

# THE FRAME

*You will want to have read the two chapters in this section (The Basics) called Harmony and Balance and Equilibrium before beginning this chapter.*

Why can't the horse work in the same frame with a rider on his back as he can without? For the same reason we alter our stance when, for example, we are carrying a heavy bag full of groceries in one hand or a heavy sack on our back.

When you carry something heavy, you alter your posture so that the center of gravity of your load is as close to your own as possible—so that they combine, becoming one center of gravity instead of two. Try carrying your groceries at arm's length and doing a few ballet steps at the same time! Then you will understand the importance of the horse working with what we call the correct frame. You might think that the horse should be able to find the frame necessary to carry a rider all on his own, but that is far from reality. Each horse is built differently, and only a few have the natural ability to carry a rider without significantly altering their frame.

Remember that the horse has spent most of his young life without carrying a rider and has adopted a frame that feels safe and balanced to him. The horse will often try to use the same frame when carrying a rider and compensate for the imbalance that arises by using negative tension.

It is important that we always work the horse in a frame that makes it physically possible for him to remain balanced and improve his gaits. At the same time, we must avoid overstressing his tendons, joints and muscles, but rather strive to develop and strengthen them. We want to develop a frame that enables the horse to experience the rider's weight as part of his own. If we are successful, the horse will feel comfortable to ride, and his confidence in the rider and the work in general will increase, leading to positive results. If we fail, problems will arise, and the horse could be injured.

## WHAT SHOULD THE FRAME LOOK LIKE?

To attempt to describe the frame of the horse in too much detail is not only difficult, it can make us inflexible. No one can hold up a picture and claim that it is the frame in which all horses should work. The correct frame depends on the individuality of the horse. Read this chapter carefully and then form your own perception - your own picture of the frame that best suits your horse.

## WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

***The goal is to teach the horse to organize his body so that he and the rider are moving in harmony.***

When we ride the horse in what we call ‘the correct frame’, we must keep in mind that the frame should make it possible for the horse to stay in balance and to move freely, allowing the horse to develop his talents to the best of his abilities. Furthermore, his conformation, level of training, and innate ability, as well as the rider’s ambitions must be taken into consideration. I like to express it this way:

***The horse must work in a frame which allows him physically to do what we ask. In other words, the horse should never feel handicapped by his frame.***

It is easy to see if and when the horse rounds his neck. On the other hand, it is difficult to determine if he is in balance, carrying himself correctly and going honestly on the bit. It is much more important, and a much bigger challenge, to get the whole horse into the picture when evaluating your goals.

The danger for the less experienced rider is that it can feel that the horse is more in control and easier to ride when he rounds his neck. Therefore, it is not surprising that the first thing that many riders do is to make the horse round his neck - often by using the hands too much, or by resorting to incorrectly used draw reins. Unfortunately, it often seems that the proof of whether a rider is good or not is based on his ability to make the horse round his neck as quickly as possible.

## WHAT SHOULD THE POLL AND NECK LOOK LIKE?

***The frame of the horse from the withers forward should be a natural consequence of the way in which he works behind the withers.***

To say it in another way, when the frame in front is wrong, it must be corrected behind the withers, rather than using every means possible to force the horse to round his neck.

When studying the form of the neck we can compare it to the instrument panel of a car. If the oil light comes on, it means that the engine needs oil. The driver now has two choices: he may either add oil or disconnect the light. If he chooses to add more oil (work from behind), the light will automatically go out and indicate that the problem is solved. If he chooses to disconnect the light (only work on getting the neck round) he is just fooling himself, and the real problem will remain unsolved.

To understand more easily why the frame should be developed from behind, try the following experiment:

1. Stand up and stretch tall.



2. Bend your neck, moving your chin toward your chest.



What happens to your back? You become hollow-backed and tense. ***The same thing happens to the horse when we develop his frame from the front; when we begin by asking him to round his neck.***

3. Now stand up straight again and relax



4. Bend your legs slightly.

Your center of gravity now moves further back.



5. Now try to move forward.

Notice that it is natural to bend your head and neck forward and down in order to keep your balance as you move ahead.



What has happened to your back now? It has rounded! By asking the horse to step further

under his body with his hind legs, ***he will seek to stretch forward and down with his head and neck, and he will round his back.***

Help the horse to work as balanced under saddle as when he runs free. See the chapter in this section (The Basics) called Balance and Equilibrium.

