

# SUPLING WORK

When we consider our purpose in educating the horse we can say that it is based on the same principles as those for an elite gymnast or ballet dancer. It requires strength, elasticity and coordination in order to achieve the results we want, while at the same time keeping the horse healthy and positive. Suppling work is one of the most important and time consuming aspects of the training process. A supple horse moves with elasticity and without tension, and his gaits are free and natural. The rider feels that the horse uses his whole body freely with a desire to go forward in a natural fashion...a feeling that the horse is doing the work all by himself. There is no resistance.

When the horse is supple and through, it is possible for him to:

- Move forward freely
- Develop his gaits
- Work in a frame without tensing
- Increase cross-over in lateral movements
- Develop his muscles

When we ask the horse to execute demanding movements, the suppling work is extremely important in order to avoid overloading muscles, tendons, ligaments, and the joints themselves. Suppling work, of course, also requires actual muscle strength, and it will build and strengthen long, supple muscles over time.

Many riders find it difficult to determine if the horse is stiff or tense, as both things can feel alike. Often, horses use tension as a means of holding up their rider and maintaining balance. It is common to see tension in horses that are on the forehand. In this case, starting directly with suppling work, where the horse is ridden in a deep frame is not correct. What happens when we work a horse in a deep frame, when he is already on his forehand? He will, of course, fall even more on his forehand. First you have to help your horse find equilibrium.

***It is important that before we start to supple the horse's muscles, he is in balance, in harmony with the rider, and mentally and physically relaxed.*** If this is not the case, then the suppling work will not have a positive effect and could possibly even influence the horse negatively.

The manner in which we want the horse to use his muscles can be compared to the way the heart

works, like a pump. The muscles work in such a way that they alternately contract and relax. We call this positive tension. A negative tension is when the horse contracts his muscles but does not relax them again. When a muscle is continually tense it inhibits the blood circulation in that muscle. As a result, it is not able to remove the lactic acid and other waste products. These products make it difficult for the muscle to access its energy reserves, while at the same time causing damage to the muscle tissues. ***The horse also needs a supply of oxygen to its muscles so that they can work without tiring. The oxygen can only be drawn into the muscle when it works like a pump.***

When we supple the horse, our goal is to work him in such a way that he develops the ability to stretch his muscles. Since we cannot tell the horse to stretch his muscles by speaking to him in English, we must instead work him in a way that causes him to feel a need to stretch his muscles on his own. Before you ask your horse to stretch, it is very important to have done some warmup. We cannot supple a cold muscle. Doing so could result in an injury. We must keep this in mind while warming up. Avoid starting out at a high speed, but instead let the horse begin slowly and calmly. When the horse is in balance, and horse and rider are in harmony, the suppling work can begin.

How to approach suppling work will vary from horse to horse. Often, but not always, it benefits the young horse to trot energetically forward for a little while. An older horse might get more benefit from starting out with some canter work. With some horses, it is best to begin with work in shoulder-in, while others might benefit from a lot of work in walk to warm up. Each horse is different both physically and mentally, so it is difficult to generalize about the best way to start and the best method for warming your horse up.

When I learned to ride, it was the consensus that the horse should first be suppled, and then he could be collected. I don't believe that anymore. I do believe that the horse must be supple before he can be asked to be in self-carriage. In reality, it is not possible to supple the horse without collection. There are two reasons for this:

1. In order for a muscle to be able to stretch, it must be relaxed. In order for the horse to relax his muscles, he must be in balance. In order for the horse to be balanced there must be some degree of collection.
2. To get the horse to stretch his muscles, he himself must feel a need to do it. This need arises when the muscles have been shortened (compressed), and that happens when the horse has been collected.

Suppling work—which supples the muscles through alternate contracting and stretching—is an important part of the warm up, but keep in mind the following points:

- Before you begin the suppling work, the horse must be sufficiently warmed up so that the circulation of blood through his muscles is adequate.
- He must be in balance/equilibrium and seek to go forward with energy.
- Vary the work while you supple the horse, keeping balance and equilibrium a priority.
- Take care not to overwork any muscles.
- Listen to your horse and respect the signals he gives you.

When the horse is suppled correctly, we should have a feeling that all his muscles have been thoroughly worked. We should feel no stiffness or tensions in the various muscle groups. This demands that your aids go through. An aid that does not go through, and therefore does not create the desired result, often creates more tension and more resistance in the horse than what you had before you gave the aid.

### SUPPLING EXERCISES

- Circles
- Leg-yields
- Lateral work
- Transitions
- Transitions in lateral work
- Transitions between trot and canter on a 20 m circle
- Free walk, asking the horse to lengthen the stride a little more than he wants to do by himself
- Changes in stride, alternating between collecting the horse and letting him stretch
- Changes between a more collected and a longer, deeper frame

When the goal of the work is to supple the horse, we let him work in a lower frame. The reason for this is that in this frame it is more difficult for the horse to hold tension, especially in his topline. It is also easier for him to stretch the muscles in his topline when he works in a lower frame. But it is important that the horse does not go behind the bit when he is in this lower frame, and that the contact to the bit is maintained by the horse continuously seeking to go forward to the bit. We must also make sure that this work in a lower frame does not lead to the horse falling on his forehead.

It is a good idea to split the suppling work into two or three sessions during each lesson. The first would take place after a brief warm up, the second in the middle of the lesson and the third at the end of the lesson when the horse's muscles are really warmed up and consequently much easier to stretch.

***When suppling the horse, never use force to reach your goal.***

If we use force, there is a large risk that the horse will damage his muscles, tendons and ligaments. Should we exceed his limits in this way, it may take months before he is sound again. Furthermore, a horse under duress will not be mentally relaxed, and relaxation is essential to achieving good results.

It is important that we take the time necessary to supple the horse. If he is not used to doing suppling work, or if he does not feel loose and elastic, it can take months to achieve good results. Do a little at a time. It takes a long time for muscles to repair themselves when they become painful due to excessive demands. ***Listen to the horse to determine when you can increase your demands on him, and remember that the basis for proper development of the horse's muscles is a correct and well balanced diet.***