

Exercises, Their Purpose and Execution, Part 4  
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Every horse used for riding should be trained at least through a small degree of collection. It is just simply the wise thing to do because it makes a ride safer, more comfortable, and also preserves the health of the horse's limbs and back. Dressage riders, however, need to collect their horses to a greater extent as they progress through the levels. It is quite often the horse's inability to collect further that limits its progress. Frequently, however, it is the rider's limits as a trainer that proves to be the stumbling block. Collection is a result of the horse's ability to carry a larger amount of its weight on its hind legs without stiffening them. This is important to consider because you can put all of the weight on the legs while they are held stiff and not increase their strength for future work. Yet again, that is the main reason for your efforts; you want to strengthen the hindquarters so that they can carry more of the weight over a longer period of time. The joints of the front legs are straight while bearing weight and that is why they are subject to wear by heavy loads. The hindquarter joints are bent and, therefore, protected by the muscles that operate them. We must strengthen these muscles in order to be able to direct more weight toward them.

This tells me that in order to ask my horse to work in collection it must already be prepared for the work. The horse must have its hindquarters strengthened to be able to accept the extra weight they are asked to carry. Most of the suppling exercises and all of the exercises to create impulsion also contain within them a demand for a stronger use of the motor and in this way already activate the hind leg to work a bit farther under the weight of the horse; thus they learn to carry and not just push. This shows the genius of the training pyramid as well as its danger. Everything is fluid and often overlapping. At the same time it is very rigid and requires a great deal of discipline. This is not a contradiction but rather a reflection of the nature of the horse and its training. As long as we stay within the limits of the horse's ability at the time, most horses will stay focused and supple. Once we push beyond it, however, we encounter tension and resistance.

Stepping outside the box of the pyramid is, in my opinion, at times helpful for a sensitive and experienced trainer. It is acceptable, however, only if it is temporary and coupled with an instant return to the box at precisely the point where she left it to solve a problem. This sidestep is limited to facilitate the solution of a problem, not to act as a shortcut in the training of a horse. Our breeders produce horses that seem to be born in a third level frame with athletic ability and correct attitude galore. Many trainers seem to use this gift to shorten the time of training, not to raise the level of performance at the end of the training. Why else is it that we see so few of the spectacular youngsters at the top of their sport when they are adults?

Only very few experienced and sensitive trainers could teach a horse to collect without the use of exercises designed for that purpose. When you watch such a trainer schooling a horse to collect, you will notice that she is constantly using collecting exercises to help her with that task. She knows that the exercises help her to overcome the horse's natural resistance to collecting. In enumerating the exercises I want to again add some aids like the half-halt to that list. The half-halt with all its variations is such an important tool that it has been the subject of many articles and entire chapters in books with authors proclaiming it impossible to do justice to all the various

situations in which the half-halt would be the solution. In my mind it is also the most misunderstood concept in riding, and yet we cannot effectively ride without the use of it.

In this article my goal is to explain the purposes of exercises and their correct use to make sure they do achieve that purpose. I believe we cannot ride any of the exercises without the use of half-halts. At this point let us engage in a brief review of the teaching of the aids to a horse.

Lightness and invisibility of the aids are the main goals of our training the aids to the horse, along of course, with obedience. We also know that we cannot expect from our horse what we do not adhere to ourselves. If we want him to be light, we must be light. If we want the aids to be invisible, we must be still in the saddle. If we want him to be obedient, we must correct every disobedience from the horse regardless of whether it was willful or the result of misunderstanding. We cannot, of course, correct the horse when the mistake was ours, like asking for more than he can do at the time. Such consistent behavior on our part will make the horse more sensitive and more quick and precise in his reaction to the aids. This increased sensitivity means also less need for strength in the aids. That in turn allows us to be less obvious in our application of the aids. So, it is consistency in our application of the aids and consistency in our expectation of the horse's reaction that will at first teach our horse to understand the aids and then allow us to become light in their application.

This understanding of the system of communication by the horse is the first of the three conditions we must fulfill before we can think about collecting our horse beyond mere balancing it under the rider. Much more difficult and time consuming to achieve is the next condition. We must instill in our horse the desire to please and a trust in his rider great enough for him to obey, even if it is demanding on his body to the point of being painful. In case you think I am being overly dramatic, do yourself a favor and start walking with your knees bent at all times. Watch yourself as to how long it takes for you to take a break and straighten the knees for just a step or two. This is the equivalent of asking your horse to accept more weight on his hind legs without stiffening in the joints. Remember, you know and understand why you are walking unnaturally with your knees bent but the horse has no idea why he is expected to move with his weight distributed in an unnatural way.

Let me emphasize again that I am not trying to turn you into, "Do not ask anything difficult of your horse because it is hard on him," riders. I just want you to be aware that resistance is often the result of fatigue, not laziness. I think it is unfortunate not to get everything out of your horse but I believe that understanding and a sense of fairness will help you more towards reaching that goal than being too demanding and tough.

The third prerequisite is to always maintain your horse's physical condition a little bit ahead of the demands made on his strength and agility. Should you violate this aspect of preparation, your horse will give up some of the requirements of the training scale. As we already know, that will result in ineffective training.