## ALLOW THE HORSE TO SPEAK

How should we begin as we pick up the reins and start to ride? Where should we start? On occasion, it is a good idea to start by letting your horse work in a free and open frame on straight lines, almost without influence from you. This will give you a chance to see where the horse needs help in finding the right frame. Make sure that you are relaxed and following the horse. Maintain a light contact with your horse's mouth through the reins. While you work in this manner, observe how the horse reacts. Pick up on his signals and try to understand them. Then decide how the frame needs to be changed. Ask yourself the question, "How can I help my horse to frame his body correctly?"

## COMMON OBSERVATIONS AND THEIR CAUSES

- If the horse runs away with you under these circumstances, there are many possible reasons:
  - Fear, possibly of the rider, or of the rider's aids
  - Tension
  - The horse's weight placed too far forward, causing him to accelerate in order to stay in balance
  - The horse too much on the forehand, causing him to want to break free and raise his head and neck in order to recover his balance
- If the horse curls his neck up, comes behind the vertical and drops the contact with the bit, he is not using his back, and as a consequence the self-carriage is lost.
- If the horse does not go forward it may be because:
  - The rider is working him in the wrong frame
  - The horse hurts somewhere
  - The horse is disobedient to the aids/signals that tell him to go forward
- If the horse cannot move straight, it's too early to begin asking the horse to change his frame. Putting the horse in the right frame requires a certain degree of collection, and attempting to collect a crooked horse will only make things worse.

Of course, it is impossible to describe the limitless variety of reactions that your horse may have to this little test. However, keep in mind that there is always a natural reason for the way your

horse reacts and behaves.

## SETTING A GOAL AND DEVELOPING A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO YOUR RIDING

*One could say that if we do everything correctly from the beginning, we can avoid problems, which of course is the ideal toward which we should strive.*

Sometimes we ride around without a plan, in a somewhat unorganized manner. As a result, the horse doesn't feel honestly obedient and 'through'. And when we are unable to explain why the horse is working this way, we reason that it must be because he is disobedient, stiff or simply stupid. Is this a productive answer? No, such reasoning is seldom useful. To find the correct answer, we must try to understand, organize and simplify.

Consider the example of preparing for dinner guests:

- First, you set a goal—you decide what you are going to serve.
- Then you look to see what ingredients (natural abilities) you have available.
- You also have to make sure that the kitchen tools and appliances (aids) work.
- Only then are you ready to follow the recipe.
- The meal now has an increased chance of success, but its outcome will of course depend on your experience and natural abilities for cooking.

### **WHAT DO YOU GAIN BY SETTING GOALS AND DEVELOPING A SYSTEM?**

1. You create a comprehensive overview.
2. Your horse will be able to keep up with the demands of the work, both physically and psychologically.
3. If something is not going well, you will be able to discover and recognize the problem immediately.

### **WHAT IS THE GOAL?**

The goal is to help the horse work in the correct frame, in balance and in equilibrium.

### **WHAT IS THE SYSTEM?**

It is essential to have a system and a plan for the warm-up in order to achieve good results.

However, it is not possible to describe one way in which to work all horses so that they work in the correct frame. Attempting to do so would result in a system that would work for only some horses. We must use a system that suits the particular horse we are working with, and as we develop this system, we need to consider a number of factors:

- The age of the horse
- The horse's conformation
- The horse's level of education
- The purpose of the training and the goal
- The horse's innate abilities; his weak and strong points
- The horse's temperament
- The horse's condition
- All the information we collected from the horse when we 'let him speak to us'

Some horses work best when we warm them up by taking them for a walk in the woods. Others (often the older horses) could benefit from a little canter work before being asked to work in a more organized frame. Some become focused and ready to work more quickly if the rider does a few minutes of work in-hand before mounting. These are just a few of the many possibilities. However, there are some general goals to take into consideration when working with the frame of the horse. As I have mentioned earlier, the most important thing to keep in mind concerning the frame, is that the horse uses and shapes his body so that his center of gravity is placed directly under the rider's.

In addition, a correct frame should:

- make it possible for the horse to stay in balance with a rider on his back
- lead to muscle development, especially along the top-line
- make it possible for the horse to work without negative tension
- make it possible for the horse to maintain and even improve his natural paces
- improve self-carriage
- prevent the horse from becoming overexerted

Please refer to the chapter, The Pyramids, for more information about developing a system.

Once again, I can't say that this system suits every horse, but I am willing to risk describing this specific way of working with the horse, because I believe it can help the majority of horses to find the natural frame in which they can work best when carrying a rider.

## DEVELOPING THE HORSE'S FRAME

All horses have different conformations, ways of moving and temperaments. We have to respect this. We all have an idea of what the horse's frame should look like - we *need* to have this to differentiate between right and wrong - but as the saying goes, "only he who wears the shoe knows where it pinches."

