

February 2008 Beyond the Basics  
***The Ultimate 'Fix'-Applying the Dressage  
Training Scale Part II of Series***

In Part I of this series, we looked at the word – Dressage – and concluded that for all of us who are aspiring horseman, dressage or ‘training’ is what we try to do everyday with our horses. Whether we are headed to a Grand Prix test or going out to gather cows, we are working on ourselves to better understand the movements of the horse, and ultimately to set it up for accomplishment of an effortless dance – a willing partnership! This month let’s examine the elements that combine in this wonderful work ethic for both horse and rider, which are truly the foundation of this joint venture. The ‘Dressage Training Scale’ gives us basic components that are arranged to develop a horse and rider team no matter what discipline you may be specifically pursuing. They should be as important to the trail horse as they are to horse learning the ‘high-school’ or *Haute-Ecole*. They are a development series. One step builds on the previous and is intricately entwined in the final combined product of grace, feel, and accomplishment of a specific job. There are no ‘quick-fix’ solutions in horsemanship! Thoughtful development of these basic elements within the Training Scale will lead you and your horse to the ‘ultimate-fix’, no matter what type of dance you wish to accomplish!

There are several critical agreements that you need to consider before you move forward with a progression of pursuing these training steps. Call them philosophies or principles...These are the agreements I make with my horse to make sure I am setting it up for success. (And maybe success in my life as well!) First I agree that development of a positive **ATTITUDE**, or a ‘Willingness to Yield in a Respectful Manner’ is the foundation of all my interactions with the horse. This means I approach each experience with a high measure of patience, work at understanding, and I am willing to reward the slightest try of the horse. **Time is not an element!** If you are looking to bring along your 2 year old Quarterhorse to win a snaffle bit futurity, then you simply can not make this agreement with your horse, nor will you be able to experience the benefits of the Training Scale. It takes **TIME** to develop these elements, both physically and mentally, for both horse and rider.

A third vital ingredient is the human’s commitment to understanding **MOVEMENT**. Questioning ourselves

about the way in which horses move, and how we can train our bodies to go **with** those movements, is critical to the success of this beautiful dance. Entwined in this component is the final agreement: We need to understand that the Training Triangle is for **both horse and rider**. It is a commitment to train and study and grow together, with no rush!

Let’s look at the elements of the Training Scale for the horse, and over-lay the requirements for the rider to help the team achieve a specific component. Please keep in mind that while this scale is composed to build one-upon-another, in reality parts intertwine, and become enhanced as we move up the progression. In general there are three over-arching steps we are trying to accomplish:

**For the Horse**

Collection

Impulsion & Schwung

Straightness & Balance

Contact & Feel

Suppleness & Relaxation

Rhythm-Movement-  
Attitude

**For the Rider**

Combination of Aspects into a  
brilliant Dance!

