

Special Report from the 7th Global Dressage Forum, p. 68

# Dressage

**T O D A Y**

January 2008

## **BREED OUTLOOK 2008**

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# Progressive Training for YOUR YOUNG HORSE

Scott Hassler, national young horse coach, gives training plans and show advice for youngsters.

*By Scott Hassler with Jessica L. McTaggart • Photos By Susan J. Stickle*

In the United States, about 5,000 warmbloods are born each year. That may sound like a decent amount until you realize that, in Germany, more than 50,000 are born yearly and, in the Netherlands, it's 12,000. Relatively speaking, we don't have as much to work with at the starting point, so every single product that we put on the ground is extremely important, and the path chosen for each of those horses is critical. In the end, all we're trying to do is give each one a foundation so they can have a future career. Every single horse must be preserved—trained classically at his or her individual pace.

Young horses are like kids—they are basically in elementary school. They need recess and variety. They have different personalities and developmental levels. Some are behind schedule, some are ahead and some are gifted. Those that enter Young Horse classes are like the gifted children, who have a program designed especially for them.

Before showing, it is important to take the nerves of a young horse into consideration. Your best defense against nervousness is to prepare him properly for the experience with road trips and trail rides. This is the only way you can gauge how he will handle a new environment. This takes time, which is difficult in the fast-paced horse world, where you must train horses,



**Scott Hassler rides Locksley, a 2001 Hanoverian stallion owned by Harmony Sporthorses.**

talk to customers, answer phones and e-mails and then drive to shows. Young horses need their owners to be patient on the path and not to be in a hurry to get to Grand Prix. By taking time, you give them the best chance to perform well.

Young horses also need recess. Too often a spirited young horse is longed like mad to take the spirit out. That's more like a student having a tutor when he gets home from school.

Young horses need to be ridden

## Should You Enter the YOUNG HORSE CLASSES?

For gifted young horses, the U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF) offers a 4-year-old test. Movements include 15-meter canter circles, 10-meter half circles and lengthened stride in trot. The FEI (Fédération Equestre Internationale) offers tests for 5- and 6-year-olds. Five-year-olds must do rein-back and turn on the haunches at walk, 10-meter circles at trot and canter, counter canter, medium canter and and single changes. Six-year-olds must do shoulder-in, half passes, half pirouettes at walk and flying changes. U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) Materiale or USEF Suitability classes are also available for young horses. These classes may be ridden in addition to traditional USEF dressage tests (First through Fourth Levels).

When deciding whether to take your horse into the Young Horse classes or to go the more traditional route, keep in mind that this decision can change with each developing year. I've seen 4-year-old horses who didn't move that well at the time become great 5-year-olds simply because they started getting more balance and self-carriage. Maybe a 5-year-old that wasn't moving so great starts to get supple and carry the weight. He may make a great 6-year-old.

I don't think you have to label the horse and say, "This is a Young Horse candidate and this is not." There are some horses that you start in the Young Horse format, but then you have to back off. Some don't show all the qualities of the Young Horse but then develop them. So, once you make a judgment call about your horse at age 4, reevaluate him again at 5 and 6. Horses often change every few months, and you've got to take that into consideration.

For the gifted horse, the Young Horse tests have advantages over the traditional route. If, in the Young Horse test, the horse makes a canter transition from the trot with extra enthusiasm—puts his head up and isn't quite through—that's not going to be marked off unless he does it on both leads and shows a connection issue throughout the test. If the same thing were to happen in a Training Level test, the score for the canter transition would be penalized.

The FEI Young Horse classes should never be the ultimate goal, as this may lead a person to force a horse into something he's not ready for. If someone were to say, "My goal is to ride the 6-year-old test," they may also think that to do this test they need to "install" flying changes by May or June. They start doing a ton of flying changes, causing the horse to get nervous so the changes are all late, which is the start of more problems. Thus, we've potentially lost one of the 5,000 U.S. horses produced each year.

It takes horsemanship and good judgment to say, "If my horse isn't making a good flying change, maybe something else is missing. I should just back off and finish training my horse correctly." By the time he is a 7-year-old, he may be making tempi changes nicely.

A horse may simply not be ready yet for the movements that are necessary in a Young Horse test. Deep down, to make a decision, look at what is successful. My feeling is that being successful is fun, and sometimes not showing at all is successful because, next year, your horse might be better.

