

COLLECTION AND SELF-CARRIAGE

First and foremost, our goal as riders is to help the horse to balance as well as possible. Once we have accomplished that, we can begin to build the horse's ability to collect so he will gradually carry more and more of his weight over his hindquarters.

Before we begin to ask the horse to increase the load on the hindquarters, there are several things that must first be in place and functioning. Even though working towards increased collection and self-carriage will develop your horse in a positive direction, if not done correctly, it can also lead to big problems.

- The horse must be working comfortably in a frame in which he feels naturally balanced, even with a rider on his back.
- The horse must understand the driving aids.
- The horse must understand the resisting aids.
- The horse must respond correctly to the rider's inside leg, driving him into the outside rein. This means the horse is able to correctly execute a turn on the forehand and a leg-yield.
- The horse must think forward.
- Horse and rider must be in harmony.
- The horse must have confidence when working in between the rider's aids.
- The horse should remain balanced when ridden on a straight line.
- The horse must be physically and mentally relaxed.
- Most importantly, the rider must clearly understand what collection and self-carriage are and how to achieve them.

Before you go any further, if you haven't already done so, read the chapters in this section (The Basics) called Harmony, Balance, The Rider's Position, The Aids, and Straightness.

Let's start by taking a look at what the horse needs to do with his body in order to reach a larger degree of collection, and as a consequence carry more weight over his hind quarters. If you don't have a clear picture of this, you won't be able to give the correct aids.

Try this: Put your palms on the floor and your legs slightly stretched out behind you. You'll find that you have to carry a lot of your weight on your arms.

Now gradually move your legs more forward, closer to your torso and towards your center of gravity. Notice that as you do this, your center of gravity gradually moves over your legs and your arms need to hold up less and less of your weight.

If you had tried to move yourself forward in your first position, where you had a greater amount of weight on your arms, you would have been forced to pull yourself forward with your arms. But with your legs more forward in under your torso, your back muscles engage, and you are able to push yourself forward with your legs.

For the horse to be able to move his hind legs more in under himself while carrying a rider on his back, he must be balanced in a way that prepares him to do that.

- The horse must be equally balanced in both directions, and equally strong and supple on both sides of his body. This is why working on straightness is very important and why the horse must understand how to correctly respond to the rider's inside leg in order to make the horse supple on both sides of his body.
- Horse and rider must be in harmony in order for the horse to be balanced well with a rider on his back.
- There must be enough energy for the horse to maintain straightness. And to create energy the horse must respond to the driving aids with more weight in front of the rider's legs than behind them.

Now a clear picture is beginning to form. To dance ballet or execute gymnastic floor exercises requires really good balance. So we will continue this chapter by talking about balance. Since you have read the chapter about straightness you understand the example of comparing a pearl necklace to the horse's neck and vertebrae.

Collection and self-carriage is primarily developed by working with straightness.

Start with this exercise:

- Ride in medium walk on the quarter line with your horse in a free and open frame. Look up and straight ahead. Imagine you are walking on a tightrope, 50 feet up in the air, so don't fall off!
- Your horse should put his front legs on the line, moving them forward and onto a line in

front of his chest bone. This requires the horse to push his body forward with his hind legs and stretch his neck forward. If he just moves his front legs straight forward he will develop a swaying walk.

- Imagine that your horse picks his hind legs up and moves them straight forward towards the middle of his body and center of gravity. You should almost feel like he moves his hind legs forward between your legs. Your seat should allow your horse to swing his back.

If the horse makes the steps too short with his hind legs, they won't be able to reach forward and in under his center of gravity to carry weight. As a consequence, he will be forced to keep his front legs under his body, close to his center of gravity. Can you picture this? After all, some of his legs have to carry his weight.

This feeling that the horse moves his hind legs forward and in the direction of his center of gravity must always exist. This is true for all three gaits, when making circles and turns, and in all movements and transitions.

Developing increased carriage of the hind quarters has now begun. We normally see the horse really moving his hind legs forward towards his center of gravity when he actually goes forward energetically with good thrust from behind and with his neck reaching forward.

Often we see riders keeping their horses in a slower speed where the hind legs move almost only up and down, and because of this the front legs move in under the body instead of the hind legs. Because of the slow speed, the rider thinks that the horse is collected, which of course is not true. Instead, the horse is what we call, 'on the forehand'.

