



UNDERSTANDING THE SCALE OF TRAINING - PART 4: POWER IN THE ENGINE

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In this fourth article looking on the scale of training, we are going to look at the mystery that is "Impulsion". Impulsion is one of the aspects that causes the most confusion among riders, trainers and coaches. If you ask twenty different coaches to define it you will probably get about thirty plus conflicting answers. Some of the terms commonly used to define impulsion are; "energy from behind", "Push" or "Carrying power". While none of these terms are necessarily wrong they don't offer the full useable picture. Like in the other articles it makes sense to look to the original German term "**schwung**" to start to understand the full meaning. When you translate schwung a number of direct translations appear; Swing, Vitality, Liveliness, Flourish and Momentum. Above all understanding Impulsion is to understand the nature of energy movement patterns in our equine partners.

ENERGY FROM THE HORSE

One of the first aspects to think about is the horse's natural swing moving forward. In previous articles, I have discussed the difference between leg movers and body movers. Leg movers being horses who have lost their natural body movement pattern, where the legs move in an over extravagant way at the expense of the horse's central core movement. The primary stage of developing impulsion is allowing the horse's natural forward swing to move forward through their body. Much of the time riders only think about pushing the horse forward in their urge to develop impulsion. This pushing process usually results in both blocking the horse's natural movement and negatively affecting their way of going. The horse's natural way of going should always form the basis of our interactions. Without pure quality paces coupled with the horse's acceptance of the ride, there will be no advantage to adding energy to the horse. It is also worth mentioning that paces with a moment of suspension, where all feet are off the ground simultaneously, naturally lend themselves to developing impulsion (trot and canter)

ENERGY FROM THE RIDER

One of the main aspects trainers, coaches and riders must remember is that horses do not understand what we are asking. When I started one of my horses with flying changes I engaged the help of the change queen Pammy Hutton FBHS, she had a clear insight into this fact. She explained that our role is to create the circumstances for the horse to offer the desired response. Developing energy without pushing the horse onto the forehand is the key challenge. As we put more energy into the horse's movement pattern understanding the biomechanics of how the horse works. The goal is to add liveliness, vitality and spring to the moment of suspension. The longer this moment lasts the greater the availability of energy.

AVAILABLE ENERGY

One of the big challenges we will discuss in detail in the next article is straightness, the next scale. However, there is some relevant thought required here to the anatomy of the horse's shoulder. Often you will hear it said; "he's running onto the shoulder" or "he's on the forehand" however what we need to think of here is why and specifically why is that relevant to impulsion? Unlike humans, horses have no collar bone which allows their rib cage a huge range of movement both laterally and vertically in the thoracic sling. For horses who have not been offered the roadmap to cope with the weight of the rider and added energy, this can turn the horse into a snowplough or car trying to turn on ice. To make energy truly available riders have to guide the energy through the shoulders without laterally bulging. Lateral bulging or **losing the shoulder** is often a method horses use when speed is not fully under stimulus control. In a sense, the energy gets stuck at the shoulder and can't get out so deviates.

The other issue is horses who are lacking proportional response to the driving aids. These horses either shoot forward (running away) or don't respond adequately to the aids. In either case, transitions are the solution. World-renowned dressage trainer Carl Hester FBHS often extolles the importance of training horses to the middle. The over reactive (run away) horse has to habituate to the leg while the under reactive (lazy) horse has to sensitise to the aid.

The underlying message we should all be aware of is that working towards the middle ground is the role of every rider. You can have all the energy in the world but if it is not **available energy** you don't really have it at all! I often compare a horse jumping a fence to a horse rearing. Both are the same action, however, one is available pushing power while the other is pushing away power. Incremental training where the horse leads, telling the rider what he can cope with is the most productive sustainable solution.