It is easy to see why people want to do Young Horse classes. The horse that captures you—when you watch him in this Young Horse format—is brilliant, has well-balanced movement with an uphill expression, has nice self-carriage and three expressive gaits. He looks fun to ride. This horse is the gifted athlete.

## 3-year-old BASICS



1. Ensure variety by stretching the frame often.
  2. Longeing helps develop trust and confidence.
  3. The horse must learn to go forward by himself early on in training.
  4. Rides should be short. Some days work for 10 minutes and then go for a walk.
- Susanne Hassler rides Renoir WF, a 2004 Hanoverian stallion owned by Cathi Bunker.**

outside a lot. Riding on the trails helps to clear their heads. This variety is important even within everyday workouts. Try to mix it up. For example, stretch the frame a lot. Stretch the horse for a while, bring him back up again, working him in that frame. Then, stretch him again. Also, mix it up with sitting and rising trot.

Each age demands its own specific focus and understanding to maintain a happy and willing athlete.

### Basics for the 3-Year-Old

All horses, regardless of their ultimate path in life, are given the same foundation. At my farm, I like starting horses in their 3-year-old year. We're lucky in this country not to be pressured to do things too early. That's where I believe we have a slight advantage over Europe, which offers a Young Horse 3-year-old class and national championship. We can take more time to train our horses, which is great.

At this early stage, you must already

be evaluating, asking yourself, "Which way should I go with this horse?" Maybe he should be started for two or three months, then given a break so he can get stronger. Three-year-olds are delicate subjects, and it takes a lot of horsemanship to make good decisions.

When starting a 3-year-old, the goal, first and foremost, is that the horse develops trust and confidence. He must also learn to move forward by himself. Contact and straightness are established and from that

comes self-carriage and balance. In general, 3-year-olds should get outside and be ridden with other horses. They need to see the world. Each workout should be short—under 30 minutes. Sometimes, you only ride for 10 minutes and go for a walk. Think of it as kindergarten, where school is only a half day.

As for competitions, the owner/breeder/trainer has the option of USEF Materiale and Suitability classes or Training Level dressage tests. Materiale and Suitability are group classes, and the

## SUPPLING the 4-year-old



1. Transition within the gaits, trot forward then back.
  2. Responsiveness to a light canter aid is expected.
  3. Leg yield on a gradual line supples the young horse.
- Kelly McGinn rides her Dutch Warmblood gelding, Windsor.



only difference between the two, aside from slight scoring variations, is that Materiale is for 3- and 4-year-old horses, while Suitability includes 5-year-olds. The advantage of group classes is they are less technical. They allow the horse to have a positive experience with other horses in the ring without being too demanding. Whether you decide to compete or not, just bringing the 3-year-old to a show without entering any classes is beneficial.

### Suppling the 4-Year-Old

For the 4-year-old horse, keep in mind that these guidelines are assuming that the horse has gone through each stage. So, when I talk about a 4-year-old, it is understood that he has completed all of the 3-year-old training elements. Therefore, I am not talking about a 4-year-old straight out of the field. If this is the case, I would back up and do the same things I would for a 3-year-old. This is progressive training.

We want to work on suppling a 4-year-old horse. So we begin with exercises, such as turning lines, moving away from the leg and some shoulder-in work. We also start transitions within the gaits. We begin to analyze the horse

for his highlights or strengths and his weaknesses or developmental pieces. I like to use the strengths of the horse to encourage him and build confidence. Over time, we gradually improve his weaknesses, but we use the highlights of the horse to make him feel really good about himself. For example, say you have a horse that likes to go forward and has great self-carriage. Well, we want to ride young horses forward, so that's a horse you want to ride lengthenings in canter for short distances and come back. Ride forward trot and come back, so he enjoys going forward.

Horses that have weaknesses, such as rhythm problems, cadence issues and stiffness, should not be ridden so forward. In these cases, spend more time suppling and riding turning lines. You work that weakness by emphasizing one of his strengths. Maybe he has really super lateral work. Then advance his lateral work. Keep working on getting him stronger and more collected in this way.