Why does the horse fall on his forehand? There are several reasons:

- The rider has pulled his horse backwards into the slow speed.
- The rider's hands or his arms are too tense.
- The rider isn't driving the horse forward enough towards the resisting aids.
- The horse is not supple enough.
- The horse's back or hind legs hurt.
- The rider doesn't understand how to create collection.
- And the most common mistake, the rider has forced the horse to give in his poll and neck by using too much hand.

When we say that '*the aids must go through*', this means the aids must go *through the topline*. The

resisting aids must go through the horse's topline to the hind legs, and the driving aids must go all the way from hind end, forward to the bit. To make this possible, first and foremost the horse must understand these aids. But that isn't enough. ***The horse must also be straight and supple over his topline for the aids to go through.***

Picture the topline as a long straight pipe, through which the aids must pass. If there is 'garbage' in the pipe (I'm thinking of stiff or tense muscles under the saddle or other parts of the back) then the aids can't go through. They will simply stop when they reach the tension and the tension will only grow worse. The pipe must be as straight as possible.

This means we will have to clear the pipe (topline) so the aids can pass through freely. We can't clear this pipe with air or water. Instead we need to send energy forward through it. ***When we use driving aids to create thrust from the hind legs, this energy should go from the hind hooves up through the hind legs, continue over the croup and through the back and neck all the way forward to the bit.*** This is what we mean by, 'riding the horse forward from behind and to the bit'.

If your driving aids cause the horse to push his body forward with his hind legs and at the same time reach his neck forward to the bit, you are '*clearing the pipe*'. And when you feel, at the same time, that the back muscles are swinging more, you have achieved the goal of this exercise.

For the horse to learn to carry more weight on his hindquarter, it is very important that there is always an energy that begins with the thrust from the hind legs and travels all the way forward to the bit.

When the horse is able to do this, it is time to begin the training which gradually leads to increased collection and self-carriage.

INCREASING COLLECTION AND SELF-CARRIAGE

Increased collection is a combination of the hind legs stepping further forward towards the center of gravity, and the muscle development (especially those over the hind quarters and topline as well as the abdominal muscles). The horse must also become increasingly supple and elastic. Increased collection is not something that can happen overnight but takes months and years of consistent work.

You can describe a horse that is in good self-carriage, as a horse that finds it easy to carry a rider on his back. This is a horse that moves naturally even with a rider. He works without any negative tension in his muscles and finds it easy to perform collected movements.

A horse in self-carriage:

- moves forward due to increased thrust from the hind legs
- feels like he is travelling a little bit uphill (due to his lowered hindquarters)
- carries his head and neck freely and naturally with the poll as highest point
- moves around more easily and looks more supple
- looks as if he is dancing elastically forward

And the best benefit from a horse in self-carriage is that it helps the horse stay strong and sound for a long time.

Exercises to Develop and Improve Self-carriage

Ride out in the open as much as possible, on trails or at the very least in an outside arena. Free, forward movement is important, and in most cases, horses think forward on their own the best when outside the indoor arena.

Climb up and down hills. When the horse goes downhill he automatically moves his hind legs further in under himself to a degree dictated by the amount of the slope. When he goes uphill he automatically increases the pushing power of his hind legs. When teaching collection, it is a good idea to do it where the ground slopes downward a little, and when developing thrust from the horse's hind legs, a slight uphill slope will help develop the muscles while maintaining a steady tempo.

Make many transitions into trot or canter, where you get a feeling that your horse accelerates forward from between your legs, out from under the saddle and up in the air. It should feel like he starts the transition with his hind legs first, as opposed to feeling that the front end runs away from the rear end, or that the horse leans forward. When making a transition from trot or canter to walk, ride your horse forward and picture him going up a staircase.

Change speeds in trot and canter (transitions within the gaits) while the horse continues to think forward and maintains a steady tempo.

Ride on bent tracks while keeping the horse completely straight, for example on circles and serpentine, to help develop collection. You must concentrate on keeping your horse completely straight on the outside, with a feeling that he is almost a little shorter on the outside and a little freer on the inside. The horse's outside ear, outside shoulder and outside hip should be on the same line. It is very effective to alternate between riding the horse straight and bent while on bent tracks. When you ride the horse bent it has a suppling effect, and when you straighten the horse with your outside aids it has a collecting effect. For more on this subject, read Straightness on Bent Tracks, the next chapter in this section (The Basics).

