

HALF-HALTS

Your first reaction to discussing the subject of half-halts might be that it is a boring subject, one you have heard enough about already! It could be easy for a rider who has never felt a half-halt really work ('go through') to have this opinion. Those riders will regret not taking the time this subject deserves when years later they discover how important it really is. The half-halt is the foundation for success in dressage. It is impossible to ride what we call "Classical Dressage" without a proper understanding of the significance of the half-halt.

THE PURPOSE OF THE HALF-HALT

The half-halt is used to recover any loss of equilibrium, to decrease the speed, to focus the horse's attention on the rider, to move the center of gravity back, to put the horse in balance, to collect him and as a result create self-carriage. It is also the use of half-halts that enable you to ride your horse 'on the bit'.

In order to make a half-halt the horse must answer the rider's driving and resisting aids correctly. These are the primary aids that create the half-halt, and without them, a successful half-halt is not possible.

A half-halt that does not go through will always create something negative. A horse that does not understand how to correctly answer a half-halt will experience it as something that works against him, and will respond with tension and resistance. Many riders complain that their horses do not want to answer their half-halts, but this is not true! The purpose of the half-halt is to help the horse balance, and there is nothing that he prefers more than to be in balance. The reason the horse does not respond correctly to half-halts is due to the rider giving the wrong aids or because the horse does not understand the aids.

WHEN SHOULD THE RIDER USE A HALF-HALT?

TO PREPARE FOR TURNS

Before leaving the path that the horse is on, a half-halt is used to prepare the horse for a change in direction. The horse always has his weight in the direction of movement. So if the rider wants to change direction - for example, go through a corner, or change across the diagonal - the rider must move the horse's weight further back before he can change the position of the horse's center of gravity, and as a consequence, the direction of travel.

If the rider does not use half-halts to prepare the horse before changing direction, the horse will

lose his balance and tempo when he turns, causing him to tense his muscles to compensate. This situation leads the rider to feel as if the horse falls in while making corners, and causes the horse to come out of the corner on the forehand. So to prepare for changes of direction, always move the center of gravity further back before moving it sideways. Remember that the horse will always follow his center of gravity.

TO DEVELOP THE HORSE'S PACES TO THEIR FULLEST POTENTIAL

The rider should use half-halts to help the horse find the best possible balance and equilibrium, enabling him to move in a free and natural way.

TO ENGAGE THE HIND END

We would like the horse to move his body forward by thrusting (pushing) with his hind legs. This requires that the hind quarters and top line take a form similar to that of a large spring. The energy in this spring is created through the use of half-halts. If we are unable to install this energy into the hind quarters and top line of the horse when we ask him to go forward, he will find another way. The horse's main engine is in his hind legs, but he can also put his weight over his front legs and use them to pull himself along. This is something we want to avoid, as it causes the horse to fall onto his forehand. Instead, the horse must go forward by thrusting with his hind legs. Half-halts are the key to making this possible.

TO DEVELOP COLLECTION

The half-halt is also used to develop collection. Repeated half-halts change the angles of the joints of the hind legs, so that the hind legs become more engaged. The horse will carry more of his own weight, as well as that of the rider, on his hind legs. In this way his energy will be directed more upward than forward. If the rider is able to keep this energy in the horse along with a steady tempo, it is in principle possible to continue working this way all the way to developing piaffe. See the chapter, [Collection and Self-carriage](#).

FOR CAVALETTI WORK AND JUMPING

When riding towards cavaletti and jumps, the rider should use half-halts to balance the horse and regulate his speed. If half-halts are not used or are not effective, the result is often that the horse approaches the obstacles with too much weight on his forehand. Consequently, the energy that should be directed upward is instead directed too much forward. It then follows that the horse increases his speed over the cavaletti or jump, becomes tense, and loses his balance. A horse that has too much weight on his forehand during the approach to a jump will lose a lot of his capacity to jump well. He will jump with a lowered head and hollow back, with too much speed, causing knockdowns and errors. Instead, we want the horse to balance on his quarters and push off over the jump in a correct bascule, a round arc of flight with the apex of the arc over the top of the jump.

THE AIDS FOR A HALF-HALT

In order to make a half-halt correctly, the rider must be able to follow the horse's movements and be totally relaxed.

The rider should use his driving aids to drive the horse forward from behind into the resisting aids to catch up the energy. This MUST be followed by a release.

It feels as if that energy, which comes from the hind feet of the horse, goes like a wave up through the hind legs, along the whole top line and forward to the bit. Now the horse must know that the rider is not asking the horse to use this energy to speed up, but instead to develop collection. To achieve this understanding the rider should use the resisting aids to contain the energy.

The resisting aids are applied by the rider first and foremost by stretching the torso upward, engaging the rider's core. At the same time the rider sits a little deeper into the saddle, tightening the muscles in the lower back and under the seat bones, and gently squeezes the reins. This is followed by a release.

The half-halt is easy to describe, but not always so easy to apply effectively. How does the rider know when a half-halt went through, or when to make a release? The purpose of the half-halt is to balance the horse. The rider should feel the horse's hind legs stepping further forward, his back and withers coming up, and a release at his poll, resulting in a lightness in the rider's hand. The horse feels more upright and directly under the rider's center of gravity. He is more in between the aids. His tempo become steady and rhythmic. And finally, but most importantly, the horse should now be in such a good balance that all his muscles hang on his skeleton just like the ornaments hang on a Christmas tree. The horse no longer needs to use negative tension in order to stay in balance. To make this possible, the horse must answer the aids as the rider gives them. If he does not, the rider will give too prolonged an aid, causing the horse to respond with tension and resistance. See the chapter in this section (The Basics) called The Good and the Bad.

