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# The German Training Scale
## implications for the rider

## 2. Suppleness

This month RICHARD WEIS continues his look at a German Training Scale not just for horses but also for the riders who influence the horse from the saddle.

The tried and true German Training Scale is as important to the rider as to the horse. Those qualities of coordination we strive to instil into the dressage horse are guidelines just as appropriate for the gymnastic development of the rider!

Last month we looked at the importance of rhythm, and by now some of you will have tuned into the metronome in your head. You might have a new awareness of the beat of your own walk in different situations and on different terrain. Perhaps you have tried bouncing around on a trampoline or a dance floor. Maybe you've developed an acute appreciation of the natural rhythms around us – everything from a dripping tap to a rap dancing CD brings new information.

And through rhythm, we are on the way to appreciating the second feature of the German Training Scale – suppleness.

Achieving suppleness, looseness, the absence of excessive effort or tension – or however you want to write it – is not possible without the right rhythm. The tick, tick, tick of the pendulum of a grandfather clock is a good example. A pendulum swings with perfect economy of movement because the momentum of each swing supplies the energy needed for the next, and the next, and the next. By its very nature, more effort is required to stop a pendulum than to keep it going.

Those of you who tried bouncing on a trampoline will have firsthand experience of what I mean. Once the skin of the trampoline is stretched as it receives your body weight downwards, it wants to re-deliver its energy and send you up. There is no doubt about it. Economy of movement comes from your willingness or eagerness to receive it, and you allow it to send you up in harmonious rhythm.

When good timing is achieved, very little effort is required to sustain the bounce, so your body can relax. That word relax is very confusing. Sure to relax is to give up unnecessary energy, but it does not necessarily take into account the requirement to be willing and eager to bounce, leading some riders to flop.

Willingness and eagerness to bounce requires alignment. If the forces delivered by the trampoline do not flow through the whole body all the way to the head, bouncing is retarded.

Good alignment does require supportive effort. The kind of relaxation we might enjoy on the massage table, or in an armchair with a scotch or two and a Mozart concerto, will not be sufficient for the trampoline, or for riding. The massage table and the armchair thankfully take away the responsibility to be self-supporting. It is a fine thing as we can relinquish control and deeply relax.

To be self-supporting means to supply just enough effort to maintain alignment in the required activity. At 40ks/hr across the diagonal in extended trot, quite an effort is required. We could term this effort 'appropriate tone', tone being the term used to describe muscular effort. The appropriate tone is just enough to get the job done.

The tone needed to maintain good alignment in activity, has recognisable features in man and horse.

> *"All joints should bend and stretch equally well, and the horse's whole body must convey the impression of looseness and suppleness in all joints, as well as a willingness to cooperate and to move actively forward."*
>
> The Principles of Riding
> (Official instruction handbook, German National Equestrian Federation)

All joints should actively engage in the task – all. Joints sustain angles supported by rubber band-like forces. A flexed joint (think of an ankle) acts like the trampoline skin, that is, it is poised and ready to re-deliver whatever energy it took to flex it in the first place. Once depressed, it is ready to propel the body up.

Joints work in sympathy with each other. They cooperate in a harmonious inter-relationship. That means that any joint that is restricted will affect all other joints. Now the human body is infinitely adaptable. Many idiosyncratic riding styles evolve through adaptations and in many cases this is a good thing. Adaptations may compensate, for example, for a disability. It is better, though, when tone can be distributed evenly through out the whole body, in such a way that all joints can work equally, according to each designated function, and in harmony. In this situation the whole body works as one piece, a springy buoyant unit.

So we sit on a horse looking for the perfect seat. We know alignment is important because it allows the best economy of effort. Sitting on a horse is a bit of a confusing term because we, in fact, adopt a posture between sitting and standing. Without a slight standing element, the legs would be disengaged and uninvolved in the overall spring required.

