

PASSAGE

Riding in passage is as close as you can get to dancing with your horse. Passage is also described as a cadenced movement and has the highest degree of collection in trot (piaffe has the highest degree of collection in trot on the spot). Passage, along with piaffe, is only ridden at the most advanced levels.

There are horses that find it very easy to do passage, while other horses need many hours of hard work and dedication from both horse and rider to learn it. Then there are horses that don't have the capacity to learn this movement, and we must respect that.

The purpose of teaching a horse passage is to use this movement as a strengthening exercise, to increase self-carriage and to improve the tempo—that is, to make the tempo more regular. Passage can be ridden on straight and on curved lines and also in shoulder-in and half pass.

The two-beat tempo of the trot must be maintained in the passage, while at the same time the pair of legs that is on the ground stays there a little longer, while the opposite pair of legs “hovers” in the air. In other words, the passage looks to have a longer and more obvious moment of suspension. Ideally, the horse should lift the toe of the back hoof to the middle of the pastern joint of the opposite hind leg, and the front hoof to the middle of the canon bone of the opposite front leg. The front legs should move so that the forearm approaches a horizontal line and the cannon bone remains vertical.

There is no question that the best way for a rider to learn to ride passage is to learn it on a horse that knows it—a schoolmaster—as when learning other advanced movements.

THE DEMANDS OF THE PASSAGE ON THE HORSE

We must keep in mind that passage is a very demanding movement for the horse. It is a movement that requires well developed muscles, much strength, a high degree of suppleness and lots of energy. Consequently, passage should be practiced for only a few steps at a time in the beginning.

When to start training passage varies from horse to horse. Of course, it is not something to work on with a three or four year old horse. Normally we start this kind of work, taking it very easy, when the horse is six or even a bit older. On the other hand, if the horse is going to learn to dance, he shouldn't start too late either.

Normally, but not always (“it depends...” as we often say), it can be helpful to teach the horse piaffe before we start the passage. The reason is that we don’t want the horse to misunderstand or try to avoid the piaffe by giving us passage, and also because the work in piaffe develops his strength and technical ability for passage.

HOW TO TEACH PASSAGE

The approach for teaching a horse passage varies quite a bit from horse to horse. One horse will find it easiest to go forward into passage by first taking a few steps in piaffe. Another horse may find it easier to come from a medium trot on a short diagonal. And for a third horse, developing the passage by using cavalettis might work well. One horse will figure out the correct tempo more easily if he is ridden in a slower tempo, while for another, a quicker tempo makes more sense. Some horses need to school this movement in a lower frame in order to keep the back free of tension, while others do better in a little higher frame. Normally, for a horse with good ability, developing the passage from a big trot is most effective. Don’t be afraid to try various methods, or to vary between them. This usually produces the best results

Some trainers and riders work their horses in longlines to develop the piaffe and passage. This is a really good idea for a number of reasons. One, because the horse doesn’t have to carry any weight on his back and only needs to think about his own body, and two, because it is a very good idea to look at the horse from the ground, since when we are sitting on the horse it is impossible to see that part of his body that is necessary for us to see to evaluate the quality of the passage. There is no question we become better riders by working with the horse from the ground. ***But keep in mind***, if you are not experienced in long lining, you must find knowledgeable help.

TEMPO, ENERGY AND STRAIGHTNESS

In addition to the horse’s natural ability for passage, it is most important to have a consistent tempo and enough energy. The rider must have the experience and a feel for riding the horse in a steady, regular tempo. When the horse comes from a higher tempo into the passage, it should feel as if the energy that was going forward goes up instead. So if there is not enough impulsion, there will be no passage.

Straightness is also a very important factor. By straightness we don’t only mean to be able to ride straight forward, but also that the horse is equally strong and supple in both sides. He should also be able to step in under himself and carry weight equally with both hind legs.

FROM PIAFFE TO PASSAGE

Passage is often developed from the piaffe by asking the horse to first take a few steps in piaffe, then go forward into passage, and finally to ride forward in collected or perhaps even working trot. This helps to keep the horse thinking forward. Another way to develop passage is to ride medium trot on a half diagonal and then use the collection during the transition to create the energy to go upward for a few steps. Remember to reward the horse as soon as he shows signs of understanding.

The best place to train passage is out in the open where the horse naturally thinks more forward. If your horse is a little fresh one day and something exciting happens outside the arena causing him to take a few passage steps all on his own, it could be a good idea to continue for a few steps more while you give him the aids for passage at the same time. Then by praising him at that moment, you can help him make the connection between the aids and the movement.

THE AIDS FOR PASSAGE

We want the hind legs to step in under the horse's body so the horse can lift his front end. The aid for passage is to stretch up and simultaneously make half-halts to contain the energy in such a way that it goes upward. But normally this is not enough for the horse to understand that he should passage. While maintaining a steady contact to the bit, you also need to use your seat to influence the horse in the same tempo and rhythm as the passage. Your lower legs should be placed slightly further back than normal, giving the signals calmly, alternating from left to right, while staying in the tempo of the trot.

When the horse can take a few steps in passage, continue to develop it by training transitions between piaffe and passage. Travers on a large circle can be a useful strengthening exercise. If one hind leg is weaker than the other you can also ride a few moments in shoulder-in while in the passage. It is a good idea during this training to ride passage in different tempos. If you are able to shift between quicker and slower tempos you will also be more able to control the tempo.

MOST COMMON MISTAKES AND A FEW HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS

- The horse is insufficiently prepared. The basics must be reconfirmed – focus on impulsion, suppleness and straightness.
- The horse's neck is too high and his back is tense. This often happens when the rider tries to lift the horse up with his hands.

- The hind legs are not placed equally in under the horse towards his center of gravity.
- The horse swings from side to side. This is often the result of the hind legs not stepping far enough in under his body. This causes the horse to become croup high and on the forehand.
- The tempo is unsteady, especially in the hind legs. This is often the result of insufficient suppleness or straightness, or because the horse isn't strong enough to carry the required weight on one of the hind legs. Unsteady tempo can sometimes be blamed on the rider if he always carries his whip in the same hand.
- The horse moves his hindquarters out of the circle while working in passage on a bent track. This is a common mistake and causes the horse to become croup high and to lose self-carriage. This problem often occurs when the horse is falling on the forehand and/or the rider does not have his outside leg in place.

Don't forget this work requires patience! In the beginning, practice this movement only a few steps at a time. We want a horse that is proud to show off his passage. Only then will we get an expressive passage...one that is as impressive as a passage should be.