How can we help the horse, without dominating him, to organize his body so that he works in what we call a correct frame? We can do this by making only four demands on the horse (described below). In order for the horse to meet these demands, he must, of his own free will, find the correct way to balance himself and shape his body into the right frame for the work that is required of him, and for his unique body.

In order to get the most benefit as you read the next section, imagine that you are riding.

Begin with your horse in a halt, standing totally straight. So far, you have not given the horse any signals. Make a light contact with the horse's mouth through the reins. ***Do not ask the horse to give. Just sit still.*** Mentally prepare to walk your horse forward. Before giving the horse any signals, think about the following details:

1. Decide exactly when you and your horse will move forward.
2. Make a decision about the direction in which you will move.
3. Decide ***how*** you will move forward. Will you take long or short steps? What tempo? Visualize moving forward together, at exactly the same time, as if the horse's legs were your legs.
4. Ask the horse to stand straight and vertically, right underneath your center of gravity. To achieve this, begin by stretching your upper body tall and sitting in balance in the middle of the 'seesaw' that extends from the horse's head to his tail, keeping the knees low and dropping the legs down from the hips. The seesaw should not be tipped too far up or down but should be in perfect equilibrium. To help the horse find that point of equilibrium, use your body like the pole held by a tightrope walker—lean a little forward and then backward until you find that place where you feel the horse balances his body just right, and you are sitting straight and balanced on both seat bones. By stretching your torso upward, and using driving aids at the same time, you can create a feeling of having more horse in front of you than behind. Do not correct the horse to achieve this. Just imagine it, experience it in your

mind, and sit in a way so that you maintain these signals with your body and position when you ride forward.

When the horse moves forward, he should do so in exactly the same manner as you. Do with your body the same as you want the horse to do with his. When it's time to walk forward, you should have already decided the direction, when to turn, etc. Think to yourself, "Now I am going to walk forward in this tempo," and the horse should follow you exactly. Next, make a decision to turn. Turn your body and the horse should turn his. Then stretch upward, stop with your own body and thereby ask the horse to do the same. Walk forward and feel that when you increase the length of the strides yourself, the horse does the same. Stretch upward and think 'short strides,' moving your seat bones in short strides and the horse will follow suit. Feel that you're moving sideways and the horse will leg yield, and so on.

In other words, the horse should copy you. If the horse does not follow you, you have two legs and two reins that can help as required. Often, when the horse does not follow you, and doesn't turn when you turn, the seesaw is tipped downhill with too much of the horse's weight on his forehead, in which case the seesaw needs to be adjusted.

If you can retain the feeling of the horse placing himself directly beneath your center of gravity, balanced in his topline, with more horse in front of you than behind, he will adjust his body, little by little, until he finds the correct frame. If the horse can't organize his body into the correct frame, it won't feel right to him and he will have difficulty staying in balance. Be patient. It pays to help the horse find the frame that is totally right for him.

If the horse's center of gravity is a long way away from yours at the beginning of this exercise, you have to accept that it can take time for the horse to find the frame where his center of gravity moves under the rider's. But once you've carried out this exercise successfully, it will be much easier the next time.

Everything the horse does should start with a thought in the rider's head: *see it...feel it...do it*. The opposite would be to do it...feel it...and be disappointed. The horse should always react to our signals, rather than the rider reacting to what the horse does. A thought is formed in the rider's head, the head speaks to the rider's body, and the rider's body speaks to the horse, and the horse responds to the rider's signal.

## USING TRANSITIONS TO DEVELOP THE FRAME

The rider can use transitions to activate the hind legs of the horse and to teach the horse to shift his center of gravity back and forth.

When the horse is asked to do many transitions, the horse often begins to anticipate the movement and to move his hind legs further under himself in preparation. The center of gravity moves further back, the horse begins to shorten his steps, and as a consequence, he decreases his speed. The rider then has an opportunity to use his seat and legs to drive the horse forward to the bit. In this manner, it is possible to ride the horse forward from behind and into the bit during the transition. This is especially productive with horses that tend to rush.

If the rider goes about this process in the right way, and with sensitivity, the work will create a natural desire in the horse to want to stretch his head and neck forward and down. When this occurs, it is very important for the rider to meet him with a sensitive hand, providing a consistent and light contact with the bit, encouraging him to continue to stretch forward and down. ***Always keep in mind that it is the horse that should seek the bit. The bit should not be pulled backward to the horse.***

When the bit is pulled back by the rider, it creates one of the worst and most common faults—the short, compressed neck. This situation leads to tension, causing the horse to lock his back and move with stiff, straight hind legs, often with his nose behind the vertical.

