

DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOPLINE

Part II

By Heike Bean with Sarah Blanchard

Once the first three goals of *Takt* (rhythm), *Losgelassenheit* ("letting go," or relaxing and stretching), and *Anlehnung* (the horse actively reaching for and taking the bit) are confirmed, the trainer can concentrate on the next three goals of dressage: *Schwung*, *Geraderichten*, and *Versammlung*.

Schwung (Impulsion)

Schwung is impulsion, an increase in the energy and power of the push off. Impulsion can occur only when *Takt*, *Losgelassenheit*, and *Anlehnung* are established. As soon as one of these first three basics disappears, there is no impulsion possible, because any stiffness and resistance will prohibit the flow of power through the horse.

However, when *Anlehnung* is carefully maintained, impulsion can be gradually increased by pushing the horse more energetically to the bit. Through this, the horse has to flex the hip and hock joints with more elasticity. As this occurs, strength is increased, and the horse will more and more be able to go in self-carriage. He will not need the rein any more as support for his balance. He becomes "light" in front, his front legs will gain more freedom, he will feel smoother to ride, and he will pull the rider's seat right into his back in every gait.

How often judges complain about a lack of impulsion! And competitors become paranoid about it, because they do not know how to get more out of the horse. Rider and horse are both working as hard as they can, but the impulsion doesn't seem to happen. In most cases, the cause of this lack is a more-or-less hidden resistance in the horse's body. The resistance must be identified and handled through careful, correct riding and beneficial exercises.

Exercises to increase *Schwung* are all the lengthenings, frequent changes in tempo, and frequent changes between work on smaller circles (10-15 meters) followed immediately by extending the strides for a few steps at a time.

It is important, as always, to ask very little in the beginning, to monitor progress carefully, and to back off when the horse becomes nervous. Too-early or forced attempts in lengthenings, especially, can result in a multitude of problems: the horse often takes quick steps, rushing off on the forehand and spreading his hind legs in an attempt to take the load and work away from his hindquarters.

Many of the horses shown in dressage today have been bred for natural *Schwung* and extensions, which makes work a lot easier for them and for their riders, but many of these horses are not performing at their full potential, because even these horses must be brought along slowly and carefully. The fact that they have natural talents does not mean they don't have to go the same road of training. The naturally talented horse may be able to progress more quickly than his less able stablemate, but a danger exists: many talented horses have been asked for too much, too soon simply because they offer so much on their own. It is easy for the rider to overlook the importance of gradual strengthening, and this results in overwork, resistance, and unsoundness.

Geraderichten (Straightness)

Every horse is crooked in itself, by nature. Usually the right side is the "hollow" side, with the right hind leg traveling outside the body. More weight is put onto the left shoulder, and by that the horse will lean on the left rein and does not accept the right rein.

The left hind leg travels naturally underneath the horse's body. In severe cases of crookedness, it tracks toward the right front leg. In this stage, it seems easy for the horse to "bend" to the right, and impossible to "bend" to the left. However, since the horse naturally bears more of his weight on the left side of his body, this side is also the stronger side. When—with proper stretching and relaxation—his left side learns to bend correctly, it is a lot easier for him to bend in this direction than to the right. Then, often sud-

denly, the horse will totally resist all attempt to bend him to the right. This isn't because he has suddenly become crooked to the right; this is because he is trying to evade proper work, and is using the strong side of his body to do it.

The earlier appearance of "bending" to the right was false, because the horse fell on his left shoulder and kept his right hind leg outside his body, thus creating a curve in his spine without actually tracking properly. To an unknowledgeable person, this may look very much like a bend to the right. However, once the horse learns to truly listen to the reins and leg, and has achieved a degree of straightness, then he will begin to work with his right hind leg towards the left rein, accepting the right rein and beginning correctly to bend right. Because this is difficult for nearly every horse, they will find ways to evade the aids. For many horses, the right side will remain—throughout their entire life—the weaker and stiffer side.

Crookedness can be very apparent when the horse falls over the inside shoulder or when he overbends and falls over the outside shoulder; but crookedness can also be manifested in small, hidden ways, as when the horse cocks his head just a little bit—which goes unnoticed by many riders and, unfortunately, by many judges.

Straightening the horse is one of the essential tasks of dressage. This is the goal of *Geraderichten*. Only a straight horse can move without any resistance. That this is listed as the fifth step in training does not mean it has been neglected so far; in fact, straightness is an early part of *Anlehnung*, because in stretching to the bit the horse must let go of a large part of his inherent crookedness.

