

THE GERMAN TRAINING SCALE

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE RIDER

1. Rhythm

The very successful German Training Scale is a tool used to check the training of the horse both daily and long term. Based on sound classical principles, it outlines and tests a sequence of physical laws governing the systematic development of coordination and balance.

In this new series of articles, RICHARD WEIS applies the German Training Scale to the training of the rider.

The German Training Scale suggests that the starting point in *the higher school training* of the horse is to establish **rhythm**. Good rhythm leads to **suppleness** of the horse, which in turn establishes a good **connection to the bridle**. The horse needs to be in rhythm, loose in its body and stretching over the back into the bridle.

Then, it is able to develop **impulsion**, because a supple horse can store and reliably deliver controlled, well-directed energy. This controlled energy creates buoyancy, makes the horse's spine longer and straighter, and encourages the whole body and mind of the horse to focus on nothing but the production of directed and balanced movement.

The whole horse **straightens**. And once the horse is lengthening over the back and straight, there are no blockages to stop it from carrying more weight evenly on the back legs in the final phase of **collection**.

And of course collection is the fundamental aim of all dressage training because it lightens the forehand and makes the horse more manoeuvrable.

The German Training Scale is a neat formula. Every training decision – for example, when to make a transition, when to perform an exercise – can be made based on the six parts of the training scale, in order. Our job is to bring the horse's attention to our special needs for coordination at any given moment.

The horse must bounce

A well-organised rider uses spring like an impulse, to direct the horse to bounce on the dressage arena. There is nothing more fundamental to bounce than rhythm.

Rhythm, timing, resonance and impulses are the stuff of life, from the beating of a heart, to breathing, to taking of a step, to producing sound.

Every substance leans towards its own special rhythm, and we are no different. Rhythm describes the evenness of the beat, the sequence of footfalls in each gait. Tempo describes the intervals between the beats as measured by a metronome.

Go for a leisurely walk over some nice even ground and you will automatically find yourself attracted to an even, regular, comfortable beat. It will be your own and may or may not be in step with a companion.

In India, holy men often undertake pilgrimages from one end of the country to the other and many are famous for their ability to effortlessly cover incredible distances at a walk. They stride out, gliding over the ground with a strong sense of purpose and no sense of rushing, feet ticking away with faultless regularity. Try it for yourself, even if you are only off as far as the paddock to break the ice of the chilly waters in the horse trough.

Riding on a trampoline

A better way to explore your own body in relation to rhythm is on a mini trampoline. Here you have two influences coming to terms with each other – the influence of the timing of the trampoline on you, and the influence of the way you react to that bounce.

On a trampoline it is easy to imagine how easily the horse reacts to different tempos. First try bouncing very fast, gradually slowing down until the bouncing is desperately slow and laboured. Then try creating chaotic unpredictable rhythms.

At some point the bouncing will feel comfortable, harmonious and efficient. You will feel as though you could bounce forever. The timing will be right for efficient movement. You will probably feel your body relax into it and all your joints will participate easily. On the other hand, too fast or too slow or an uneven rhythm will make it discordant and tense.

The horse's body isn't exactly like a trampoline – it is more adaptable than that. It can accommodate different rhythms by changing muscle tone. To accommodate a fast rhythm a horse simply stiffens – imagine flicking tight elastic, which twangs back at you faster than when it is loose! The best rhythm, though, is when the horse can most efficiently swing its back, using all his energy in movement.

Some people and some horses are naturally blessed with the ability to find the beat and stick to it. You'd have to be crazy to choose a horse for dressage that did not have good rhythm because it is a reliable feature of natural balance.

Watch a young horse go from trot to walk. If it maintains good rhythm all the way until trot is walk speed, then changes gear into a freely swinging walk, it has something going for it as a dressage prospect.

Of course, we have to live with our own natural strengths and weaknesses. We can't choose the ideal body or the ideal temperament, but we can train what we have towards our full potential and that is exactly what I would expect of any worthy student.