Leg yield is an exercise I introduce to my 4-year-olds. While riding it, keep in mind that leg yield is not a sideways movement. It is a suppling movement, which means the horse gets more power from the leg yield as opposed to flatten-

ing. Pushing the horse sideways is not a leg yield. A leg yield asks the horse to move away from the leg so he gets more suspended and animated in his joints, while remaining in a soft, steady contact. When asking the horse to yield from the leg on an opening line, you are teaching him about your directional leg. Your inside leg sends the horse into the outside, receiving rein. Ask for leg yield on what I call opening-up lines, such as off the quarter line or on a circle. It's the idea of a leg yield, but it's much more gradual. It feels similar to spiraling out of the circle.

## 5-year-old CARRYING POWER



1

**This exercise introduces and strengthens counter canter.**

1. Pick up true canter.
2. Ride a shallow loop away from and back to the original track, using your outside leg to guide him in counter canter.
3. As the horse becomes stronger, you can make the loops deeper.

**Susanne rides Davidoff Hit, an Oldenburg stallion owned by Harmony Sporthorses.**



2



3

Along with leg yield, I begin to work on the responsiveness to the aids—the horse goes from light aids to light leg and light rein. Play with some transitions, such as trot–walk–trot. This leads to what you need to do with a 5-year-old, which is ask for a canter–walk transition. If the horse isn't sensitive to the aids and in good self-carriage, he is going to lean on the reins and fall on the forehand.

Competitively for 4-year-olds, we now have the first USEF Young Horse test, which is in its second year. The options are the USEF Young Horse test for 4-year-olds, Training or First Level dressage tests, Materiale and/or Suitability classes. A combination of all of these is possible. There is a lot of discussion right now among riders and owners as to whether to enter the USEF 4-year-old class or to go in a traditional Training/First Level test. This decision requires thought (see “Should You Enter the Young Horse Classes?” p. 45).

### **Develop Carrying Power in the 5-Year-Old**

For a 5-year-old horse, responsiveness to the aids, advancement of suppleness and an emphasis on the regularity of the gaits are now incorporated into the workouts. The 5-year-old is also learning how to shift his weight onto his hind legs, developing true carrying power.

Once the horse learns how to carry effectively, he can make the difficult transitions, showing off a brilliant, forward lengthening while coming back properly in both the trot and canter. The balance developed by canter–walk transitions is necessary for the development of true uphill counter canter and in self-carriage. Counter canter tests the balance of the horse.

A simple exercise I use for introducing and strengthening counter canter is riding shallow loops off the track. As the horse becomes stronger, you can make the loops deeper. This way the horse

slowly develops his balance and carriage in counter canter.

Competitive venues include the FEI 5-year-old test, USEF Training, First, even Second Level or Suitability.

### Teach the 6-Year-Old Collection

You will ask a 6-year-old for more maturity carrying weight in collection, which relates to his responsiveness to the aids. At this age, the work turns to building the horse's self-carriage power by collecting more within the gaits and regulating within them. The focus is also on advancing the horse's suppleness until he starts to keep more suspension and balance in the lateral work.

You can start to ask for more expression, power and definition—do you want it now or later? With the 5-year-old, you are more forgiving. You worked your way into a lengthening, for example, and worked your way back from it. For a 6-year-old, you can say, "Hey, let's really go; let's really come back." You have the collection and the self-carriage, which leads into the critical stage of teaching flying changes.

Transitions are an excellent point of emphasis at this time. They help the horse learn to carry his weight, while maintaining the responsiveness to the aids. Do shorter transitions, going forward and back for improved expression. Emphasize lateral work—half pass or shoulder-in. At this age, the horse works on tighter radii, spiraling in and out of circles.

Six-year-olds also have competitive options. It's a big jump from the FEI 5-year-old Young Horse test to the 6-year-old test. You can fake your way through the 5-year-old test to an extent. The judges certainly will notice it, but