Legs are primarily shock absorbers. The angles of the ankle, knee and hip are tremendously dependent on each other, and relate best through tonal qualities very similar to those required in standing in a dressage seat posture. In Tai Chi this attitude is called a 'horse stance' and is used to lower the centre of gravity for the purpose of grounded stability. When most of our weight is distributed to the saddle, the muscles of the legs do not need to work as hard as they do standing. They do, however, need a similar distribution of muscular tone, otherwise the joints, ankle, knee and hip, would not relate to each other appropriately and maintain their supportive position under the torso.

The riding seat is a sitting/standing crossbred posture. Failure to achieve this is the undoing of many a rider.

The most common fault is to draw up the legs. The muscles involved are called hip flexors. These are the most powerful muscles in the body and they are the ones used to bring a leg forward to, for example, take a step. Many riders draw their legs up and forward and effectively disengage shock-absorbing features.

Engaged legs not only shock absorb, they also supply spring. They contain stored energy, like stretched rubber bands, which contribute to the overall lightness of the seat. Any weight distributed through the legs to the stirrups tends to be supported towards the front of the saddle. Lifting the legs takes that same weight and transfers it to the seat, where it is supported on the back of the saddle towards the horse's loins. The ability to reliably distribute weight, a fundamental riding skill, requires actively engaged legs and an ability to inhibit hip flexion.

The hip flexors connect the thigh to the lower back via the psoas muscles. Often the lower back is not strong enough to carry the weight of the legs so it is pulled forward and the back is hollow. The hip joints are the hinge behind the crease in front of a rider's breeches and between the two contracted ends of the hip flexor muscles. Hip joints that take on too much angle, and are driven backwards, are no good for pushing the horse. Driving aids are limited, so is stability, and so is the rider's postural alignment to the ground.

A sitting/standing posture does imply a postural alignment to the ground. That means that the body does what it does best. It takes its bearings for coordination and balance from the ground, not from the horse. The ground is reliable. Horses are not. A person riding with a connection to the ground can give the impression to the horse that it is contained between the rider and the ground, and that is a great deal of our positive influence.

Good work, with sound postural disciplines like the Alexander Technique, can be extremely helpful in re-educating the body to use hip flexors positively. However, if I were asked to come up with a very direct approach, I would continue my studies with the Chek Institute in the United States.

Hip flexor problems magnify the need for muscular effort in the whole body. When hip flexors try to stabilise the pelvis they disengage the legs, taking away the tone from the legs that shock absorbs, and robbing the legs of the weight needed to affect the torso of the horse.

The pulsations experienced by engaged legs travel up through the rider's torso. Mostly they flow up through the pelvis and backbone to the head, which is buoyed up. Different gaits give

different pulses, from the symmetrical rebound of trot, to the swing-like rocking of canter, but by the time these pulses get to the head, they need to be translated through the body into only buoyant vertical forces! In other words, the head should give the impression that it is gliding proudly upward in space. Any unwanted muscular effort will tend to deflect these pulsations horizontally. We commonly see a rider's pelvis rocking forward and backwards and their head nodding forward and backwards. These are signs that the body hasn't got it right. It has not organised itself to give the head a smooth ride by absorbing and distributing impulses, created by the movement of the horse, into only upward pulses.

This feature of a good seat, typified by the feet looking as if they seek the ground at the base and the head gliding smoothly in space on top, can be observed in well-coordinated movement in most vertebrates. It needs well-distributed tonal qualities and allows all joints to be free to contribute to concentrated spring-like forces. Any efforts that interfere must be systematically tracked down by critical self-observation, and inhibited until good coordination becomes habitual and reliable, even in times of difficulty.

This laborious process requires very intense and honest personal discipline. In this phase of learning, instructors need to be encouraging and supportive, because it is not normally done by trying harder but by cultivating powers of self-observation. A rider will learn a lot about their motivation and what makes them tick when they discover the inevitable emotional implications of postural expression.

Suppleness is closely aligned to a self-confident state of mind. The German Training scale groups rhythm, suppleness and connection to the bridle into the familiarisation stage.

Through them, confidence and willingness is achieved. In the next article we will look at number three on the German Training Scale, connection to the bridle – from a rider's perspective. This will involve a closer look at elements of rhythm, spring, and suppleness, which lead to lengthening of the spine and then on to the exciting part – the meaning of true forward movement!