

Exercises - Their Purpose and Correct Execution - Part 7  
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When I first started this series of articles on the exercises I promised myself that I would stay positive in my approach and explain the exercises according to what they should look like in order to fulfill their purpose. I would also explain how best to teach the horses to execute the exercises well. I believe I have kept my promise. The Piaffe and the Passage now have me struggling. The reason is that we see so few of them performed correctly. One of the explanations for the often strange looking movements is the speed of training of the horse that at this point catches up with the rider. Another is just simply the fact that so many horses will never be able to perform a correct Piaffe or Passage because they lack the talent to function at that level. Unfortunately, the ambition of the rider often exceeds the horse's talent and the result of that discrepancy as demonstrated in the show ring is anything but correct or beautiful.

Both the Piaffe and the Passage are designed to improve the horse's strength to carry weight and to further improve its suppleness. In order to execute these exercises the horse must already possess a great deal of strength or else it must resort to evasion. These avoidances are often subtle and remain unnoticed or uncorrected. When the rider realizes the problem, it is harder to correct it than it would have been had she been patient and built up the horse's power so it would not have needed to dodge correctness. Let us first determine what the exercises look like when performed as intended.

The Piaffe is a trot-like movement in place. The horse steps farther under its body with its hind legs, thereby lowering the croup. This increased engagement brings the base of the hindquarters, the hooves, directly under the hip. This is the best position for the horse to carry weight on its hind legs and thus free the front legs of some of their weight enabling them to lift up higher. The back of the horse is rounded upward, the neck is stretched upward-forward and elevated due to the lowering of the croup. The poll is the highest point and the nose is slightly in front of the vertical. The movement of the legs is straight up and down both in the front and the rear. The forearm of the front leg when lifted approaches the horizontal position. In the hindquarters the lifted hoof reaches to about the height of the fetlock of the carrying leg. The legs move in a clear two beat and stay in an even rhythm. Now notice the clear forward tendency of the horse as it is expressed in an advance per step, but not more than about the length of a hoof. When you observe such a Piaffe and realize that the horse stays relaxed and the only stress visible is the work of the powerful muscles in the hindquarters, back, and neck, it is time to feel in awe. Very few horses can perform it to such perfection and very few trainers are capable of training their horses without allowing imperfections or stress to ruin the picture.

The Passage, like the Piaffe, is a trot-like movement that also requires a great deal of collection from the horse. The horse moves in a clear two beat gait with the hindquarters lowered due to the increased engagement. As a result the direction is forward-upward with the poll the highest point and the nose slightly in front of the vertical. Unlike in the Piaffe, in the Passage the horse moves forward in a cadenced rhythm and gives the appearance of a slight hesitation at the moment of the highest reach of the lifted legs. In my opinion, that is precisely the moment when the supporting phase of the carrying leg is

about to end and the pushing phase is about to begin. The joints of the hind leg have bent as far as they can, the horse's weight has depressed that coil and now the coil is beginning to expand. This is the spring action of the hind leg and it moves only upward, not forward, causing the pause in the forward motion, creating the impression of a hesitation. The then contracting muscles of the hindquarters move the body over and past the now extending supporting leg. In this exercise relaxation is also of utmost importance since a horse is quite capable of producing a tense trot that is often mistaken for a Passage.

To many of us ambitious riders, Grand Prix is the goal for which to strive. On the surface it seems a worthy goal and, in spite of what you are going to read next, I believe that you should keep it in the back of your mind. The dirty little secret about dressage is that it is not at all about you, the rider, or shows or money or ribbons or interviews or top hats. It is all about training a horse. Do you remember when they "invented" dressage? These masters never showed any of their horses. They trained them so that their sponsors (usually noblemen) could ride them comfortably, expect them to be obedient and, of course, collect compliments for their beauty under the rider. Looking into the goals set forth by our various governing organizations, that still seems to be what we are striving for today. **Correctness in training is the goal.** To me, that is comforting because I would be very upset if I had a horse unable to perform at the highest level. With Grand Prix as my goal, why bother? And as I stated earlier, the vast majority of all horses reach their limit before they reach Grand Prix. If, on the other hand, I make absolute correctness of training my goal and do my very best to stick with that goal, I assure that my horse will reach its potential and I will avoid frustration and a sense of failure when Grand Prix is not in his genes. Instead I will be able to enjoy every little bit of progress achieved as a result of my work as long as I stayed within the boundaries of humane and natural means. The purpose of the show is to demonstrate to an expert the correctness of my horse's progress up to the level at which I am training him. Of course, we humans are quite competitive creatures and so we also want to prove that we have done a better job than everybody else. I said keep Grand Prix in the back of your mind. This is meant to motivate you, not to have you throw in the towel too early when difficulties occur.

