

March 2008 Beyond the Basics  
**Age-Old Training Elements Applied to Every  
Discipline Part III of Series**

As I review the past two articles in this series, I have to admit that they are a bit on the academic side. I apologize for that, at least a little, and yet the premise of these articles is all about 'dressage' or the mindful 'training' of both horse and rider. So I guess there is no escaping that if we truly want to develop a willing partnership with our horses, we have to commit to stretching the boundaries of our understandings, read, listen, compare, and observe. I am drawn to what Bill Dorrance said in his book, *True Horsemanship Through Feel*, regarding the development of horsemanship. Mr. Dorrance felt there were three critical elements: First, work at developing FEEL; Second, give yourself and the horse TIME; Last, find a good TEACHER! As we progress this month into applying the fundamentals of the Classical Dressage Training Scale, let's keep in mind that it will take time to develop this incredible dance. Part of that relationship will require us to become students of horsemanship, in order to be a good leader and teacher for our horses.

This month, let's look at examples of applying the rudiments of the Training Scale to some very specific training scenarios. In each case it is important to keep in mind that these steps, or notes of the scale, combine and build one-upon-another, and that the human has a responsibility associated with each step. If the picture is not coming together just as you had envisioned, use the notes of the training scale to see what element is missing and determine what you need to work on to get the picture to come into focus. It never is just the horse's fault! Somewhere we humans have missed a critical step that is not allowing us to accomplish the maneuver in a willing partnership. By going back to the Training Scale for both the horse and the rider, we can usually discover a better way to set it up for success.

**Example One – Out of Balance Ground Work**

We have discussed many times in previous articles the necessity and benefits of proper ground work, work-in-hand, and liberty work. Hopefully everyone is applying some ground work exercises to your equine routine, whether you are working with a young horse or training at the Grand Prix level. With the more recent 'Natural Horsemanship' movement, it has been great to see so many people enjoying the fun and benefits of ground work with their horses. However,

as I have traveled these past few years, I have seen many horses moving on non-geometric circles, at inconsistent gates, and balancing with shoulders popped-out, heads up with stiff backs. The involvement of the human – the leader – is often non-existent in truly influencing the over-all picture of the movement in this poor ground work. To experience the feeling of this scenario I am describing, try trotting a circle on your two-legged horse. As your toes try to stay on the imaginary railroad track-circle beneath your feet, look to the outside of the circle, and lift your outside shoulder. Notice how it became difficult to keep your toes on the arc of the circle, and you probably lost the rhythm of the two-beat trot? Can you imagine a similar situation with a horse you are trying to send on a circle at the trot on the end of a lounge line? Ok...so what is creating this un-pleasant picture and how might we provide the leadership from the ground to make the situation more pleasing? Go to the Training Scale for answers! First, we must be missing some very basic notes in the scale. The horse has poor rhythm, which is being influenced by a lack of suppleness in his back, causing a lack of balance. What do you need to do to help? Look at the Human Training Triangle and make sure you are accomplishing each note of the scale:

**Step No. 1** - Providing clear leadership, with a positive and

present attitude:  
Do you have a clear picture of the direction and rhythm you are asking the horse to



accomplish? Have you internalized the rhythm of the gait you are asking the horse to accomplish?

**Step No. 2** - Suppleness & Relaxation: Are you balanced in your stance and engaged in picturing/watching for the movement? Are you breathing, with a smile on your face?

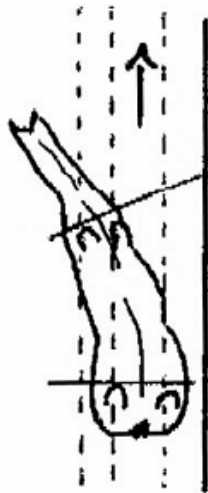
**Step No. 3 - Contact & Feel:** Are you feeling *of, for,* and *with* the horse through the line? In your mind's-eye, are you riding the horse, with contact through your entire body, all aids – seat, leg, and last hands?