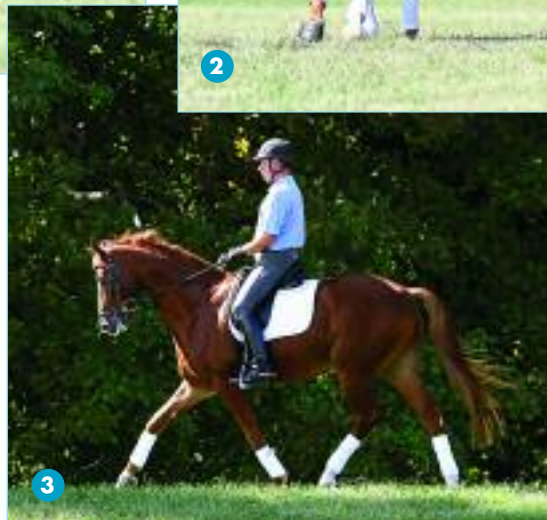
## 6-year-old COLLECTION



1



2



3

**1. The 6-year-old horse learns to carry more weight behind and show more expression, power and definition.**

**2. Half pass at trot demands suspension and balance.**

**3. Transitions help maintain responsiveness. Scott rides Locksley.**

you can ride the test. In the 6-year-old test with four flying changes, walk pirouettes and half passes in trot, your horse has to be truly collected. You have other options, which include the national tests—USEF Training, First, Second, Third and even Fourth Level. The overall goal is to train each young horse to do his best with his long-term career in mind, and that takes patience. Let's hope we're building a foundation that allows all horses the chance to become FEI horses. 📖



*Scott Hassler (here with Rousseau, a Dutch Warmblood stallion) was the inspiration for annual seminars dedicated specifically to trainers of young horses. In 2005, he was named USEF National Young Horse Dressage Coach. He has worked with trainers, such as Michael Klimke, and trained more than 25 horses to Grand Prix. He and his wife, Susanne, run Hassler Dressage in Chesapeake City, Maryland (hasslerdressage.com).*



Go to [DressageToday.com](http://DressageToday.com) to find the **Directory of Young Horse Trainers**. Arranged by state, this list includes the participants of the Young Dressage Horse Trainers Seminars.