One big mistake that many riders make when giving half-halts is that they do not drive the horse forward enough, or at all. This is often because the rider feels that there is already enough energy there. When we make a half-halt, it is because there is something that we want the horse to do with his body. This something that the horse should do with his body requires a certain amount of energy. And you may ask, "But can't the horse use the energy that already exists?" The answer is no. That existing energy is at that moment being used for something else; either for moving forward, or to create tension, or to balance. So the energy which is required for the horse to answer the half-halt must be created by the driving aids. When a half-halt does not go through it is rarely because the resisting aids are not effective, but rather the driving aids.

You must be careful that when you make a half-halt, the horse may not respond by going against the hand. If this is the first thing the rider feels as an answer to the half-halt, it is a sign that the horse is tensing the muscles in his top line, which in turn makes it difficult for him to bring his hind legs forward in under his body. If the rider nonetheless succeeds in getting the hind legs to step under, the horse will move them back out again as soon as the rider makes a release. A horse that has learned to answer half-halts correctly will immediately feel more relaxed over the top line and lighter in the hand.

MOST COMMON MISTAKES OF THE HALF-HALT

- The rider is too heavy handed.
- The horse is on the forehand making it physically impossible for him to answer correctly.
- The rider tries to pull the horse into the half-halt, from the front to the back, rather than riding the horse forward from behind.
- The rider tightens the muscles in his lower back too much. As a result he is unable to drive the horse forward in such a manner that the horse understands that he should maintain his tempo.
- The rider braces his shoulders, which decreases the strength of his seat.
- The rider tightens his thighs. The consequence of this is that he ends up pushing himself out of the saddle and is no longer effective with his lower legs.
- The horse answers by going against the rider's hand.

HOW TO TEACH THE HORSE HALF-HALTS

Before you begin to teach the horse how to answer half-halts, he must understand how to go forward from the leg. He must move forward into the bit with impulsion. Preferably, he should also understand the lateral leg aid (be able to do a turn on the forehand), so that the rider can effectively use leg aids to keep the horse straight through the half-halt. See the chapter in this section (The Basics) called The Aids.

One way to teach the horse half-halts is to begin simply by teaching driving and resisting aids using transitions between walk and halt. Practice this in as simple a way as possible. This is something big and important that you are teaching your horse and it should stay with him for the rest of his life. Don't ask more of the horse than is necessary in order to do this exercise. He should be straight and in balance, but does not need to be let go or on the bit. You want the horse

to be able to concentrate on the most important aids and nothing else. Walk—stop—walk—stop until it feels easy. When the horse answers the go forward signals, stop driving. When the horse stops, make a release. Once these signals work, you can start carefully using driving and resisting aids at the same time. It is important that you make a release as soon as you feel the horse has answered the half-halt by shortening his strides and moving his weight further back. Remember to praise the horse when he answers correctly.

In making a half-halt, the rider first and foremost influences the hind legs of the horse (the horse engages more). Unfortunately, it happens much too often that we see a reaction in the other end of the horse—he goes against the rider's hands, tries to come off the bit, compresses his neck and perhaps even increases his speed. Since driving aids are used both when decreasing and increasing the speed, the horse must clearly understand when the rider is asking for collection and when he is asking for lengthening of the stride. If there are problems with this, it is not generally that the horse is disobedient, but rather that he has not understood the aids. When this is the case go back to basics.

The effect of the aids on the horse during a half-halt:

- Pressure from the rider's legs creates energy and is a signal for the horse to go forward. At the same time, the legs embrace the horse, so that he stays straight.
- By stretching his torso and opening the angle of the hips, while at the same time bracing the muscles of the lower back, the rider tells the horse to step with his hind legs further under his body.
- When the rider closes his fingers around the reins, this is the signal to the horse that the driving aid now means that he should collect instead of increase the speed.
- When schooling half-halts it is advantageous to carry a whip. The rider can use the whip *carefully* on the hindquarters at the same time as he gives the resisting aids. In this way, the rider can explain to the horse that he primarily wants to influence his hindquarters. The whip serves as an extra leg that can reach the rear end.

The half-halt should not always slow the horse down; it should be possible to make a half-halt without changing the speed or losing energy. By using half-halts we should be able to maintain a steady forward motion and create the best possible balance in which to ride the horse forward. After having taken a certain number of strides (how many depends on the level of education and the horse's ability) the horse will begin to lose the collection, at which point it is time to make another half-halt. A good way to practice using half-halts to increase collection is on a circle while keeping the horse straight. Riding the horse straight on a bent track will invite him to step further under with his hind legs and therefore, create more self-carriage, as opposed to riding the

horse with more bend, which will improve suppleness rather than collection.

To be successful we must study and understand this phenomenon called “half-halt” and then practice it until one day it becomes second nature. It is an essential tool to reaching our goals and is well worth the time it takes to master it. For a better understanding of the half-halt, read the chapters in this section (The Basics) called Harmony, Collection and Self-carriage, The Good and the Bad, and Balance and Equilibrium.