Now both you and your horse are ready to start some serious work on collection. Here are the exercises to best help you achieve that goal:

- Half and full-halts
- Lateral movements
- Transitions between lateral movements
- Transitions, halt-trot-halt
- Transitions, walk-canter-walk
- Pirouettes, walk and canter
- Rein back
- Piaffe
- Passage

While the half-halts are not considered exercises in themselves, they are the glue that makes the exercises work. They also clearly show the direction in which the collection must happen; from the back to the front. Since the horse would rather move on the forehand the rider has to use restraining aids to prevent that, and since she wants to achieve the opposite effect, a lightening of the forehand, she must be active in the driving aids to succeed. No restraining aids without driving aids is not different from the way she has applied the half-halts in the past, however, it takes on an added importance in her efforts to collect her horse. Moving from the half-halt to the full-halt (coming to a stop from any gait while keeping the horse balanced) requires an even more sensitive hand. It must accept the additional energy created by the drive of the seat and leg and bring the horse to a halt without acting as a fifth wheel. The horse must stop its weight and movement with the hind legs, thus staying in an uphill direction, balanced and square, ready to move off uphill again. Too strong an influence with the hand would cause the horse to either shift its weight forward onto the rider's hand or come to a sliding stop, equally off balance.

This clearly shows that collection does not mean that the farther we drive the horse's hind legs under its body, the better the collection is. If we are looking for an outward indication of a horse halting well under but off balance, we often see the front legs not perpendicular to the ground but back behind the vertical line. This horse is on the forehand and it cannot move off in balance. When asked to trot off, it most likely will raise its head to lighten the forehand and start with short strides until it has regained its balance.

Collection is a gradual process. Compare the collection of a horse working at second level with the collection of a Grand Prix horse. With the young horse we ride ten meter circles to improve collection while the mature horse is asked to execute pirouettes to advance its collection. Even the same exercise will appear different between these two horses. In order to ride the exercises correctly we must, therefore, be aware of the horse's current level of understanding, strength and agility. To watch a shoulder-in at the Olympics and then go home and expect the same level of collection from your young horse is unrealistic, and to insist on that performance is a recipe for failure in your training. Your young horse, however, can receive high marks for the shoulder-in he performs at his level of training. The same progression applies to all collecting exercises.

The shoulder-in is the first of the lateral movements we introduce to the horse. We guide the shoulder into the arena to the extent that, by looking at it from the front, the outside front leg and the inside hind leg travel on the same track making the hind leg invisible. This way the observer sees the horse traveling on three tracks. The shoulder's position to the inside must be the result of a bend in the horse's body around the rider's inside leg. It is just a slight bend and it must be

even throughout the horse's spine. As a result of this bend, the front legs of the horse cross while its hind legs travel straight.

One of the reasons we start the lateral movements with the shoulder-in is that it is the easiest to teach to the horse. Another is the variety of benefits the shoulder-in offers the trainer. She can start with small steps, like the shoulder-fore, and develop the strength and agility necessary for the shoulder-in. At the same time she improves the straightness of the horse which is an absolute condition to achieve higher degrees of collection. This straightness also helps keep the horse physically sound since it allows the horse to work with less strain on its muscles and joints.

Usually we start the shoulder-in at the first corner of the long side. The corner allows us to prepare the horse for the exercise by flexing it at the poll and bending it around our inside leg. After the corner we guide him with the inside rein off the track as though we wanted to ride a volte. As soon as the shoulder has left the rail, a half-halt with the outside rein stops the horse from moving farther off the rail and the inside leg pushes him in a straight line along the rail. Our outside leg has made sure that the horse truly bends throughout its spine by keeping the hindquarters from falling out. To do this our leg was positioned slightly behind the girth. In order to help keep the outside hind leg active we apply the outside leg at the girth. To be effective at this double task, positioning and timing of the leg are of great importance. Our inside leg is active at the girth to encourage the inside hind leg of the horse to reach forward under the center of gravity of the horse. It also helps keep the horse from leaving the rail and turn onto a volte. In this effort it is supported by the outside rein. The second responsibility of the outside rein is to limit the bend the horse can have in the neck, this way preventing the outside shoulder from popping out and allowing the horse to become straight in its body, bending in the neck only, or even turning the hindquarters into the arena. Our inside rein along with our inside leg maintain the bend of the horse and the position of the horse's shoulder away from the track. The positioning of the shoulder should be such that the outside shoulder of the horse is traveling in front of the inside hind leg. This way the outside front leg steps on the same track as the inside hind so that, viewed from the front, the horse travels on three tracks.

As you can probably tell by the various aids described to prevent the incorrect execution of the shoulder-in, horses do not normally perform this exercise voluntarily. It is demanding and, therefore, horses are looking for evasions to escape the work. What seems to bother them the most is the extra weight the shoulder-in shifts to their hindquarters, especially the inside hind leg. In this, however, lies the most important effect of the exercise and, therefore, we must not allow the horse to escape that burden. Running over the outside shoulder, stepping out with the outside hind leg, slowing down the rhythm, shortening the strides and bending in the neck only are all easily noticed evasions. The hidden one is the stiffening of the hind legs. On the surface everything appears to be correct but the horse has managed to avoid the difficulty of carrying more weight on a leg that bends deeper under that weight and demands more strength from the muscles of the hind legs to support the joints of the leg. The rider will notice this evasion by a more jolting gait while for the observer the horse travels croup high. The rider cannot correct this evasion through rider influence alone. She must look for exercises to prepare the horse better for the shoulder-in. The shoulder-fores, voltes and spirals in and out will strengthen the hindquarters sufficiently to prepare them for the added load.

Often we hear said, “Forward through sideways,” meaning progress in our training through the use of lateral movements. In riding the lateral movements we must keep in mind, “Forward in sideways,” meaning we must ride forward in the lateral movements. Anytime we ride our horses with their bodies bent they tend to slow down. That is one of the benefits of such exercises. They allow us to ride our horses more aggressively forward without the need for strong restraining aids. It also means that we do have to ride forward or risk losing our horse’s impulsion. The idea is to always mix medium gaits with collected gaits or collecting exercises in order not to shorten the steps too much and lose the clean beat of a gait or its rhythm as well as the impulsion.

The next article will explain the rest of the collecting exercises and how to improve the effects of the exercises by combining them.