



UNDERSTANDING THE SCALE OF TRAINING - PART 6: BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

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In this final article in this six-part series looking into the scale of training, we will be decoding the idea of "Collection". Often seen as an apex superstate that only top-level horse and rider combinations can attain. When you look into the original German term "Versammlung" the translation falls short of the true meaning behind the term. In the original German it translates into meeting, assembly or gathering. This develops us beyond what most people think collection means; short, tight and slow. One of the major issues that we have to counteract training horses is their natural inclination to be "front-wheel drive". In their natural state horses spend a significant amount of time operating grazing behaviours; head down slowly mooching around. This head posture and movement pattern naturally significantly loads the forelegs rather than what we seek in a performance setting. Fortunately, horses are very good at learning if they are given the correct circumstances.

SEESAW

Training collection is chiefly about shifting the horse's centre of gravity back more towards the hindquarters. First, we need to set aside the fear of the horse being "above the bit". The modern sensationalist obsession with having horses over round and extravagant through the forelegs has been detrimental both to the purity of dressage training and horse welfare in kind. Moving towards more traditional training principles gives a great opportunity to progress training effectively. Shifting the weight onto the hindquarters is a delicate dynamic balance. As discussed in previous articles the horse's thoracic sling allows flexibility of the ribcage between the two forelegs. When spooked by something they draw themselves up to their maximal height by lifting their ribcage and backbone up through their shoulder blades. This lifting response is what we are trying to target in developing collection. In our centre we tend to use a collar (neck-strap), applying pressure to the collar will encourage horses to lift through the sternum. However, it takes a lot of effort through the deep muscles to elicit this response. As they lift through the sternum their weight transfers into the hindquarters, something like a well controlled "wheelie" on a bicycle. Working with an experienced coach who understands targeting responses and the biomechanics can be very helpful.



Courtesy of Louise O'Brien

SELF CARRIAGE

One of the elements which is often conspicuous by its absence in the over sensationalised equestrian sports is self carriage. With our sport more in the public eye, our social licence is under threat. How the public perceive us is an essential component to the future of the sport. Self carriage is the embodiment of good training and is one of the best ways to demonstrate one of the precepts of FEI sport; "the Happy Athlete". Self carriage is essentially equine cruise control, the horse should be able to hold their pace and balance without the intervention of the rider. One of the keys to developing self carriage is good timing of the release of pressure. It is always worth remembering that pressure motivates and release trains. As the horse learns to transfer balance the rider needs to avoid holding them up. Constantly testing the release of pressure will really allow true evaluation of how far along the training road your horse is. Even though we are discussing collection, self carriage is a critical component of training at every level, especially when training new and complex skills.

PRACTICE MAKES PERMANENT

Once you have installed the basic seesaw centre of gravity shift and started to introduce self carriage as a matter of course in your training you then need to practice the core training skills as a matter of course. The late renowned German Dressage Master Dr. Rainer Klimke was well known for his practice of the phases of training. His attitude was that every horse should practice a little bit of what is expected in every session at a level that is suitable for their development. In a sense, although the training scale is seen as a linear progression with horses at preliminary level at the bottom and those at Grand Prix at the top it is in fact not that simple. Bringing all the elements together is a juggling act that never ends. Only by connecting all the links in the chain will the true actualisation of a horse's potential be possible. While the scale of training is by no means a perfect system it certainly gives an evaluation framework, especially when used in conjunction with the shaping scale; Basic attempt,

Obedience, Rhythm, Straightness and Proof. With this combination, nearly any skill can be easily trained. For anyone at any level an understanding of how to apply the training scale will offer a greater opportunity to understand your dressage scores at the very least and in the best case to develop your understanding of the biomechanics requirements of optimal horse movement.

