

THE GERMAN TRAINING SCALE

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE RIDER

6. Collection

So far RICHARD WEIS has looked at the first five features of the German Training Scale – rhythm, suppleness, connection to the bridle, impulsion, and straightness.

They all free the forehand of the horse and lead to greater manoeuvrability, but the forehand doesn't manage extraordinary feats such as canter pirouettes, piaffe and passage, until the horse carries more weight behind.

Energy is generated behind and is guided and directed through the forehand. The more the hindquarters carry the load, the lighter the forehand becomes and the easier it can be directed.

The rider experiences more control with the seat and legs and less and less with the reins. Both horse and rider develop self-carriage.

Self-carriage means attending to the balance and movement without assistance. The rider who can organise his body to work like a spring, who can maintain rhythm, lengthen and stay loose with activity while staying vertical, still needs to learn to use his back effectively. A specific organisation of the rider is necessary to encourage the horse to carry more weight on his back legs. The groundwork is laid, but we are asking the horse to take on a very alien balance. It can take some doing.

The rider's whole body, particularly his back and, more particularly, the middle section of his back, needs a great deal of postural strength. The length of the body, in this sitting-standing posture, needs to relate to the ground, now more than ever, if it is to be successful in finding the leverage required to rock weight from the front of the horse to the haunches.

Leaning back won't do it, squeezing won't do it, and neither will pounding the seat. The real solution is leverage, which involves slowing the front end of the horse down while getting the hindquarters in underneath. There is a combined influence of particular kind of driving aids with the restraining aids.

Kangaroos and spiral staircases

Try this little exercise. It will give you a pretty good feel for what you are asking when you ask for collection. Imitate a kangaroo for a minute. Hop about on the flat as a warm up. Then try hopping up a few steps. Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting you take on a tall building in a single bound. Leave that to the experts. Start with a few steps and you'll soon discover that elevation takes concentrated vertical energy. It goes out through the top of your head.

Experiment. Notice whether the job gets easier or harder if you shorten your neck by pulling your head towards your torso. Notice the jarring as well, and the sound of it. Try hopping with your toes clenched, your jaw clenched. Play with altering the tempo. With a bit of imagination you could find yourself tackling the steps in a myriad of styles. Some will be very difficult and some will make the task possible and maybe even easy. See what effect there is when you change the angle of your legs.

Try a spiralled staircase and think about how your body spirals to turn. Try looking away from the direction in which you are going, like a young horse. Do it on one leg, first the inside, then the outside. Don't hurt yourself! Collection is a demanding business. It is great for the cardiovascular system. You'll have a far greater appreciation of the kangaroo after 20 minutes of this. See how you need to organise yourself in order to minimise the thump, thump, thump.

In effect, the rider needs to learn to collect himself. In Germany, Johann Hinneman told me that he thought a mare would have more trouble with high school movements than a stallion or a gelding because it was built differently and generally lacked the strength in the abdominal muscles.

(The role of the abdominal muscles, in part, is to hold the contents of the abdomen towards their support, which is the back. The contraction of the abdominal muscles brings the back and the innards up. In these highly collected exercises, the abdomen of the horse, towards the loins, widens and stabilises and strengthens the connection so that it can support and transfer the weight from the forehead down to the ground, through the bent joints of the back legs.)

If you are explaining the difficulty of this to someone who doesn't understand dressage, get them to take a semi-squat position. Then ask them to make the equivalent of a pirouette pivoting around one grounded foot. That is a western-style spin. Now get them to make the same movement picking each foot up and putting it down again. A few times around and the muscles of their legs and back will soon tell them what a weight lifter the back end of the horse needs to be, in order to support weight on bent joints.

The abdominal muscles in the rider also act to stabilise the middle section so that fluent weight aids can flow through into the legs, which, like the horse, are also supporting weight on bent joints. The chain of muscles from the pubic arch to the throat holds the contents of the torso up and back into the housing cavity of the back. I say 'up and back' because the body is designed to transfer weight through bones. That means that sacks of weight such as the stomach are connected way above where they lie inside the abdomen. The stomach has attachments to the spine as high up as the neck.

