

USDF Instructor/Trainer Development Program

Dressage Seminar – Riding

Report by Josephine Hauer

Dressage instructors and trainers from New England and beyond gathered at Weatogue Stables in Salisbury, CT in July 2024 to participate in the 2-day USDF Instructor/Trainer Development Program focusing on dressage riding, co-led by [Vicki Hammers-O'Neil](#) and [Bill McMullin](#).

Day 1 was open to non-instructors and included presentations and discussion on the Dressage Training Scale and Levels, safety, the evaluation of horse and rider, and the need to plan appropriate exercises to develop both horse and rider.

Four horse and rider pairs offered live demonstrations of riding and instruction that incorporated the training scale to each situation. Each pair brought different strengths and weaknesses and were varied in level of education and type. Bill and Vicki offered insights and suggestions by dialoguing with the rider after the warm-up phase of each demonstration session. Participants were able to observe the nuanced application of insights from instructors on dressage exercises and concepts to improve the work of each pair.

If I walk into an arena, I should be able to observe a horse and rider and know what they are trying to achieve in the session and based on a progression of the exercises. (VHO)

Throughout the day, the Dressage Pyramid of Training was cited as a crucial guide that emphasized the necessary elements for the horse's gymnastic development. Riders should take these qualities into account in every training session.

The triangular form of the training pyramid highlights the importance of establishing the fundamental components—rhythm, suppleness, and contact—as the basis for the other parts rather than depicting a linear development. Every component is connected synergistically and can be enhanced collectively over time.

One example of this back and forth was when a rider was using a shoulder-in to improve suppleness and as a result the horse also showed improved rhythm and contact.

Key Riding Skills

Demonstrate concern for safety.

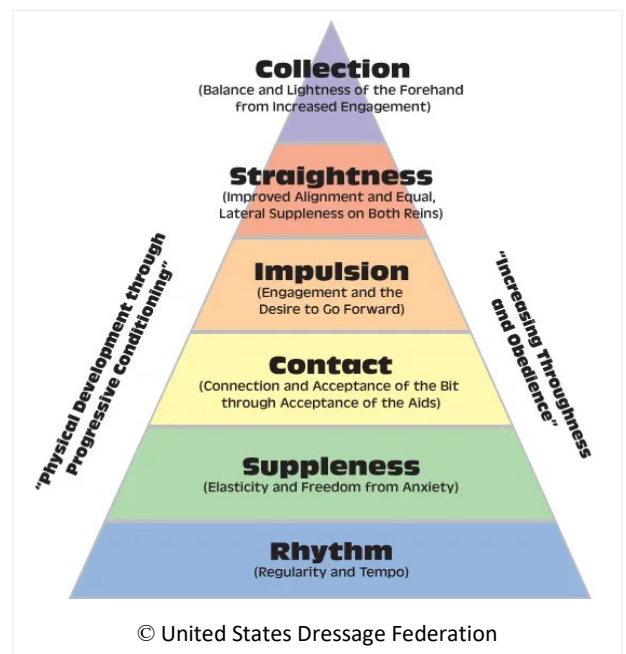
Apply correct rider position including alignment, balance and use of the aids.

Apply knowledge of the Pyramid of Training, being able to assess the horse while riding and implement changes based on classical dressage theory.

Demonstrate correct training for the horse.

Develop strategic and appropriate plans for improving the horse over time.

Pyramid of Training



What is your horse's weakest link? For many horses, it is important to establish a good trot before lateral work. But for others, it's the other way around. (BM)

Developing Appropriate Exercises

Selecting an effective exercise to improve the horse is a critical skill to develop. With keen observation, experimentation and practice, riders, trainers and instructors can build their repertoire of exercises in different contexts.

When is the best time to determine which exercises to use? Riders can plan prior to a schooling session based on past work or suggestions during a previous lesson. After the warm-up phase within a session is also a good time since riders need to work with what the horse brings to the work that day. During a schooling session, riders may also want to choose different strategies based on the response of the horse on the spot.