But by now the horse, if brought along properly, has enough strength to work with his hindquarters truly underneath himself, and then the "*geraderichtende Biegearbeit*" (straightening bending work) will be the major part of this stage of training. All lateral exercises, executed on straight or curved lines, and lots of change in the bend on smaller turns will be helpful. This work not

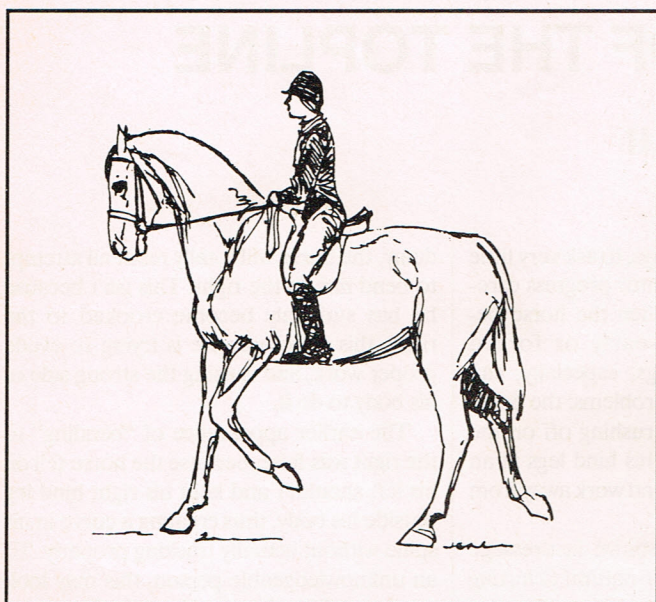


Fig. 1 - The signs of a tense horse: worried eyes, pinned ears, short topline and long bottomline, bulging bottom neck, stiff tail and short, nervous steps. A horse exhibiting these symptoms has had his training progress too quickly, and needs to be taken back a few steps, to be encouraged to relax, stretch, and re-establish his rhythm.

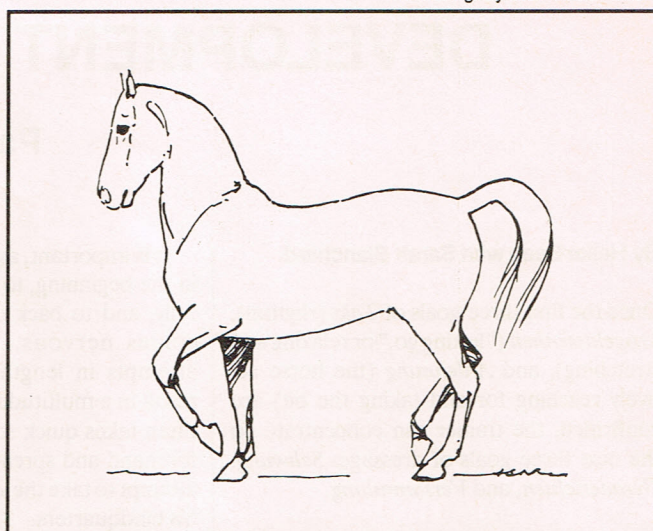


Fig. 2 - The incorrect, misunderstood piaffe, often created by rein and whip only. The horse is totally disengaged behind, exhibiting a short topline and long bottomline, with no lowering of the hindquarters or corresponding elevation of the forequarters.

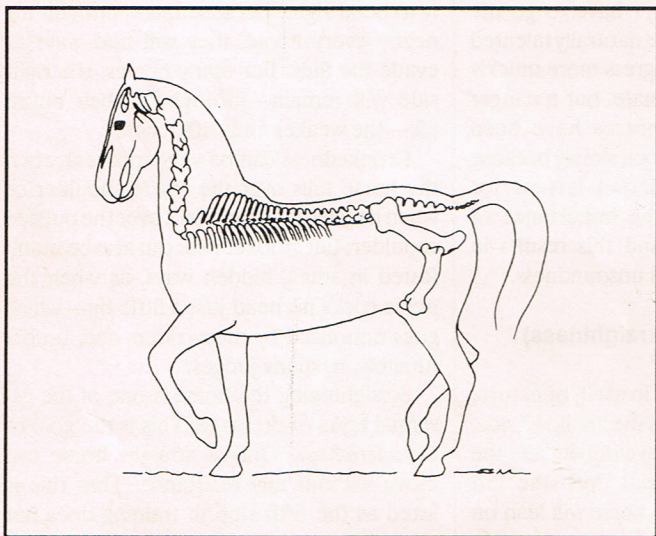


Fig. 3 - The same horse as in illustration #2, showing the rigid spine and forced-down withers. The hip and stifle joints show open angles and little flexion.