Torso works like a backpack

The torso works a little bit like an old-fashioned backpack. The frame, which is the supportive structure and the ultimate strength, is the back. The canvas, filled with goodies, is drawn up so that they rest close to the frame. Our abdominal muscles act like the canvas. They keep the vital organs resting up and back towards their support, where they are housed by the back,

and are carried forward by it. We could say that our front hangs from our back and our back carries our front forward.

Of course, in a resting state the vital organs don't need much support. They are not jostling as they are when we undertake dramatic physical exercise, such as riding. The more the jostle, the more the abdominal muscles need to protect the organs with increased internal abdominal pressure. Holding the breath is an unsatisfactory adaptation to insufficient abdominal support. It does the job, but we are deprived of oxygen and can't manage for long. The best overall protection is when the whole plate of the front is well sandwiched into the whole plate of an expansive back. The weight of the front rests up and back into the back and is transferred through the spine and pelvis to the saddle and down through the legs to the stirrups.

This is one element in the collected attitude of the rider, and so is the stretch taken down the front of the thigh, and the back of the calf. Here again, we have a strong parallel with the horse, because when the back advances the front forward, and the weight drops, stretching the front of the thigh and back of the calf, the knee rotates slightly back and down. The back coming forward and the knee coming back narrows the 'wheelbase' of the seat, if we were looking from the side. A narrow wheelbase is tremendously manoeuvrable and that is partly why movements like the canter pirouette are possible. The horse takes the weight of his front end back, and carries it on his quarters, which are brought forward. The wheelbase narrows and around he goes.

The postural forces, applied as I have described, increase. The spine lengthens and straightens and the resilience of its spring-like quality increases. The body is kind of pumped up rather than deflated and sagging. The body is in danger of stiffening and this would certainly happen if the concept of the elastic spring were lost. With the increased lengthening up and down it is hard to imagine being able to knock such a rider off, for example in a joust. A floppy rider would topple and so would a stiff one.

Now this highly toned stack of concentrated weight sits vertically on top of a horizontally aligned horse, with the intention of transferring weight to the back end. The line of the front, from the pubic arch to the throat, comes up and with a restraining connection to the bridle, so does the front of the horse. The weight of the front is transferred down the back, where it is expressed as driving aids. The hindquarters lower and come forward and a kind of leverage has taken place.

Throughout this process it is absolutely important that the lower back does not disconnect the weight influences, through the seat and the stirrups, by hollowing. A hollow lower back makes the body into two disconnected pieces above and below it. Spring is lost.

A highly collected attitude of the rider is necessary for collecting the horse. The periods to sustain such an attitude will be brief. Energy is lifted to boiling point and it must be reduced to a simmer, turning up and down as required, to ensure that the horse keeps interested in its job to carry more weight behind.

This is as close as I can come at the moment to describing the attitude of a braced back. It is the attitude of the half halt, and therefore the attitude that leads to collection. The back gets its strength, like the horse, from widening and lengthening. This is a highly sophisticated postural attitude and comes to few without very extensive training. Few riders manage to get a horse to really carry behind.

I wish I had time to go into all the pitfalls, like instability through middle posture and how to organise arms so that they are well connected and can access the strength of the back. Riding is one big subject. We'll never be bored and we will never come to the end of it.

The German Training Scale is equally valuable whether applied to the horse or the rider. No doubt, when you have considered all six features through the workings of your self, you will be a little bit closer to understanding what you are asking of your horse when you ask him to be a dressage horse. Few riders engage in the athleticism of the partnership.

Work on yourself and play with your horse. I think I might have stolen that line from some western trainer. No apologies, it is a good one. After all, all you have at your disposal when you sit on a horse is your own body and the volition that drives it. Train yourself to train your horse. Train your own body to take the lead by doing with yourself what you would like your horse to do. Train yourself to train your horse. I like that better!