Finesse of Aids

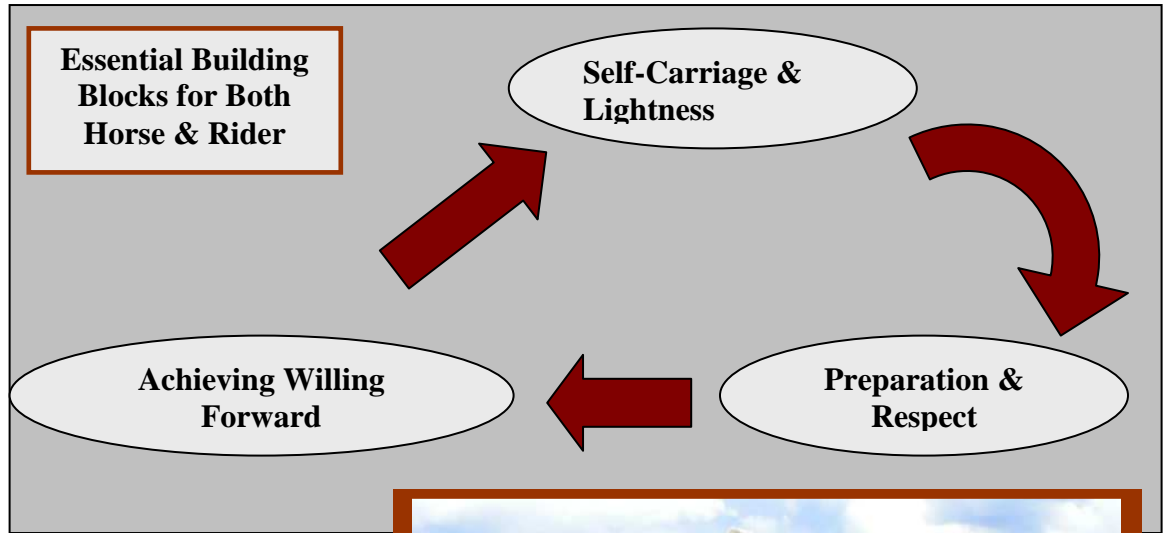
Understanding Lateral & Flexing

Understanding & Applying  
Combination of Aids

Relaxed, yet active hips &  
Understanding Movement

Attitude, Leadership & Balance in  
Seat

1) Preparation & Familiarization of Equipment and Environments – Accomplished with Respect & Safety;  
 2) Achieving Willing Forward Movement – Generated from the Hindquarters; 3) Development of Self-Carriage & Lightness. Here are the things I think about and feel for in using the Training Scale to bring myself and my horse along. I am constantly moving in a cyclical manner from Respect to Forward to Lightness, using the ‘notes’ of the Training Scale:



**Attitude & Rhythm**

To achieve the first step in the scale, I must provide good leadership for my horse. That includes understanding the movement that I will be requesting, familiarizing my horse with the equipment and environment to be used, and always maintaining a positive attitude that rewards good effort. Because of my musical background, I often compare my horsemanship journey with my musical training. Without the good attitude of my music teachers, (and tremendous patience!) I would have never learned a specific piece of music. Quite frankly, I had great natural rhythm and timing, but without the guidance of my teachers, and the respect I had for them, I would not have progressed. While my attitude in learning the violin was not always positive, it was the patience and discipline of my teachers that truly helped to shape some natural talent into a rhythmic and pleasing piece. I think this is a very similar scenario for horse and rider. Without a good leader, that has prepared a clear lesson plan, even the horse with tremendous talent will not excel. Our job is to develop a willing, respectful attitude, combine it with mental and physical preparation of both horse and rider, to move towards achieving a job well-done. Try developing this positive attitude with rhythm in everything that you do and see how it will effect all that you accomplish.



**Suppleness & Understanding Movement**

This is such a critical step for the partnership. As we have discussed many times in previous articles, the importance of relaxation, suppleness, and flexing has to be included in every warm-up for both horse and rider. Understanding the four basic movements (Forward, Backwards, Sideways, and Crossing-of-Hindquarters) is a human requirement. The most important of these is willing forward, and beginning to develop a thrust or push coming from the hindquarters.

**Contact, Feel, & Combination of Aids**

Much has been written about ‘contact’, and the various levels of ‘feel’ involved. In my experience the amount of contact on the snaffle bit or bosal is greatly influenced by the level of development of the horse. My ability to provide a reward or release, along with the application of my aids (seat, legs, hands) at the correct time is equally important. Personally I find this rung of the training scale the most difficult and challenging, as it requires that level of ‘multi-tasking’ that so defines true horsemanship.



### **Straightness & Balance**

Horses, like humans are never totally straight. But, the more we work on rhythmic movement, on both straight lines and in lateral postures, the more balanced we will become. I find that riding my two-legged horse to get my body in shape and balance really helps. Become a kid again! Trot, canter, leg-yield, half-pass to re-discover how fun being balanced in these movements can be.

### **Impulsion with Finessed Aids**

In this step, your previous work will really begin to pay off. Allowing the horse to drive from behind, while staying out of his way with our human body parts, will let you begin to rate the energy into a very pleasing picture.

### **Collection & Lightness**

This truly is the pinnacle of the scale. To gather all the aspects achieved previously into a light and brilliant dance. To reach this spot without resistance in horse or rider may take a lifetime. It requires such discipline, but the feeling when achieved is worth all the effort! For me, this is what I ride for, whether it is a moment or two out on the trail, or an extended period working on the dressage court.

This February you may not have a lot of opportunities to apply the Training Scale to your horse. However, it is a great month to mentally and physically prepared yourself so that these steps become part of your vocabulary. As you sit at the computer, drive your vehicle, or push the grocery cart think about the ‘notes’ of the Training Scale. I think you will become more rhythmic, balanced, supple, and carry yourself with a spring in your step that will surely put joy in your heart!



“By useful gymnastics, the horse may be made to shine with brilliance in such a way, coupled with the correct position of the rider, that a vision of great beauty will be seen by the spectator.” *Nuno Oliveira from Reflections on Equestrian Art*