## **WHY DO TRANSITIONS CREATE A NEED IN THE HORSE TO STRETCH HIS HEAD AND NECK FORWARD AND DOWN?**

Transitions activate and gymnastically work the hind legs and back, contracting the muscles. This type of exercise creates a natural need for the horse to respond by relaxing and stretching his muscles. The best way for the horse to relax is to stretch forward and down with his head and neck, thus stretching all the muscles in his topline. Our goal is to be able to ask the horse to contract and lengthen the muscles of his topline, similar to the bellows of an accordion. Make sure that the whole horse is included, and not, as we often see, just the neck.

## **ARE THERE OTHER WAYS TRANSITIONS CAN INFLUENCE THE FRAME?**

Transitions and half halts can initially be used to encourage the horse to step with his hind legs further in under his body, shifting his center of gravity further back. Thereafter, half halts can be used to maintain this balance and activity of the hind end, while the rider simultaneously encourages the horse to go forward. As a result, the horse will need to lower his head and neck so that he directs enough of his weight in the direction of movement in order to go forward. When we work the horse in this manner and develop the frame from behind in a natural way, we avoid tension and resistance, and the horse's entire body becomes involved in the work.

The goal is to reach a point where the horse gains enough understanding and physical ability so that half-halts are all that is needed to achieve this response. But to begin with, it may be necessary to alternate between half halts and walk/trot transitions, progressing later to canter/trot

and canter/walk transitions.

## DIFFERENT TYPES OF FRAMES

### THE LOW FRAME

The horse stretches his head and neck forward and down, stretching the topline muscles and relaxing. His frame is free. The horse works naturally. He should be able to go into this frame whenever the rider asks for it. If this is impossible, it is necessary to go back to work with the basics again. When the horse is in a low frame, it is important that the horse remains on the aids and increases his speed only when the rider asks for it. He should not rush away.

A good way to teach a young horse or an incorrectly educated older horse to reach forward and down is to ride a 20 meter circle in walk. Then change the circle into a square. Ride through each corner by making a quarter turn on the haunches while keeping the horse quite straight on the outside. You may find it helpful to use an opening inside rein when turning.

If the horse is on his forehand or above the bit, he will find it difficult to move his front end around the turns since there is too much weight on his front legs. In this situation, the horse may actually choose to move his haunches out instead of moving his forehand around. When this happens, the rider should place his outside leg further back to help keep the hindquarters in place.

To begin with, the horse may go against the rider's hands and become tense during these turns. This is because he feels that the turn throws him out of balance. But don't correct the horse. Let him think for himself and come up with a solution on his own. He will eventually figure out how to frame his body so that he can make the turns without losing his balance.

The solution that the horse should come up with is to move his hind legs further in under his body. This will unload his front end and make it much easier to move the shoulders and execute the movement, and eventually will create a natural need in the horse to reach forward and down. If the horse is unable to solve the problem on his own after a number of turns, the rider should continue these turns on the square until the horse begins to reach forward and down. At the moment he reaches forward and down, ride him straight and forward again along the line that makes up the side of the square, and resume the exercise. Use the small turns in the corners as needed until the horse can make the quarter turn on the haunches successfully.

To reiterate, this exercise will create a need in the horse to reach forward and down as a result of his hind legs stepping forward in under his body during the turns; the hind legs step further under, the back comes up, and the horse reaches forward and down of his own free will. We can then maintain this reaching forward and down by using our seat and legs to drive the horse

forward to the bit. When this takes place, we can say we have built the frame up from behind, which is the correct way to do it.

The low frame should not cause the horse to fall on his forehead and lose his equilibrium. *The rider should feel that the topline—from the tail to the withers—is still uphill even when the horse stretches his neck forward and down.*

### When should the horse be ridden in a low frame?

- During the early phase of the warm-up
- After a period of collected work
- As needed throughout any lesson or workout.

The training session should always end with work in a low frame, during which time the blood circulation and oxygenation of the muscles increase. This removes the toxins that accumulated in the muscles during work, which can cause them to ache.

### Most Common Mistakes

- **The horse falls on his forehead (has too much of his weight placed over the front legs).** The rider feels as if he is riding downhill. In this situation, the horse overloads his front legs, locks up in the shoulders and works with inactive hind legs. He makes poor use of his back. The horse loses the quality of his movement and pulls himself forward with his front legs instead of thrusting himself forward with his hind legs.



