

Setting Goals and Planning Your Work to Train a Horse

by Paul Kathen

Plan your work and work your plan. Businesses have taught this advice to their employees for many years. It is also a very good approach to training your horse. To know this concept and to recognize its value is one thing; to effectively implement it is, however, quite another.

Let us, just as an illustration, assume you plan a trip by car from Houston, Texas to Vail, Colorado next Christmas. Of course you would not even attempt planning such a trip unless you will be in Houston at that time, you can find Vail on the map, you know how to drive a car, and you are aware of the conditions you might encounter driving in the mountains in winter. If you cannot answer yes to all of these conditions, I suggest you fly.

This example shows the very simplest form of planning. You have a start, a finish, and very predictable conditions. By comparison, planning to train a horse is more like preparing for a trip around the world. There are so many situations you cannot predict and plan for that must be dealt with on the spot as they occur. Therefore, quick thinking and flexibility are more valuable than rigid planning no matter how analytically it was done. When the trip becomes too long, or conditions are subject to change at any moment, or both, then planning turns into goal setting.

Let us assume you are an experienced rider and you have this wonderful dressage prospect. He is four years old, looks all athlete, moves like a dream, and has a great mind. When asked how far you would like (expect) him to go, do not say, "As far as I can take him." Instead say, "My goal for him is Grand Prix." You are not boasting. You are just stating a goal. There is the possibility that you may not reach it, but you feel your horse is capable of it, and so are you! If your horse is thirteen years old and struggling at second level and you say, "Grand Prix," you are not boasting either. You are simply out of touch with reality.

It takes about six years for a horse with the necessary talent and attitude to make it to Grand Prix. That adds up to about fourteen hundred to sixteen hundred training sessions. It is impossible to plan that many rides in advance, and even if you could, you would probably have to start revising your plan after the second ride. You are working with a living, feeling animal that has a mind of its own and did not sign a contract to behave according to your expectations. Your long range plans therefore must be stated in general terms. They act as guidelines and motivators to stay on course. They also remind you to avoid shortcuts and not to ignore problems. While these problems may not matter much to you at the time, the experienced rider knows that you will be confronted with the same problems later in your work, at which time they may be more difficult to deal with than they are now.

Here is the good news. You are not the first person to train a horse! Many others have done it before and left us their thoughts and experiences by which to be guided. The best example is the *Training Pyramid*. This system to train horses in the first two years of work is the result of thirty years of the German Cavalry schools preparing their remounts for work on the parade grounds as well as the battlefield. During these two years they trained their horses from the very start to a level of work comparable to today's second level in dressage. The *Training Pyramid* was crystallized in the *Training Manual* –

HDv12. You can look at the six words that form the *Pyramid* as the headings of chapters in that manual. They are *Rhythm*, *Relaxation*, *Connection*, *Impulsion*, *Straightness*, and *Collection*. I mentioned earlier that the longer range goals must be stated in general terms. Look at these words. Other than *Rhythm*, they are all general and allow for a wide range of degrees. For instance, the *Collection* of a second level horse is much less than the *Collection* of a Grand Prix horse. The progression of balance, strength, and obedience of your horse is what training is really all about. You already know that, and this is about planning, so let us return to that.

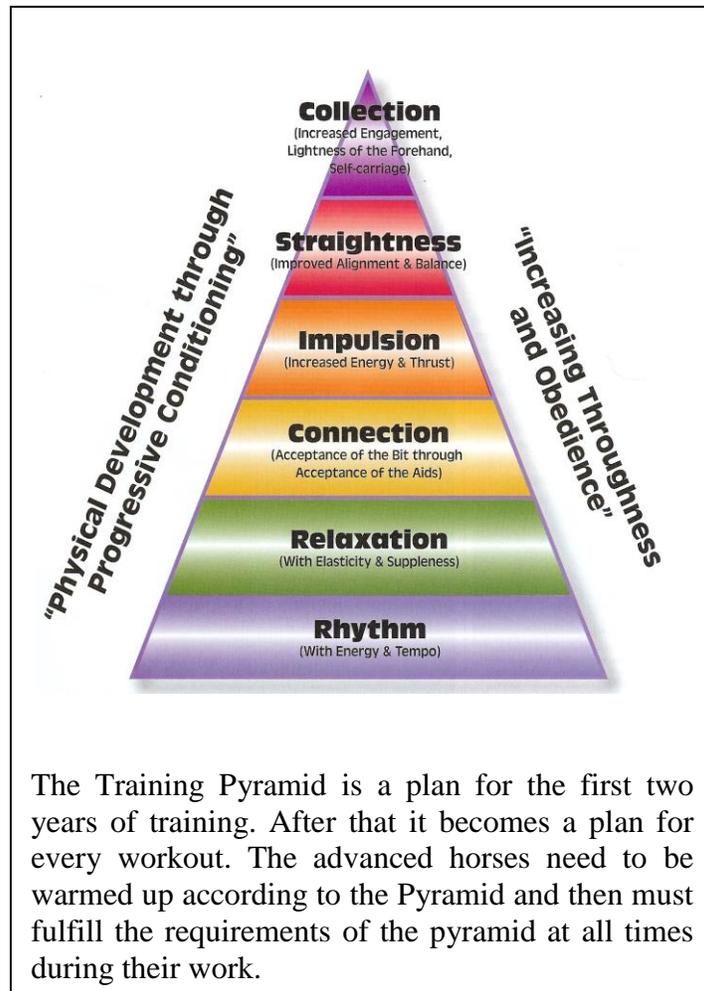
Your ultimate goal is Grand Prix. Fulfilling the requirements of the *Training Pyramid* is your halfway point.