Exclusive New Feature: Arthur Kottas-Heldenberg Critiques Your Rides, p. 24

# Dressage

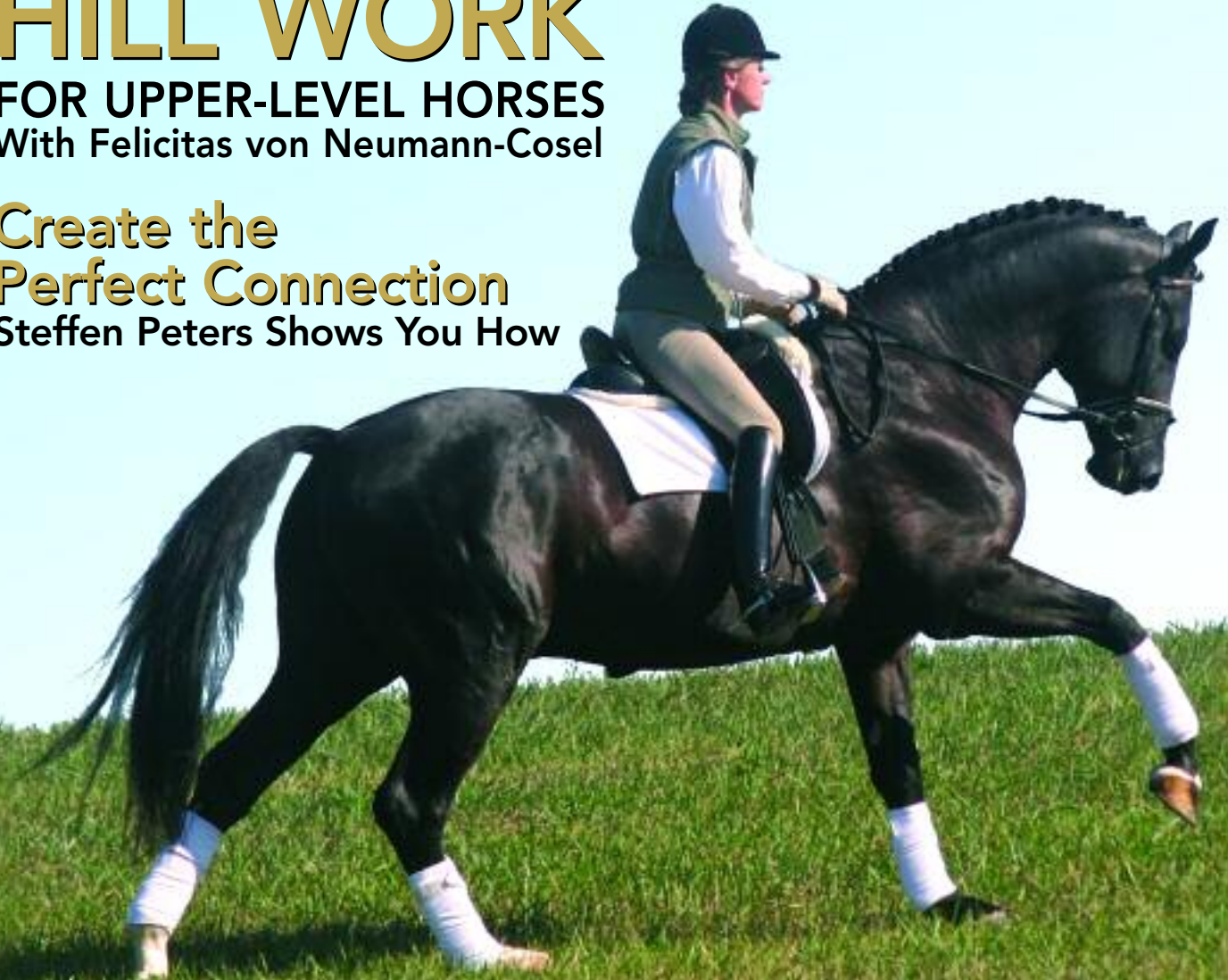
T O D A Y

February 2008

## HILL WORK

FOR UPPER-LEVEL HORSES  
With Felicitas von Neumann-Cosel

Create the  
Perfect Connection  
Steffen Peters Shows You How



100-Day Stallion Testing

Dressage in China, p. 16

Make a Vaccination Plan

A SOURCE INTERLINK MEDIA PUBLICATION



Felicitas von Neumann-Cosel rides Graf Montekalino, a 1998 Oldenburg gelding owned and bred by Juergen Strauss.

# HILLSIDE EXERCISES FOR

From shoulder-in to pirouettes, learn how riding on a slight slope benefits your horse.

By Felicitas von Neumann-Cosel with Jessica L. McTaggart  
Photos by Mary McKenna

**W**hile riding an extended trot, have you ever thought, *I wish my horse had more power and suspension?* Or while schooling a canter pirouette thought, *I wish my horse would finally be able to collect more and lower his croup.* If you answered “yes” to either of these statements, working your horse on hills may be beneficial.

Last February, I gave simple exercises and transitions to do outside the ring (“Develop Power with Hill Work”). The next step as you move up the levels is to address hill work for the more advanced horse. There are many benefits to working on a slope.

1. When going uphill, the horse has to push from behind to propel himself forward. This encourages him to step more forward and closer to his center of gravity.

2. When going downhill, the horse must shift his weight back to avoid the downward momentum that gravity promotes. As the horse shifts back, he is again encouraged to step under his center of gravity. When ridden correctly, the horse does not let propulsive power take over but, instead, converts it into carrying power.

3. With work on a hillside, the horse develops the correct muscle memory for more advanced movements from extensions to piaffe. This way you can help younger horses understand these movements better or improve older horses’ performances, keeping them enthusiastic and joyful in their daily work.

Upper-level exercises on hills are intended only for advanced trainers and riders who have a clear understanding of the Training Scale. The horse should have a correct, basic foundation and understanding of the aids. The movements should have already been introduced in the dressage arena, so the horse is prepared for the exercises. Also, pay attention to the amount of incline and decline on which you are riding, as it should be extremely gradual. Because this is difficult to see in a photo, the



Where's Waldo is a 2001 Approved Hanoverian stallion owned by Bonnie Watrous.

# THE ADVANCED HORSE

## What You Need to Know First

Advanced hill work should be done in a dressage seat, but the rider should be able to move into a half seat if, for example, it helps the horse to lift his back and stay with the movement in a canter extension. Trot extensions are easier for the horse if you rise to the trot. For the very collected canter, make sure you do not sit too far back, which would drive the horse more forward.