Vicki and Bill offered important commentary on when and why an exercise worked well or not. Highlights include:

- **Refresh the gait.** Use the short side or the diagonal of the arena to “refresh” the gait. If an exercise is not effective, don't struggle too long; rather, make a change to access the basic correctness again.
- **Improve diagonal connection.** Leg yield is one of the most useful and accessible exercises to improve the diagonal connection – inside leg to outside rein – as well as acceptance of the contact.
- **Observe the base of the horse's neck** when thinking about straightness. Use a head to the wall leg yield to encourage a release at the base of the neck.
- **Promote straightness and collection** by using renvers. In a correctly ridden renvers, the horse's shoulders move to the inside, off the rail, while the haunches continue to travel along the rail, with bend toward the outside of the arena.
- **Collect, supple and straighten** by incorporating counter canter in shallow loops along the long side of the arena.
- **Prepare well for transitions.** Riders should plan for the specific type of gait desired post-transition. Consider both the tempo of the gait and the bend prior to asking for the transition. Some riders will benefit from using a mental count-down for this: 4-3-2-1.
- **Improve transitions** between any gait by using shoulder-in on the circle.
- **Practice stretching in all three gaits** based on the horse's balance and confidence and re-taking the contact for enhanced suppleness and coordination.
- **Use counter-flexion** to help diffuse tension in anxious horses. This will improve connection by improving alignment.
- **Mix up your horse's routine** with changes of direction to keep the horse from anticipating the next request. When giving any aid to the horse, he should stay forward into the bridle.

Keep in mind that even when things feel good, your horse should be available for a reaction. Ask yourself, is my horse still there? Listening? Can I ask another question and still get an answer? (BM)

We can see the importance of rider fitness – there needs to be sufficient core stability so she can have following hands and seat. Where there is connection between hips and elbows, the arms are not rigid but remain over the hips, making all the aids more effective. (VHO)

Quality of the Gaits – Walk, Trot and Canter

Instructors reviewed the quality of each gait, common faults and possible causes. The walk, a four-beat gait should be marching and forward with no moment of suspension. The trot is a two-beat gait with diagonal pairs. The horse at trot should swing through his back with a moment of suspension between the footfalls. The canter is a three-beat gait starting from the outside hind, then the diagonal pair (inside hind/outside fore), then inside fore, followed by a phase of suspension. Canter is a bounding/jumping gait with energy.

Faults and Possible Causes at the Walk, Trot and Canter

Gait	Common Faults	Possible Causes
Walk 4 beats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lateral pacing or lateral tendency, almost two beats. • Uneven - length of strides differ. • Unlevel – height or breadth of strides differ. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horse related – not through back, walk too lazy, walk too hurried, lack of relaxation or suppleness, crooked, rein lameness, uneven contact or unsoundness. • Rider related – stiff hips or core, stiff arms, hands not following, overuse or arrhythmic use of legs and/or spurs.
Trot 2 beats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of suspension • Passage-like • Uneven – length of strides differ. • Unlevel – length or breadth of strides differ. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horse related – lack of relaxation or suppleness, lack of energy/impulsion, stiff back musculature, crookedness (stiff and hollow sides), uneven contact, rein lameness or unsoundness.
Canter 3 beats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four beat rhythm/lateral canter – diagonal pairs do not land simultaneously. • Lack of suspension – flat/hurried. • Lack of clear separation/reach between hind legs. • Cross canter – hind legs on different lead from forelegs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horse related – lack of relaxation or suppleness, lack of energy/impulsion, lack of fitness, strength. • Rider related – faulty aids, lacking a balanced seat, misalignment shoulders or hips or holding/pulling on the inside rein.