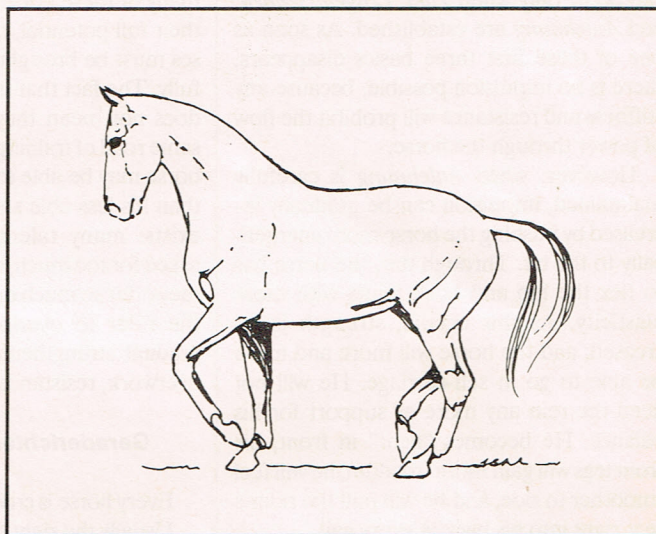


Fig. 4 - The correct piaffe, with a topline stretched to the utmost, a short bottomline, true front elevation, and noticeable lowering behind. Note the engagement of the hindquarters.

only improves straightness but also increases impulsion—and the beginnings of true collection occur.

It is important to remember in all of these exercises that the forehand must be adjusted to the hind end, and not vice versa. The horse has to step at all times into the outside rein by softly accepting and yielding to the inside

rein. The horse must never lean into a turn; he must stay vertical to the line on which he is traveling. (For an accurate check of this, look at the ears—they should be always at the same height.)

The spine of a truly straight horse (the topline as seen from above) will conform at all times to the line on which he is moving.

He will always feel in balance, will give the rider the same feel in both hands, and will let the rider sit equally on both seatbones.

Versammlung (Collection)

Again, collection is not a goal in itself. It is deeply involved with all the previous goals,

and basic collection work starts very early. Trot-halt-trot transitions as well as canter-walk-canter transitions, reinbacks, turns on the haunches, and all lateral movements are collecting exercises.

However, we now have all the necessary tools and required strength in the horse's back and hindquarters to shift weight truly backwards to the haunches, by properly lowering the quarters and asking the horse to carry more weight behind than in front. Bad training will be very obvious now, since an incorrectly trained horse will just not be able to lower his quarters, and severe resistance will arise. Lowering of the haunches cannot be achieved by severe rein action or powerful, cruel, rough aids. Collection is the result of the previous training and should come easy for the horse when he is made ready for it. If it does not, then the horse is simply not ready, and the training emphasis has to remain with the previous goals.

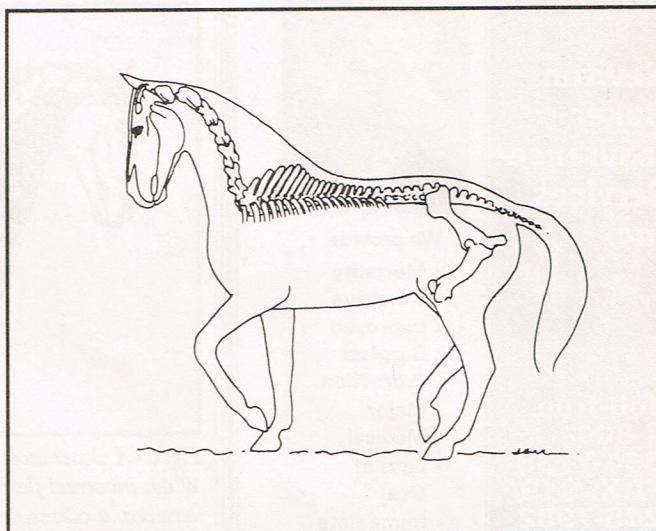
Also, there are many degrees of collection, as the gradual increase in demand is demonstrated in the various test levels. Unfortunately, many judges don't seem to know about this and like to see Second-level horses in Fourth-level frames. This confuses trainers, riders, and spectators alike—and everyone puts unreasonable demands on the horses. Strangely enough, the degree of collection is often measured by the height of the horse's neck, and not by the amount the quarters are lowered. And often, no regard is taken of the horse's conformation when his frame is compared to the "ideal."

