

IMPULSION

We can say a horse has impulsion when he moves forward willingly, and unconditionally obeys the rider's driving aids (seat and legs). ***Good impulsion and energy are essential for successful dressage work.***

If we buy a nice Mercedes but take out the battery, we will soon discover that nothing works. If we purchase expensive lights, put in more wiring and install switches, but have no electricity, we still won't get any light. Energy is something we must have, even when we ride. Without it, we cannot accomplish anything.

One of the first lessons we teach our horses is to go forward by signaling them with a light leg aid. A slight pressure from the rider's lower leg should cause the horse to react immediately by thrusting himself forward with his hind legs. When the horse moves forward, we want him to do so with a willingness from within; a natural kind of impulsion that can be likened to the water flowing in a creek or a river.

When the horse is moving with impulsion, the rider will feel the energy coming from the hind quarters, moving through the back and out into the neck, and the horse will respond by making his neck longer and reaching out to the bit. The rider will feel the energy moving freely through the horse's entire body.



It is important when the rider drives the horse forward to give the horse something to go forward into. A light contact must be kept with the horse's mouth. If the reins become too loose there is a risk that the horse will begin to think backwards as a response to the driving aids. This is something we want to avoid. The other possibility if the reins are too loose is that the horse seeks the contact, falls on the forehand and the tempo gets quick as a result.

LOSS OF IMPULSION

The most common reasons for lack of impulsion:

- The horse is sore or in pain
- Incorrect shoeing
- Incorrectly fitting saddle
- The horse does not respond to the rider's legs
- The horse does not understand the driving aids. Young horses must be taught to understand the driving leg aid before impulsion can be developed.
- The rider does not have sufficient contact with the bit – the horse has insufficient contact to go forward into
- The rider is inconsistent in his expectations for a prompt answer to his aids
- The horse has a lazy temperament
- The horse is tense or nervous
- The horse has low energy from anemia or lack of vitamins or minerals
- The horse has low energy from poor quality feed, wrong type of feed, or not enough feed
- Poor footing in the arena
- Too much time spent working in an indoor arena

THE LAZY HORSE

A horse that is naturally lazy should be ridden forward at a vigorous speed and preferably outside in the open, where all horses are inclined to go forward with better impulsion. Try not to ride a lazy horse in the indoor arena too often, where he constantly has a wall in front of him. When this is necessary, avoid movements for which it is difficult to maintain impulsion, such as lateral movements with a lot of angle, or small circles.

Vary your work to develop different muscle groups and to provide interest. Jump your horse at least once a week, especially if it is a young horse. Work in hand and in long reins to develop strength and power in the hind legs. And most importantly, ride as much as possible in the open.

Transitions between walk and trot are also helpful to develop more energy in the hind end. Trot about ten strides, walk three strides, trot ten strides, walk three strides a number of time until the horse feels more active.

THE HORSE THAT HURTS

As riders we must constantly be aware of how our horses feel. When we feel that something is out of the ordinary, there is always a reason. It is not always possible to determine why the horse moves or behaves differently, but it is important to take the time to analyze the situation, and not to resort to using strong aids or the whip right away.

Possible causes of pain that inhibits the horse from moving forward:

- Muscle soreness or fatigue from previous workouts. We have all had sore or tired muscles from strenuous or repetitive activity. It is important to keep this in mind when training your horse.
- Incorrect shoeing, shoes that are too small or misplaced nails
- Sore tendons
- A sore back
- A saddle that does not fit well or that needs to be re-flocked
- Mouth problems—teeth with sharp edges or hooks that need to be floated
- A bit that does not fit correctly
- A lame horse. Riders may not be able to feel the lameness, and horses sometimes try to hide lameness as a natural instinct to protect themselves from prey.

We have a tendency to think that a horse that is not lame and does not have a fever is disobedient when he is unwilling to go forward. But forcing an unwilling horse to go forward, only later to discover that he has, for example, an inflamed fetlock, would certainly give us a guilty conscience (at the very least)!

