flexed and hindquarters carrying more weight). This lowers the hind end which creates a light forehand. He is round over his back and his neck is raised from the wither. His frame is correct, with his poll as the highest point and his nose just slightly in front of the vertical.

DON'TS

- DON'T forget that 45 minutes of work independently is much more intense than a one hour group lesson. If feel your horse getting tired or losing focus, take a break. Just because you're allowed to ride for 45 minutes doesn't mean you have to. If you've accomplished good work, don't keep going until it falls apart, end on a positive note. An overworked and sour horse will not help your show season.
- DON'T run your dressage tests over and over. Practice each movement individually with focus on the movements and transitions you struggle with. If you run through the test too many times, horses will start to anticipate the transitions and may do them before you want them too!
- DON'T try to pull your horse's head into a false frame. Remember, to truly have your horse "in a frame" or "on the bit" they must be in front of your leg, pushing from behind, rounding up through their back and moving forward into a soft and elastic contact. Lots of bending exercises and transitions, if ridden properly, will put your horse into a frame without even trying!

Dressage Training Pyramid



Rhythm: “Rhythm is the term used for the characteristic sequence of footfalls and timing of a pure walk, pure trot and pure canter. The rhythm should be expressed with energy and in a suitable tempo with the horse remaining in balance appropriate to his training.” (from the USFD definition)

Relaxation: Relaxation is the quality dressage tests refer to when it states “that the horse’s muscles are supple and loose.” “Relaxation refers to the horse’s mental

state (calmness without anxiety or nervousness”, as well as his physical state (the absence of negative muscular tension. Usually, the mental and physical states go hand-in-hand. The horse learns to accept the influence of the rider without becoming tense. He moves with elasticity and a supple swinging back, allowing the rider to bend him laterally (side to side) as well as longitudinally (lengthen and shorten his frame).”

Connection: When the horse is accepting the rider’s hands, seat, and legs, it is said that he is offering good contact. Many people mistake contact for the horse being on the bit. That is not necessarily true and encourages riding with the hands alone. A horse moving under a rider is in contact with his seat, legs, and hands. Good contact is when the horse accepts and responds to seat and leg aids while maintaining a round outline with a mouth that is relaxed and accepting the bit. You can point out good contact when the horse’s back is raised, his quarters engaged, his poll the highest point, his jaw relaxed, and his nose a hint in front of the vertical (which is also a sign of good riding and training).

Impulsion: Free-flowing energy initiated by the rider, causing the horse’s back to swing, his quarters to engage, and his forelegs to articulate is impulsion. Good impulsion is mirrored through a horse that appears to have an innate desire to go forward with active, lively steps. How far the horse steps underneath his barrel and how much he engages his hocks are both measures of impulsion. Basic training regulates the horse’s engine so that impulsion becomes second nature to the horse and the rider does not have to push all the time.

Straightness: Horses are naturally crooked, so straightening them is the job of the rider/trainer. For example, many horses canter with their quarters slightly in. Crookedness is caused by uneven lateral suppleness, i.e. one side stiffer than the other, and a weaker hind leg. Good training focuses on developing both sides and hind legs of the horse equally, which eventually leads to absolute straightness. A horse is truly straight when the hind foot steps in the line of the front foot (or sometimes a little deeper to the inside in the event of collection).

Collection: The pinnacle of the Training Pyramid, collection is the ultimate goal for the dressage horse. When all the previous elements are present, collection just happens! Collection involves the lowering of the croup, lightness of the forehand, and shorter and higher steps. Collection is possible in the walk, trot and canter, and is achieved by collecting exercises and refined by little half-halts. A rider on a horse doing a great collected canter feels as though he/she can let go and the horse would still maintain perfect rhythm and self-carriage without any interference from the rider.