On the other hand, more and more judges are complaining about the loss of the basic principles in the higher levels, which results—logically enough—in inharmonious and badly performed tests.

A truly and correctly collected horse will have fun in his work, will make it look easy and effortless, will at all times submit to the lightest aids, and will always give the impression of moving uphill. His entire topline will be stretched to the utmost, and he will resemble a leaf spring, that—held on both ends—is popped upwards and completely filling out the rider's seat.

The horse is fully "durchlässig," or "permeable." That means that all of the produced energy flows totally unobstructed to the bit, and goes from there back into his body where it is fully under the command of the rider. In Germany we call this "vom Gebiss abstossen," which may be translated as "pushing himself off the bit." The pushing

Fig. 5 - The spine of the horse in illustration #4 shows how the withers elevate, the back rounds up, and the hip and stifle joints flex to produce engagement. Compare this to drawing #3.



power that the horse gained from *Schwung* and *Geraderichten* will now—together with the carrying power—produce the shorter but stronger, higher and more energetic steps of true collection. (The steps of collection must be by no means confused with the short, tense steps of a nervous horse, which can sometimes look more impressive than true collection, especially to the unknowledgeable observer.)

If, on the other hand, a horse is being "held together" by strong driving aids and strong rein aids, we know the six goals have not been accomplished. The horse has been pushed too fast, and we see it in his resistances: tilted head, gaping mouth, pinned ears,

clamped or flagging tail, and a stiff back that bounces his rider miserably. The rider becomes frantic, continuously using his spurs and pulling himself tighter on the curb bit.

This last statement needs further explanation about the use of the curb bit.

A curb bit is not a tool to obtain collection or a certain frame from a horse. A horse ridden in a full bridle should at any time be able to perform the same movements on a light snaffle contact. The basic idea of the curb was, and still should be, this: The respect the horse has for this more severe bit should allow the rider an even lighter contact. The curb reminds the horse of its presence; the curb reins should be almost

Photo by Sarah Blanchard

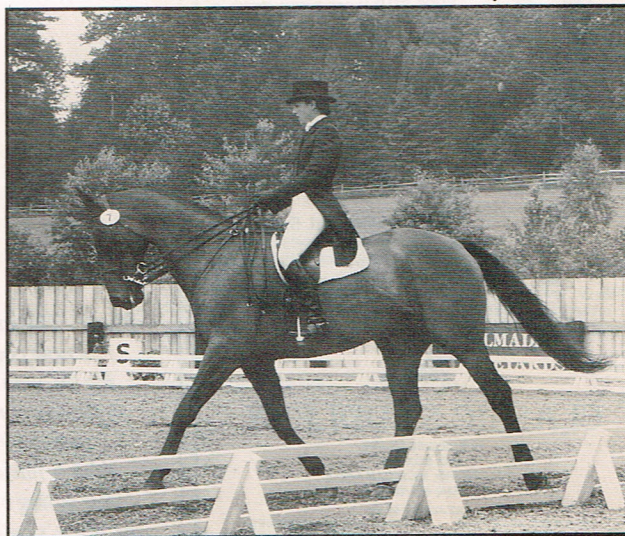


Fig. 8 - Serious problems surfacing: the break at the fourth vertebra of the neck is very apparent here, as is the bulge of the lower neck. The horse's head is behind the vertical, the curb bit is pulled back farther than 45 degrees, and the horse is on his forehead.

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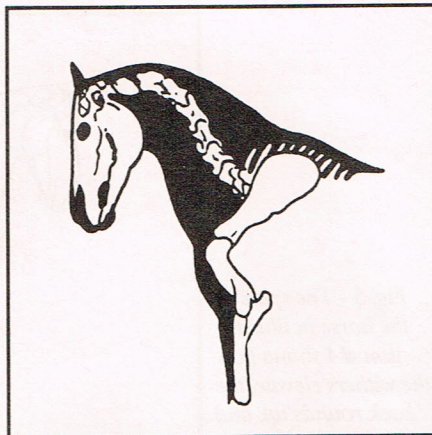


Fig. 6 - A closer look at the bones of the neck. When incorrect flexion occurs at the fourth vertebra, a corresponding bulge is produced at the bottom of the neck.