When looking for a hill area, try to find a grass field with at least one gentle incline, which, of course, serves as your decline, as well. Be careful early in the morning, as the grass may be slippery. Also, pay attention to the firmness of the ground. If it hasn't rained for several weeks, for example, the field may be extremely hard. Avoid these situations. Also, be sure that the ground is even and without holes.

The first time out, it is helpful to warm up in your traditional schooling ring before starting outdoor exercises. When riding in a new area, take the time to get the horse comfortable with his surroundings. Remember, the second element of the Training Pyramid is relaxation. Even though we look for the extra spark and energy that creates positive tension in the horse (required for collection and self-carriage), negative tension can get in the way.

When first introducing hill work to your horse, be conservative. A few correct rides up and down the hill are enough. This work can be varied but, when the weather allows, I might use it two to four times a week or even while I am on a trail ride, until I feel the work has carried over to the dressage ring.

A cautionary note: If you have any concern about soundness, especially in the stifle area or in the front feet, consult your veterinarian before starting this work because you will increase the workload on the hind legs and the impact on the front feet.

# Uphill Extensions



**While working extensions uphill, Tonico (left) and Where's Waldo compress their hindquarters like springs to propel themselves forward. Tonico is a 1999 Revised Lusitano stallion owned by Linda and Joe Denniston.**

hills featured in these photos are often steeper than those you should typically school on at home. See “What You Need to Know First” on page 33, before starting this work.

## Uphill Extensions

In a traditional ring setting, especially in the beginning of training, a horse's common reaction when asked to extend is to fall on his forehead and make quicker strides instead of lengthening. This lengthening should be produced through more suspension, which is created by the combination of propulsive and carrying power. That's why extensions are not required before collection is introduced.

This is where hill work comes in handy. By riding extensions up an incline, the horse pushes against gravity and is therefore encouraged to take a longer stride instead of rushing.

Begin by riding uphill in a working trot. As you ask the horse to go forward up the hill, he will, most likely, offer a lengthening naturally. When this happens, support it with gentle forward-driving aids and a possible touch of the whip, as encouragement. The whip, a training aid, also tells the

horse to lengthen.

Maintain the rhythm and tempo by continuously using little half halts. If you let the horse rush, he will avoid taking longer strides. The horse must stay soft in the connection to allow the power to go through his body without stiffening and losing relaxation.

An indicator that your half halt has gone through occurs when you lighten your aids and the tempo and self-carriage remain the same. If your half halts are not going through, ride a few downward transitions, such as trot-walk. The action of the rein aid to come back should go through the body, while the horse maintains a forward tendency. This keeps the horse forward but connected.

To test if the horse is on the aids, release the rein for a couple of strides (*überstreichen*). If your horse does not accept the half halt, he will get faster, overly excited or strung out. Hold the lengthening for as many strides as the horse feels powerful and soft.

Be aware that horses with a strong and expressive front leg and a slower hind leg might, at first, try to trot even bigger in front without bigger engagement behind and lose the rhythm

behind, while horses without a natural extension might try to rush up the hill.

After the trot work has been established and the horse feels responsive, you can move on to the canter. Extensions uphill in canter require that the rider have a lot of feel for the horse. Some horses will get too excited in the canter extension, so a few strides is sufficient. You may also need to experiment with the angle of the hill. A steeper angle for the trot might encourage some horses to really use their bodies. But, the same angle at the canter might make them too excited, since they have to push so strongly against gravity created by the steep incline.

Start as you did in the trot, riding a working or collected canter uphill. Check your rhythm, relaxation and connection as you did in the trot and, if it is satisfactory, ask for a lengthening. As in trot, use half halts to maintain the balance and connection. If the horse rushes or falls forward, half halt so he sits back and slows down. If the horse continues to be strong or off balance, ride a few canter-walk transitions.

Over time, you can increase the stride. Keep in mind that the quality of the basic elements of the Training Scale

is more important than the size of the horse's stride.

### Uphill Lateral Work

Developing and maintaining quality lateral work can be difficult because, with the addition of sideways movement, the horse often loses the straightness through his body and no longer steps toward his center of gravity. This results in the horse losing the lift and cadence of the collection and, therefore, the quality of the basic gait. By riding lateral work uphill, the horse is encouraged to continuously step under the rider's weight and lift. The horse lifts his back continuously, which, in turn, also makes bending easier. These exercises help a horse with a slower hind leg and, in combination with extensions, improve the action of the hind legs.