Up to here, every horse, regardless of its specialty, should follow the same line of work. The dressage specialists are now starting at third level.

At this point I would like to congratulate the persons writing the new tests. At least in my judgment they have finally written tests that reflect the progress of training in the dressage horse. In the shows we judge the horse's ability and quality of training by observing them performing exercises that the trainer must use correctly to move the horse along in its development. Let me say that again. What we produce to the judges is a short segment of our work at home with this horse. The judge then scores that performance against what it ideally does look like. The reason I digress into showing and judging is my belief that your score must be a true reflection of the degree of correctness of your work. Only correctly executed exercises will improve your horse!

Look at training level test one. All you are asked to show is that your horse has found its balance under you, moves rhythmically and with relaxed muscles, is obedient to your aids, and is through enough to execute transitions up and down in all gaits without tension or loss of balance.

Connected, balanced, and supple is the short version for the definition of *throughness*. Like strength, coordination, and the horse's ability to focus on its work, *throughness* is also progressive. The reason I give *throughness* special attention here is



that it is one of the conditions in training without which nothing else works. By looking at the *Training Pyramid* and at the demands of training level you see that your horse must satisfy steps one to three in order to do well. First level adds the demand for impulsion (lengthenings) and a degree of straightness (ten meter circles). At second level we add collection (simple changes, counter canter, shoulder in). Then there are the medium gaits. Remember we asked for impulsion at first level (lengthening), now we need to step that up to a medium gait. Everything is progressive – nothing is ever finished because the next level demands more until you reach Grand Prix.

You may have noticed that in developing a training plan for your horse we are moving from the top down and from very general to more and more specific. Let me remind you how it went so far: We started with the ultimate goal (Grand Prix) then we moved to fulfilling the requirements of the Training Pyramid (end of second level). The next smaller step was preparing your horse for tests of the various levels starting with training level. This brings us to our daily work.

Here a distinction must be made between the green horse (first half year, at three to five days of work) and the mature horse. The green horse is weak in its topline and therefore cannot carry its rider for more than thirty minutes at a time. After that it should have developed enough strength and found its balance under the rider to extend that time. So in order to plan my work with the green horse I walk for ten to fifteen minutes, trot and canter for ten to fifteen minutes, then walk him cool. With the mature horse I condense the thirty minutes of work for the green horse into a fifteen to twenty minute warm-up, work for twenty minutes, and walk him cool.

To avoid boredom and the stress of drilling, it is wise to vary the work from day to day. This is an example of a five day work week:

One day of longing – to observe and strengthen.

Two days of working in the arena.

One day of working outside.

One day having a play day under saddle (trail riding, cavalettis, jumping, etc).

The progressiveness of training also applies to the amount of work. How much the horse can and should do is your judgment. Let yourself be guided by compassion for the horse and the need for progress in your training.

You must determine where your horse is in its training in order to make this plan work for you. That is your starting point. Then you must judge how far your horse can progress realistically with you as his trainer. That is your ultimate goal. Determine your halfway point, shorter goals, and your work week. Now write it all down!

After one week check your actual work against what you planned to do. I hope they match. If not, you need to change your plan or your work. Either way, this planning your work and then working your plan will give you a better awareness of accomplishment and a greater pride in your work.