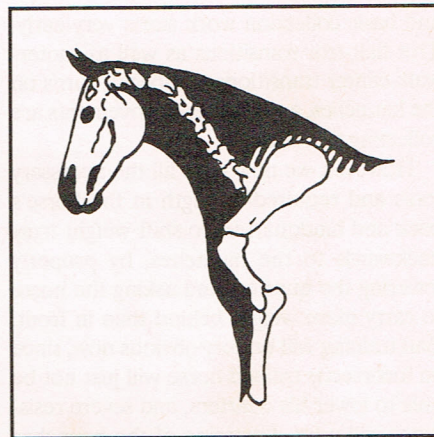


Fig. 7 - Correct flexion, occurring at the poll, creates a smooth underline to the neck. Compare this to illustration #6.

slack, allowing the horse and rider to be fully freed from the front end. In no case should the rider's hands ever pull the curb bit beyond a 45 degree angle. And how terrible it is to see a horse gaping his mouth against a curb bit, with a stiff, blue tongue visible!

A horse that puts a lot of weight against the bit—any bit—while traveling in a collected frame is not truly collected or in self-carriage. It indicates that the horse has been asked to do more than he can handle, and it points to a problem: unsoundness, lack of strength, poor conformation, or lack of proper training.

And a further comment on the rider's seat: if a rider is bouncing, there's no *Los-*

gelassenheit and no *Anlehnung* possible. Either the rider's ineptness causes the horse's stiffness and discomfort, or the horse's stiffness causes the rider to bounce, but in either case the horse can neither let go nor stretch onto the bit. Even in Training-level competition the horse must demonstrate these attributes, so that his back swings and he sits a competent rider comfortably. It is, however, very distressing to see Second- and Third-level rides earning scores in the high fifties or low sixties, when riders are hanging on for dear life, especially during the extensions. This alone should prove to a judge that the basic training of the horse has been wrong. Even if the movements of the

Photo by Sarah Blanchard



Fig. 9 - The same horse has now come above the bit, with the bulge in the lower neck even more obvious. The rider is having a hard time sitting because of the horse's locked back.



Fig. 10 - Subtle changes make a visible difference. Here this horse is stretching his topline and working through his back, and the rider is sitting comfortably.

test are executed precisely, the test performed by a bouncing, unsteady rider should be judged insufficient, since the rider is not in full control of his mount.

Conclusion

Throughout the entire training program, it is the correct development of the topline—



Fig. 11 - But as soon as there is even the slightest bit of tension in the jaw, it is transmitted to his back, and suddenly the rider finds it difficult to maintain her position.

the spine and the muscles and ligaments supporting it—that produces the changes necessary for the horse to perform work properly. Rhythm, stretching and reaching to the bit, impulsion, straightness, and collection are all created through (and their success gauged by) appropriate changes to the topline. Each step of the way requires a caring, educated rider who actively teaches the horse and carefully adjusts his work to the horse's needs and responses.

For the sake of dressage (as the only true training of the horse's body and mind), and especially for the sake of our beloved horses, it is to be hoped that all riders will try to learn and understand the real needs of these wonderful and patient animals. Ignorance—not bad intentions or indifference—is the greatest obstacle in horse training, and ignorance can be overcome by intelligence, inquiry, and dedication.

When things go wrong in training, don't blame the horse. Don't think you have done everything right—be humble! Look for the fault in your own lack of knowledge or understanding or coordination, and think it through again and again. The rider's inability to communicate is not the fault of the horse. Look for the cause of the problem: your ignorance, lack of experience, or inability to communicate; or his misunderstanding, unsoundness (pain), or simple inability due to conformation.

The one good thing of horse training is this: It is absolutely logical. There are no mysteries, and everything has an explanation. That you can't see it right away doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Every time you ride a horse, you should learn something new and understand a little bit more—and so should your horse. If this does not happen, you are on the wrong road. Work your way out of it by studying, observing, and searching for answers any way you can. ¶

Heike Bean, a German-educated trainer/instructor, is now, in addition to dressage, also active in driving. Together with Sarah Blanchard she authored several articles on training techniques. Sarah Blanchard, an active participant in dressage and eventing, is a professional journalist, working for the publicity department of Crabtree & Evelyn, Ltd. Joan Sinclair Mueller is a horsewoman and a professional artist/illustrator, and has collaborated with our authors on a number of occasions.