Ride shoulder-in and transitions in shoulder-in to develop self-carriage, where the less angle you have and the straighter you ride the horse in the shoulder-in, the more collection you create.

Ride travers (haunches-in) to increase collection. We call this movement a *collecting movement* because it requires a certain degree of collection to perform correctly. However, collecting movements can also be used when first developing collection and self-carriage earlier in training. Combining collecting exercises such as travers, renvers, shoulder-in and counter shoulder-in is also very effective.

Ride over cavalettis as a tool to develop the horse's muscles, balance, and tempo, as well as to practice collecting and lengthening of the stride. For more information, read the chapter in this section (The Basics) called Cavalettis.

Exercises are important in the development of collection and self-carriage, however, it also requires that you have the ability to imagine your horse as he would look and feel when his self-carriage has increased to a further degree, and to ride your horse with this picture in front of your inner eye and a feeling in your body that he is already there. This will create a controlled disharmony between you and your horse. If you can do this without correcting him, little by little he will begin to work like that horse you imagine. When the horse feels the disharmony, he will gradually begin to adapt his body to the frame you have created around him. And then when the day arrives that your horse looks and feels like the horse you pictured, it is time to exchange that picture with another one that shows how the horse will look when he has developed by yet another degree. If you continue to ride your horse every day as he is here and now, he will never advance.

Remember that rest is an important part of the horse's training as well. It is during rest that the horse's muscles develop, not while he is working. You could say that the muscles break down while the horse is working, but of course he will not develop his muscles while he is resting if he has not worked beforehand. The optimal combination of work and rest depends on the individual horse. We have to take it step by step and use common sense. It is not unusual for a horse to need a week or maybe even more to rest after a period of strenuous muscle building work. But keep in mind that rest does not mean the horse should stay in his stall or in a pasture. He needs to rest from the strenuous muscle building work but will benefit from trail rides in walk or even an easy trot, or some simple suppling work. During this time he could also use an extra day off now and then. And if he feels really overworked it may be good to give him some time off for a longer period.

It is important that we stay on the right track. You are on the wrong track if the horse:

- stops moving willingly and naturally forward

- shows signs of soreness
- loses his regular and rhythmic gaits
- resists work
- goes against the hand
- doesn't want to keep a steady contact
- becomes tense and unwilling
- is not willing to vary his frame easily

If any of these signs appear it means you must change the way the horse is being worked. Also remember to alternate between collecting and suppling work. The frame your horse works in should over time become *stable, but never static*.

How can we tell if we are on the right track and what should we look for?

- It is a good idea to film your horse once in a while when you are working him. Or take pictures from different angles every 6 months. Save the pictures and films and compare them regularly.
- When you ride a movement such as a 10-meter circle or a figure eight with 8- or 10-meter circles you will clearly feel it when the horse is more vertical, stable, and rhythmic, and consequently in better balance.
- Ride counter canter at regular intervals. This will also help you feel if your horse has improved his self-carriage. This is especially true if you ride serpentine in canter while maintaining the same lead all the way, therefore riding every other loop in counter canter.
- Many horses find it easier to balance and carry weight on the hindquarters in canter. For example, if you have developed better balance by training counter canter it is often possible to take this improved balance with you into the trot work.

One of the most important things to remember when you want to develop your horse's balance and self-carriage is, ***never force the horse to give in his neck or poll.***

The frame of the neck and poll should develop as a natural result of the way the horse works through the withers and back. Never take his balancing pole away from him! You can only achieve control over him by being in harmony with him, so that he is right under your center of gravity. A horse that is forced to give in the neck and poll will never carry himself correctly. This is not a question of opinions. This is about the physical laws of nature. Those that believe that they should under all

circumstances and with any means get the horse to give in his neck and poll should read the story about the emperor's new clothes.* They could then compare themselves with the emperor.

* The Emperor's New Clothes (Danish: *Kejserens nye Klæder*) is a short tale by Hans Christian Andersen about two weavers who promise an Emperor a new suit of clothes that is invisible to those unfit for their positions, stupid, or incompetent. When the Emperor parades before his subjects in his new clothes, a child cries out, "But he isn't wearing anything at all!" The tale has been translated into over a hundred languages.