

THE ART OF CLASSICAL DRESSAGE

COLLECTION

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COLLECTION IS THE SIXTH, AND FINAL, LEVEL OF THE TRAINING PYRAMID. WHEN COLLECTED, THE HORSE SHIFTS HIS WEIGHT AND THAT OF HIS RIDER FROM THE FOREHAND TO THE HINDQUARTER, THUS DISTRIBUTING THE WEIGHT MORE EVENLY BETWEEN ALL FOUR LEGS. THE JOINTS OF THE HIND LEGS BEND MORE AND HE WILL STEP FURTHER UNDERNEATH HIMSELF, RESULTING IN SHORTER, MORE ENERGETIC STEPS. THE POLL BECOMES THE HIGHEST POINT AND HE WILLINGLY FLEXES AT THE POLL AND THE JAW. AS A RESULT, THE HORSE IS BALANCED AND POISED, THE HINDQUARTER IS ENGAGED, AND THE FOREHAND IS ELEVATED (EG. UPHILL). THIS IN TURN ALLOWS THE SHOULDERS AND FOREHAND TO MOVE MORE FREELY. THE COLLECTED HORSE IS MORE EXPRESSIVE AND ELEGANT IN ITS MOVEMENT.

The physical make-up of the horse is such that the horse's hind legs are used for propelling the horse forward, while the forelimbs are weight bearing. Adding a rider increases the amount of weight that the forelimbs carry because the rider sits just behind the horse's shoulders. It must be understood that the forelimbs can be strengthened only minimally through training. The muscles of the hindquarter, however, can and must be strengthened to enable the horse to carry more of his weight on the hindquarter. The end result, if trained properly, is collection.

Collection is achieved through progressive, correct training. A great deal of patience, dedication and time is also necessary to adequately develop and strengthen the hindquarter. As training progresses and collection improves so will the horse's balance and self-carriage in all three gaits. Furthermore, collection aids in keeping the horse sound. This leads to a safer mount because the horse will maintain his footing and balance better.


Before we discuss the exercises used to develop collection, it must be said that impulsion and collection go hand in hand. Impulsion is a necessary pre-requisite for collection and, when trained correctly and continuously, produces collection. Once the horse is adequately engaging his

hindquarters through impulsion, the rider will be able to "catch" the horse's energy. This catching of energy will result in more animated steps and stepping under, the basics of collection.

When discussing the exercises used in collection, it is necessary to clarify the difference between collected exercises and collecting exercises. The primary difference is in the way these exercises are performed. In collecting exercises, the horse's head and neck are generally lower to allow the horse to use his back more. In collected exercises, the head and neck are carried higher and the horse demonstrates self-carriage.

Now that the distinction has been made, exercises for developing collection can be discussed. Collecting exercises include any exercise that encourages the horse to carry more weight on his hindquarter. These include the halt and the half halt. The rein back, in its early stages, is also a collecting exercise because the horse is allowed to perform this movement with a lowered head and neck. Shoulder-in is also used as a collecting exercise. Collected exercises include collected variations of each gait (collected canter, collected trot and collected walk), piaffe, passage, canter pirouettes and the rein back (in its later form). Sending the horse forward after

periods of collected work is a good way to test whether the collected work is being trained properly. If the horse loses his rhythm, stiffens his back or poll, resists the leg aids or falls on the bit, the training has not been done correctly. This may also be an indication that the exercise has been introduced too early in the development of the horse.

Collection is the pinnacle of the dressage training pyramid. It is not attained quickly, but rather through progressive, correct, consistent training. As the horse works through the various levels of the training pyramid, he will develop the muscle strength and flexibility required to carry himself and his rider. The horse carries his weight on the forehand in his natural state. It is the job of the rider to ensure that the horse adequately develops the muscles of the hindquarter so that the weight can be shifted more towards his hindquarter. This allows the horse's forehand to move more freely. As the horse's hindquarter becomes more and more engaged, his steps will become elevated and animated. He will move elegantly and expressively. Ultimately, developing collection will lead to a sound and safe mount that is a pleasure to ride and watch. 

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