To begin, ride uphill in shoulder-fore position. Increase the angle if your horse is able to maintain the quality of the gait. The next time you go uphill, ask for a shoulder-in and, if the horse maintains rhythm, tempo and a soft connection, move on to the travers or renvers. How many steps you perform in the lateral work and the sequence depends on the horse's level of training and his strengths and weaknesses. A younger horse might just do a line of shoulder-in right to shoulder-in left, for example.

When the shoulder-in, travers and renvers are established, you can challenge the horse with two or more lateral movements together, such as shoulder-in to travers. For the more advanced horse that is comfortable with this lateral work, half passes are a possible next step.

Hill work can also be particularly beneficial for the half pass counter changes of hand, such as the changes in direction from half pass right to half pass left. This is first introduced at Fourth Level with one change in the trot and canter. At Grand Prix, you have to perform five canter half passes on the centerline and a change of hand in the trot and canter

## Uphill Lateral Work



**Graf Montekalino shows cadence and joint bending in shoulder-in (left) and maintains a steady rhythm and cadenced trot in half pass (right).**

out of a steep angle.

It is often difficult to keep the horse engaged enough and maintain the proper alignment while going sideways. The horse should not lead or trail with the haunches or lose the cadence of the collected trot. Without impulsion, it is hard to change direction with a quality trot. Practicing half passes while going uphill helps the horse to stay straight and engaged. As he learns the body memory for the movement, you will find that changing directions becomes much easier.

To begin, ride a few strides uphill in a trot half pass to the right. Give yourself time to straighten and then transition into half pass to the left. The horse should stay forward but in a steady rhythm and a cadenced trot.

When you feel that your horse is comfortable enough to advance to the canter half passes, there are a few things you must remember: It becomes more important to straighten the horse between half passes in order to prepare for the flying change. Going uphill

makes this transition that much easier, because the hill forces the horse to maintain the forward, uphill movement and to step straight under his center of gravity. When moving in the new direction, be careful not to overflex the horse, as he must maintain the alignment of his spine. With all these factors working for you, doing the flying change and the next half pass will be that much easier.

### Uphill Flying Changes

I like flying change work on hills particularly for a horse that gets nervous and strong when working on multiple changes. Normally, this added tension makes it hard to keep your leg on or to maintain the feeling from back to front. The relaxation suffers, and the tension results in a short neck, which blocks the hind legs from coming through in the change. The tempi changes are then unreliable, as the horse often falls on the forehand and is either unable to change again or changes too frequently. While riding a correct canter uphill, you can push the horse forward without him

# Uphill Flying Changes



**When riding flying changes uphill (1), the added challenge of continuously pushing against gravity (2) helps the horse jump through with height and expression (3). Roulette is a 1996 Oldenburg owned by Gene Freeze.**

running away from your leg. The added challenge of continuously pushing against gravity breaks the cycle of heaviness in the connection.

To practice changes uphill, first ride a single change in both directions. Your goal is to have the feeling that you can truly ride the horse forward into the change with a consistent leg aid. Your leg should be in soft contact with the horse's side.

You are ready to ride a sequence when you have established a clean flying change in both directions that is truly from back to front with an appropriate canter in rhythm and tempo. You will need a longer hillside for this. At this stage, you do not count the strides, but instead, focus on the feeling of the canter. Ride one change and make sure you regain the same canter quality before you ask for the second one. If the horse is able to change twice without getting nervous, you can try asking for a third one. If you ask for multiple changes too quickly, the horse might fall back into the old pattern of tension. The horse's relaxation and sensitivity in the exercise will dictate how soon you can start to count between the changes.

## Uphill Piaffe and Passage

If your horse has been previously introduced to piaffe and passage, you can also include them in your uphill workout. As you walk uphill, ask the horse for a few half steps. Allow him to go forward with as much carrying power as possible but enough propulsive power to allow him to work against the incline. Bit by bit, let him go more forward without losing the lift until you feel a few strides of passage. From there, let him slowly develop an extended trot. The ability to do that will prepare the horse to execute the most difficult transitions without losing cadence or rhythm.