*Downhill frame*



*Uphill frame*

- **The horse's neck is pulled in too much (too short).** This results in a tense back, stiff, straight hind legs and loss of self-carriage. The quality of the gaits—especially the “schwung”—is lost. The rider often feels resistance to his hand. Sometimes problems with the tongue develop (tongue above the bit, hanging out, etc.).
- **The horse tenses.** It is impossible to supple a tense horse (loosen his muscles). If a horse is tense, he loses his movement, becomes uncomfortable to ride, and increases the risk for damage to his joints and muscles.



## THE COLLECTED, ELEVATED FRAME

When should the horse be ridden in an elevated frame? When we want to execute movements that require increased collection and self-carriage, the horse must be ridden in a more elevated frame. In this type of frame, the neck is raised to a degree so that the horse can lower his hindquarters more easily, therefore increasing engagement (since more weight is placed over the hindquarters), and lightening the front end, which frees the shoulders.

As self-carriage increases, it becomes progressively easier for the horse to change direction (turn). Self-carriage is necessary in different degrees for movements such as turn on the haunches and canter pirouettes. If the horse is to perform movements such as piaffe or passage, it requires, as for canter pirouettes, that much of the weight shifts onto the hindquarters in order for the horse to be physically able to execute the movement.

When the horse has learned how to carry himself properly, it feels as if someone has lifted him up from his withers towards the ceiling with a cord attached to the rafters. He feels so high up that his legs barely reach the footing. It feels as if the horse hardly touches the ground with his toes. Whereas, riding a horse that doesn't carry himself feels as though someone has cut that cord, letting him fall heavily to the ground with each stride.

Increased self-carriage and engagement is accomplished through increased collection using half-halts. In addition to half-halts, the collecting exercises that improve self-carriage can be used. It is most effective to combine half-halts with collecting movements.

When you use a collecting exercise as a tool - for example, haunches-in on a circle - you put the horse into a situation that makes him feel that he needs to collect. This is ideal since it leads the horse to feel that collecting is a natural thing for him to do. Keep in mind that collected work should always be combined with work in a lower, more relaxed frame to prevent overexertion.

When do we start asking the horse to work in a more collected, elevated frame? Because this is a gradual process, it is incorrect to think that there is a defined point in the training of the horse when we suddenly ask the horse to change his frame and begin to carry himself. A higher, more elevated frame is developed over years of very hard work. Before the horse is able to carry himself in an elevated frame, his muscles and his technique must be developed in order to avoid stressing the muscles in the quarters.

Work that develops the ability of the horse to carry himself should be started as early as his natural aptitude allows, but a little at a time, slowly increasing the degree of collection and elevation. When tension arises, be very careful to alternate this work often with work in a lower frame. But don't be afraid to gradually ask for increased self-carriage, because this is clearly the best thing for the horse, as it 'unloads the front end', reducing wear and tear. Just be careful and be patient.

### MOST COMMON MISTAKES

- **The nose is behind the vertical (over-bent)**—The vertical line should drop through the eye, to approximately the corner of the mouth. When this is not the case, the horse will work with an inactive back and no self-carriage. His desire to go forward will disappear and the

“schwung” will be lost. The half-halts will not go through to the hind legs.

- **The horse is being pulled together**—This causes the horse to shorten his neck, creating tension in his back, and forcing him to move with straight hind legs. There will be no self-carriage, and the quality of his gaits will be lost. In addition, a pacey walk and/or four-beat canter could result.
- **The horse is not straight**—In order to work in an elevated frame with increase self-carriage, the horse needs to be equally strong and well-balanced on both sides.
- **The horse is not supple enough**—In order for the horse to move freely in a collected frame, the horse must be supple.
- **The rider thinks that the horse is collected when he is actually only walking slowly.**
- **The rider attempts to collect the horse by slowing him down with the resisting aids but without using enough driving aids at the same time.**
- **The horse works with a short, contracted neck.**
- **The horse is on two tracks.**
- **The horse feels trapped by the rider's aids.**
- **The horse is tense.**

## WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN WORKING WITH THE FRAME?

*First and foremost, we must be patient.* We should visualize a picture in our minds of the finished horse. But we must remember that before our horses can work in this wonderful finished frame (as exemplified by the best Grand Prix horses), the muscles, self-carriage and technique must be built up, and this takes time.

It's very important that we stay on the right track by working with the horse in a manner that leads to the desired goal, and that we take the horse's conformation into consideration. *We should work with the horse, not against him. Never force a horse into any frame.*

*The horse must always work in a frame which allows him physically to do what we ask. In other words, the horse should never feel handicapped by his frame.*