

PIAFFE

Piaffe is the highest degree of collection that can be executed in the trot (trot in place). The horse should maintain a steady tempo and diagonal footfall, as when moving forward in the trot. Piaffe is the most difficult movement in trot and is only required in the most advanced levels.

In order to produce a good piaffe the horse must have a talent for it. It must be easy for him to step under with his hind legs and consequently to lower his hind quarters. Some horses have a conformation that limits their ability to collect, and it is important to take it easy with these horses. But even if you have a horse that does not have the capacity to produce a Grand Prix quality piaffe, it can be beneficial to work with him on developing a piaffe since this kind of collecting work can have a positive effect as a strengthening exercise that leads to increased self-carriage.

The horse must be completely straight in the piaffe so that his hind legs carry equal weight. The hind legs should step far enough in under the horse's body and carry enough of his weight to allow him to come into self-carriage. This collection should elevate the forehead and result in a very light contact with the rider's hands. The nose should come close to the vertical and the poll should be the highest point. The horse should lift his front leg so that his hoof is raised to the middle of the cannon bone of the leg that remains on the ground. The hind hoof should be lifted to a level even with the middle of the fetlock joint of the other hind leg.

In piaffe the horse must continue to think forward, and to the observer's eye, should appear to almost move forward. It is a big mistake for the horse to step backwards. On the other hand, it is not a problem, especially for the inexperienced horse, to actually move forward a little to begin with – about the width of a hoof print for each step forward is a good initial goal.

The horse must not lose his expression, and although the piaffe is a difficult movement, it should look easy—as if the horse almost dances with the rider.

HOW AND WHEN TO START THE PIAFFE

Once again, we have to say, “It depends.” It depends on how easy the horse finds this movement, his talent for it, the level in which he is working and his condition. Normally the horse can start this work at age 5, providing he has the basic education, a talent for piaffe and his muscles are well developed. It is also true that we work towards piaffe each time we make a transition between or within the gaits. Such movements develop the piaffe tremendously. See the chapter in this section called Transitions.

It is a very good idea to start this kind of work either in hand or in longreins. This is primarily so that the horse needs only to worry about balancing his own body, but also because this allows the handler to see how the horse works. See the chapter in Section 6 called Longreining.

Before starting the piaffe work under saddle, the horse should move straight and forward into both reins. He should be thinking forward, with almost an excess amount of energy. He should be supple and under the aids. It is a given that the horse should answer driving and resisting aids correctly and that horse and rider are in harmony.

Right from the beginning do your best to use the smallest aids possible, maybe even try to lighten your seat a little once in a while. The horse should feel a little like he is just playing. It is also important that the horse can keep up with the rider's demands, both physically and mentally, and that he understands what he is being asked to do. The end product should be a horse that likes to show off his piaffe, and is proud of it. We don't want a horse that piaffes because he is afraid of the rider.

The most common way to start teaching piaffe is to begin in walk on the track, next to the wall. Start by collecting the walk as if you want to make a halt. When the horse begins to angle his hind legs in under his body, giving you the feeling that he is lowering his hindquarters, you can ask him to trot forward with short strides; ask him just to change gait, not the speed. It should feel as if Tarzan is lifting your horse up by the withers. As soon as the horse trots, praise him. A few steps at a time is plenty to begin with. At this stage it is a good idea to get some help from the ground by a knowledgeable person who can use a whip of suitable length (first and foremost remembering to stay in a safe position!).

Another possible approach is to ask for some piaffe steps directly out of a few steps of rein back. Ride 6 strides of rein back. During the 5th and 6th strides, increase the energy and then immediately ask for piaffe.

The correct frame for this work will vary from horse to horse. Most common is to have the horse in a more elevated frame with the poll as the highest point, as this makes it easier for the horse to lower his croup. As soon he begins to understand this work, it's a good idea to practice piaffe outdoors, since most horses are more forward there. It helps to find a place where the footing is good, and slightly downhill. Asking the horse to bring his hind legs under while on a downhill slope makes it more natural for the horse to do so.

The horse needs plenty of energy to produce the piaffe, but don't push him. If your horse stays relaxed from the start, this is what will create the best piaffe in the end. Remember not to ask for too many steps at a time. If you start this work when the horse is 5 or 6 you have plenty of time

before he will have to do piaffe in competition.

THE AIDS

The aids for piaffe are the same as we use in the preparation for a transition from trot to walk or in a walk pirouette - half halts that go through. Normally the rider places his lower legs a little further back than usual keeping a deep heel and knee. He sits deeply in the saddle to drive the horse forward while maintaining a steady tempo. The rider's position should be as vertical and quiet as possible. The hands can resist slightly, but mostly just give the horse something to go forward to. The signal to the horse to move forward again comes from the rider moving his lower legs slightly forward. It is important to consistently ride forward to an appropriate degree. Using the hands as a brake to hold the horse back is a big mistake. It is the degree of *collection* which moves the center of gravity so far back that the horse remains on the spot.

MOST COMMON MISTAKES

- The horse does not stay straight.
- The horse steps too far in under himself, either with the front or the hind legs.
- The tempo does not remain steady.
- The horse doesn't think forward.
- The horse crosses his front legs or his hind legs.
- The nose comes behind the vertical.
- The rider uses aids that are too loud, kicking with the lower legs.
- The rider piaffes more than the horse.
- The rider asks for too many piaffe steps at a time.
- The horse is too tense, maybe even afraid of the piaffe.