What prompted me to travel this little detour into the philosophy of dressage was a search for the best explanation about how to train Piaffe and Passage. If we have faithfully followed the guidance and the demands of the training scale through Prix St. George, these two exercises are the next logical steps in collection. According to Gustav Steinbrecht, if we have done everything right, they will fall into our lap. So, we could say that all the work until now has served to prepare the horse for this final accomplishment. What a reward for patience and persistence. Steinbrecht also claims that the trainer only needs an absolutely balanced seat, legs and reins. Again and again he reminds us of the importance in keeping our horse in a forward attitude and straight.

At this point I would like to, one more time, urge you to read Gustav Steinbrecht's book, [The Gymnasium of the Horse](#). He devoted forty pages to explain to his readers why Piaffe and Passage can only be performed correctly by a horse that is athletic enough to be capable of it and prepared carefully from the very beginning of its training. He will

also convince you that training these exercises should only be left to very experienced riders. So, please do not experiment with them unless you fit that category. In order to reach that particular goal you must constantly strive to develop your seat, to improve your feel for the horse's movement, and to learn to read the physical and psychological state of your horse. Then search to find a horse that is a schoolmaster in Piaffe and Passage. Ride it and learn the feel of these exercises before you think of trying to teach them to a horse. Even then you should at first only work under the supervision of an experienced trainer.

When I talked earlier about the "inventers" of dressage, we only read about their work in the arena. Most of them lived in Northern Europe and if you have followed this area's weather reports lately, you will have noticed that it is cold and wet a great deal of the time there. We also, of course, know about the Lipizzaner of Vienna. So, we come away with the impression that it all happens indoors in very confined quarters. I would like to quote Alois Podhajsky in his book, The Complete Training of Horse and Rider. He actually paraphrases H.E. von Holbein, who was Director of the Spanish Riding School from 1898 to October of 1901, and who is also given credit for having first laid down the instruction for training in the school. Von Holbein divided the training into three phases. I am quoting a part of phase two. "In the Campaign School" (dressage, jumping, cross country riding) "the ordinary natural paces and cross country jumping will be developed; the horse will be given the necessary bend in the ribs, neck, and gullet, as well as the correct position appropriate for his conformation. This second phase of riding has to be developed from the first and presents the only possible preparation for the third, namely the High School." About phase three he said, "This phase of riding can not exist without the first two and especially without the Campaign School. The dressage horse is not a super specialist working in the arena only. On the contrary, he must be out in the field to maintain his desire to go forward and his joy of moving and feeling his strength." H. E. von Holbein must have been a man I would have admired greatly because he also stated the fact that, "The shorter time allowed for training and the universal demand for speed has caused a decline in the art of riding throughout the various armies." Imagine that. They felt that way already a hundred years ago. Compared to today they worked at a snail's pace. Two other statements of his are worthy of reflection. "By making High School so artificial, a gap has been created between school riding and campaign riding to the disadvantage of both. There is no reason to separate the movements of campaign riding from those of the High School. Every effort must be made to clarify and simplify the instructions and theories that have been handed down by word of mouth, and to follow the doctrines of only those masters who have proven themselves by showing that the horse can be trained to the highest proficiency, even of the High School, by natural methods and without restraint." Second, he stated, and I hope I have lived up to his expectations in my writings, "The art of riding must be divorced from all mystery by simplicity and truth."

I would like to add that riding is a privilege granted to us by a very generous creature. Each horse is different and, therefore, the best way to train them differs to some degree. That means that you must think and study to be able to find the best way for your horse. The training scale gives you a framework within which you will find the approach to

your horse. The old masters developed exercises that are the tools to implement the approach. The horse gives you hints about how you are doing and God gave you the sense of feeling and a brain with which to think. You will need to use all of that to succeed.

One of my students, in an effort to download all the articles that I have written over the last several years, told me that it was now like a book. Maybe it is time to change the format a little bit. So far I have written about what I thought was important and interesting to riders. If you will tell me what you would like to learn more about, I will do my best to put on paper what I know concerning your subject. It could be a question you have about a specific area of dressage, a problem you are wrestling with in your training, or anything else as long as it deals with horses. You can best reach me by e-mail at [tex-over@consolidated.net](mailto:tex-over@consolidated.net) or you may write to me at Tex- Over farms, 13217 Kidd Road, Conroe, TX 77302.

Thank you for reading.