Riders can dance too

Rhythm and tempo certainly can be trained. I live in a house with an awesome double bass player, a drummer and a singer. A metronome can be heard ticking away in the music room any day of the week because music is not music without a reliable beat. I am lucky to be surrounded by musical guardians of the beat.

Riders can guard that beat too. Last year I was invited to a party in Germany, hosted by Ingrid Klimke. Most of the guests were riders, for example Michael, Ingrid's famous dressage-riding brother, and a number of others who were all part of the university riding scene. They love to dance! The music was German 1960s rock'n'roll, and dances like foxtrots. Couples danced with raw energy, crammed into a wonderful ancient hall, their steps fitting into each other so tightly that any loss of rhythm anywhere would have led to major collisions!

It was wonderful rider training in action, not only from a rhythm point of view but also because the music made it possible to synchronise every energetic impulse so that the whole gathering pulsed tirelessly as one. Because I am unfamiliar with this style of dancing and was very jet-lagged, I feared for my life and skirted gingerly around the edges, standing out like a sore toe. I was lucky though – those bold German riding types sure do love to lead!

Dancing is wonderful training for riders. For many years when I was a struggling instructor I played in ceilidh bands and called the dances. The caller is the link between the dancers and the musicians. Irish players have a strong tendency to speed up because they can, until the music is too fast to dance to, and so my job was to keep the show together. In fact, it was very similar to what I need to do these days in order to keep a rider with a horse.

Solomon says . . .

A few years ago in Western Australia I was sitting in a train next to a short, stocky, black man called Solomon. We got talking and Solomon turned out to be a Ghanaian tribal drummer, earning his living as a street performer and drumming teacher. I asked him if he thought he was good enough to instil a beat into a group of white girls I was teaching over there, organised by Megan Christie.

Solomon reckoned he was, so I brought him – and about 30 homemade drums – to a house warming party at Megan's place. By the end of the night the group was proficient at four distinct drum sequences. In fact, they were so efficient that they could play the drums in small groups simultaneously, and swap readily from one sequence to another at will. I couldn't

believe it, because I had been teaching these people for quite some time and rhythm was *not* their strong point.

The next morning in the lessons, the rhythm was so ingrained that I only needed to make minor suggestions. Those girls rode some of the best transitions I'd ever seen there.

Music and dancing are great fun ways of beating rhythm into riders, and so is riding. Exercises like learning to sense and appreciate all the nuances and impulses in the different gaits are very good training. From the actual timing of footfalls to the subtle movements of the horse's back, the moving horse is a symphony of syncopation and resonance – once we tune into it.

Of course, rhythm requires balance. Lack of balance implies a sense of falling and causes speeding up.

As an example, think of a rider in rising trot with their legs pushed too far forward. Without the support of legs under the body, the torso falls to the back of the saddle and the timing becomes irregular . . . bom *boomp*, bom *boomp*, bom *boomp*. Trot is an even two-time pace, so the horse has a bit of a dilemma to cope with and usually solves that dilemma by stiffening against it.

Few riders are willing to take the ultimate step of getting a big, lithe, black dancing partner, but we all need to cultivate the qualities that help make a relentless and natural rhythm. If we explore, we can find out at what point the horse loosens up and shows us his pure natural rhythm in each pace. When we do, we need to grab hold of it like a terrier and feed it back to the horse every time he loses it. Rhythm, after all, is the only thing we can usefully dominate in riding.

But be careful! Dominating rhythm does not mean emphasising the downbeat. We do not need to pound onto the horse's back like a jackhammer. Think, instead, of music! Few people can keep their feet still when listening to Irish music – that's because good Irish music bounces gaily, the emphasis on the "up" beat of the rhythm. We are uplifted by the cadence in it.

Cadence? Cadence is what develops when the horse springs lightly up off the arena. The accent is on the rebound. The *up* beat gets the emphasis – and that is the theme as we move onto suppleness and connection to the bridle because these features of coordination cultivate the *up intention* in the rider.