THE HORSE THAT IS TENSE

If the horse is not in pain, but is still tense, it could be that he is nervous (is afraid, does not trust his rider or lacks confidence). Tension can also be due to the frame in which the horse is being asked to work. Riding a horse in a frame that is incorrect creates tension. See the chapter in this section (The Basics) called The Frame. A tense horse lacks impulsion, and riding a horse with no impulsion is like driving a car with the emergency brake on. Or, returning to the comparison to water flowing in a creek, tension has the same effect as building a dam across that creek. ***The horse will go forward freely and willingly only when he is completely free of tension, mentally and physical.***

To rid the horse of tension we must place great importance on suppling work and encourage him to work in a frame that allows him to stretch his muscles. See the Chapter in this section (The Basics) called Suppling Work.

Some horses 'turn inward' when they become nervous. They hold back, are unable to concentrate and are easily distracted. We could call it 'nervous tension.' This situation is often found in horses that lack self-confidence. When we ask this type of horse for too much too soon, teach him too many things at the same time, or use loud or rough aids, he will respond with tension. A horse in this condition must be allowed to relax, to do some easy work with only small demands, thereby giving him a chance to feel successful. Relaxing trail rides on a long rein can be helpful.

THE HORSE THAT DISREGARDS THE RIDER'S LEG AIDS

It is a serious problem when the horse does not react to the rider's legs. Many riders would claim that the horse is insensitive, but this is not true. ALL horses immediately notice when a fly lands anywhere on their bodies. When the rider perceives the horse as insensitive, it is usually because the rider has been inconsistent, has been unsteady with his legs, or has used leg aids that were consistently too strong.

When the horse has received a signal to go forward, he must respond instantly. If he does not, the rider must immediately give a stronger push with his leg or reinforce his leg with a quick tap with the whip. This teaches the horse that if he does not pay attention and respond quickly to the initial light aid, he will receive a stronger aid. It is extremely important to follow up the first signal if we do not get a correct response right away. Consistency is the key.

Often the rider thinks that his horse does not respond to his leg aids and as a result he pushes and squeezes more and more. Eventually he finds himself squeezing so hard with his legs to make his horse go forward that he becomes exhausted. The horse becomes progressively more annoyed at the rider's strong aids and ends up resisting the rider's legs instead of going forward. The horse no longer perceives the rider's driving aids as a signal to go forward, but rather an irritation. It becomes a no-win situation.

The following approach can help to re-teach the horse to respond correctly to the rider's driving aids:

Follow the track in a walk with a light contact. Sit as quietly and passively as possible. When the horse is completely relaxed, give a light leg aid. When there is no reaction from the horse, within two seconds, give a strong kick combined with the whip applied next to the leg. It is an advantage here to be at the beginning of the long side, with lots of space in which to go forward!

When the horse responds it is important to stay out of his way when he moves forward and to reward him generously. Keep in mind that it is very important for the rider to be completely relaxed during this exercise. ***It is not helpful in any way for the rider to communicate any feeling of dissatisfaction to the horse.*** The exercise is repeated until the horse responds to and goes forward immediately from the softest possible leg aid.

Perhaps you feel that it is somewhat cynical to punish the horse without letting him know that you are dissatisfied with him, but the fact that the rider is completely relaxed puts the horse into a situation where he is caught a little off guard. The rider makes the horse a little unsure and as a result, he becomes more alert and pays more attention to what is going on.

It is very important that the rider always uses a very light leg aid to start with, even though he knows that the horse will not respond. The idea is that the horse should associate the punishment with the light aid. In the beginning of course, he reacts only to the punishment. However, he will soon perceive the light aid as a warning, and consequently learn to move forward from this aid.

Generously rewarding the horse the instant that he gives a correct response is an important part of the learning process. The reward will teach him that a light leg aid (the warning) is really a signal to go forward. ***Keep in mind though, that if the rider is consistent to begin with, the situation that I have just described can be avoided.***