**Step No. 4 - Straightness & Balance:** Rather than continuing to send the horse on a circle out of balance, have you thought of other methods or exercises that might help him to understand self-carriage? Perhaps accomplishing some work-in-hand or lateral maneuvers will help, then come back to the exercise on a circle.

**Step No. 5 - Impulsion, Schwung, & Collection:** Depending on the age and development of the horse, even these elements can be accomplished with proper ground work for the exercise of a balanced trot on a circle. You may want to consider tools such as driving on the long lines, use of the surcingle with light side-reins, or the cowgirl side-rein system. (i.e. Run your reins up through the gullet of the saddle, and hook over the saddle horn, with very light contact on the snaffle bit.)

#### **Example Two – Excessive Bending in the Shoulder-In**

As a quick review, the shoulder-in exercise is a three-track maneuver that strengthens, supples, and balances the horse. It is a critical exercise in the development of all horses and all disciplines. As example, if we are riding on the track to the left, a proper shoulder-in posture would find the left-front foot slightly off the the track towards the center of the arena. The right-front foot would be on the same line as the left-hind, and the right-hind foot would be on the outer track. The rider could see the horse's left eyelash, with a slight bend to the left.



Now, what if we see the entire left eye of the horse, and his neck was definitely bent to the left? Let's use the the Training Scale to examine what is happening, and how to help the situation. Clearly he is over-bending, which is most likely causing the horse to be out of balance, certainly not straight, and probably rigid or braced in various portions of his body. The horse may also be a little mentally bothered, as his eyes are not in a very natural position and something is causing him to over-bend. On top of that, the most basic of the notes – rhythm – is probably non-existent! HELP!!

**Step No. 1 – Leadership & A Balanced Seat:** Are you present, with a clear picture in your mind's eye for what a shoulder-in looks like, and the rhythm of the gait clearly beating with your internal clock? Have you checked that your aids are correct for the shoulder-in posture, with your seat bone and shoulder weight balanced in the direction of travel, your inside leg active at the girth, your outside leg relaxed, and your hands accepting the energy as it moves from the inside hip to the outside rein?

**Step No. 2 – Relaxed, Supple, and Active Hips:** Did you remember to do your suppling and stretching exercises for both you and the horse?

**Step No. 3 – Contact & Feel:** Are you using all your aids efficiently, without brace?

**Step No. 4 – Straightness & Balance:** How is your posture? Are your shoulders parallel to the ground? Are your pressure and balance aids working in unison? (Review NWHS Beyond the Basics article: July – August, 2007)

**Step No. 5 – Impulsion, Schwung, & Finesse of Aids:** Are you feeling for the energy starting with the push of the horse's inside hind foot and carrying that energy towards the outside shoulder and rein, with rhythm? Is the timing of your aids enhancing the rhythm and flow? Are your hands there to accept the energy, not inhibit or brace? Can you feel the freedom of the back muscles and does the tail swing with rhythm, not announce?

**Step No. 6 – Collection & Lightness:** Can you now ride the shoulder-in with imperceptible aids, with the poll as the highest point, energy pushing from behind, in a balanced, rhythmic, pleasing dance? Yeah!... You have reached the pinnacle of the Training Scale!

This should give you some idea about how to use the Classical Dressage Training Scale to evaluate and improve your experience with your horse. It truly is a great tool in helping us humans to become good detectives in seeing clues, causes, and cures to developing a willing partnership with our horses. Step by step, note combined with note, to make beautiful music and a dance that is unique to you and your horse partner. Brilliant!

#### **Web Sites for More Information on the Classical Dressage Training Scale**

[www.artofriding/articles/trainingscale.html](http://www.artofriding/articles/trainingscale.html)

[www.horsemagazine.com/CLINIC/W/weis/rider'scale/](http://www.horsemagazine.com/CLINIC/W/weis/rider'scale/)

[www.woodsdressage.com/training\\_scale](http://www.woodsdressage.com/training_scale)