Improving the walk

Vicki and Bill advised riders to address walk rhythm issues immediately as they are more challenging to fix later. They noted the importance of noticing the stride length – is it the same on both reins? Suggestions to improve the walk for both horse and rider include:

- 1) Incorporate long rein work to allow the horse to stretch and relax, especially in the walk.
- 2) Focus on your own body position and relaxation, as stiff hips or arms can negatively impact the horse's movement.
- 3) Use gentle half-halts to rebalance the horse without interrupting the rhythm.
- 4) Practice turns while maintaining a clear walk rhythm, as this is an area where lateral tendencies often appear.
- 5) Work on proper contact and frame to help the horse maintain balance and rhythm throughout different movements.

Consistency and patience are key, as the walk is often considered the easiest gait to ruin and the hardest to improve. Avoid chasing or rushing the horse, as this can lead to tension and disrupt the natural rhythm.

Improving the Trot

To properly diagnose the causes of an uneven trot, instructors should:

- 1) Observe the horse's movement carefully, looking at the whole body rather than just focusing on one area.
- 2) Determine if the unevenness persists after one or two movements. If it's pervasive, it may indicate unsoundness.
- 3) Consider potential causes such as:
 - Lack of relaxation and suppleness
 - Insufficient energy or activity behind
 - Stiffness in the muscles
 - Crookedness in the horse's body
 - Rider imbalance or hanging on one side
- 4) Assess whether the issue is related to soundness or training. If it persists and seems related to soundness, consult with a veterinarian for a thorough examination.
- 5) If it appears to be a training issue, work on improving the horse's overall balance, suppleness, and engagement.
- 6) Pay attention to how the unevenness manifests in different gaits and exercises to gather more information about its root cause.

Some horses naturally have less suspension in their trot, so it's important to distinguish between a natural gait characteristic and a potential problem.

Improving the Canter

The horse's alignment and straightness is key to improving the canter. Bill and Vicki stressed riders should start by ensuring the horse is supple, as suppleness is the foundation for achieving straightness. This involves both lateral and longitudinal flexibility. Utilize trot- canter transitions on a circle and exercises like shoulder-fore to help bring the inside hind leg more underneath the horse, promoting better alignment.

Practice transitions within the canter, such as from collected to medium canter, to help improve the horse's balance and straightness. Ensure that during transitions, the horse remains aligned and does not fall onto the forehand.

To strengthen their analytical skills, participants viewed videos from USDF "On the levels" and discussed the quality of each ride in terms of the horse's movement, balance, and the rider's ability to communicate with the horse. Bill and Vicki underscored the role of evenness and balance in the horse's movement, as well as the rider's ability to create

Test your knowledge!

- **Rhythm.** Identify an exercise for improving rhythm at each gait.
- **Tempo.** Describe the difference between Rhythm and Tempo.
- **Suppleness.** What exercises can improve suppleness at each gait?
- **Contact.** How might you improve your contact at each gait?
- **Impulsion.** How would you determine if the level of impulsion is adequate? What are the possible causes for lack of impulsion? What are two exercises at trot and canter for improving impulsion?
- **Straightness.** What do you look for when observing straightness? Describe two exercises that address straightness in the horse.
- **Collection.** How would you identify self-carriage in the horse at each level?



a clear and consistent rhythm. Additionally, they discussed the geometry of the ride, including the distance between markers and the importance of accurate measurements.

Participants were able to ask questions throughout, often raising issues of concern in their teaching and riding. Vicki and Bill emphasized solving problems by using the Pyramid of Training along with knowledge about the horse, the context and the rider's goals. Day 1 of the USDF Seminar concluded with a review of assessing a horse, level schooling figures and movements and how to fit and use the double bridle.

This program was hosted by the Connecticut Dressage Association (CDA) a non-profit organization promoting dressage in the Northeast through education and opportunity. CDA is a Group Member Organization of the United States Dressage Federation (USDF)

For more information on events and opportunities, visit CDA at www.ctdressage.org



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