## Downhill Transitions

Going downhill in balance makes the horse rock his weight back on his hind legs and carry himself. This is a great tool in teaching horses to transfer weight during transitions. In my 2007 article, I taught you how to ride walk-halt and trot-walk transitions. For the upper-level horse, the canter is added. Before attempting any canter work downhill, you must be completely confident that your horse is rocking his weight back and is soft in the connection.

Start with a walk-canter transition near the bottom of the slope. This will give the horse the feel of the more difficult transition without overfacing him. The upward transitions should be ridden very collected and on the lightest aids, so the horse can stay balanced in the strike-off. The first few downward transitions might require a little stronger aid, but the horse often learns quickly that he has to engage his hind legs to come down rather than stop on his front legs. Your hand might have to resist a little stronger, but try not to pull back. Lighten as soon as the horse has changed his weight to his hind legs.

## Downhill Pirouettes

Even for the most advanced horse, canter pirouettes can be improved with a slight slope. It is hard for many horses to collect enough for the preparation of the pirouette. For a highly collected canter, it is important that the rider sit in perfect balance and allow the horse to work on his own. A well-trained horse will start to collect and balance himself as the rider stills her pelvis and follows the canter motion only slightly. This is only possible if the horse learns to carry himself and stay light in the

# Downhill Pirouettes



**At the bottom of a slight incline, Roulette collects for a canter pirouette (1). As he moves through a quarter of the turn (2), he begins to go uphill (3), and physics forces him to step toward his center of gravity (4) to maintain his balance (5). His upward, forward cadence remains. Going forward uphill out of the pirouette (6) helps to rebalance him.**

rider's hands. Collect as much as possible within the horse's ability to carry himself and maintain canter quality.

Another issue that can be overcome with hill work is the tendency to get stuck and lose the forward momentum, which results in the horse falling out with one hind leg and spinning. Once the horse is capable of collecting properly in the canter downhill, start to ride a pirouette out of this collected canter. As you ride through a quarter of the turn, you begin to go uphill, and physics forces the horse to step toward his center of gravity to maintain his balance. His upward, forward cadence also remains.

This is highly intense work and should not be done for long periods of time.

## **Downhill Piaffe and Passage**

Downhill work can be helpful when first introducing the piaffe or for the well-schooled Grand Prix horse. Here is a common scenario: In the piaffe, a horse may not have enough expression or correct engagement to use his front legs properly while shifting his weight onto the engaged hind leg. The more the rider tries to engage the hind legs, the more the horse reacts by working behind and sometimes coming too far under (pedestal position). He ultimately just

gets heavier on the forehand. Or, the horse lifts his hind legs too much and gets croup high instead of lowering his haunches and taking weight. Going downhill helps this tremendously, because the horse has to rock his weight back and lift his forearm to stay balanced. The benefit is the same for the passage and transitions.

Before introducing the piaffe, ride numerous transitions, such as trot-walk or canter-walk, over a period of weeks to ensure that the horse is properly carrying himself. When beginning piaffe work with the young horse, I ride walk-trot transitions but, as the horse trots off, I

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## Downhill Piaffe & Passage



**Riding half steps downhill helps Where's Waldo shift his weight, because he has to rock back and lift his forearms to stay balanced.**



**Roulette shows a new and improved balance in the piaffe.**

make him wait on my seat as long as possible—not letting him go forward but letting him advance in the smallest trot strides. This develops a few steps of more extreme collection. This is called mobilizing the hindquarters and is one of the most important tools for training an upper-level horse.

If your horse is trained in piaffe and passage, start working downhill either for a few steps or until you feel your horse changes his balance. Do not try to keep the piaffe on the spot; just try to get a new improved feeling. It is helpful to have someone give you feedback from the ground or be videotaped. This way, you can make sure you don't push the horse at the wrong moment. A big word of warning: Do not overwork the horse! The easier it feels for you, the harder the horse is working. Only when piaffe and passage have been firmly established can you work on the transitions between them. In the transition, allow many steps, as it takes time for the horse to change his balance from piaffe to passage and vice versa.

Ultimately, the muscle memory and added enthusiasm your horse has gained from hill work will lead to vast improvement in the ring. 📷

*Felicitas von Neumann-Cosel is head trainer at Gene Freeze's First Choice Farm in Woodbine, Maryland, and a former examiner for the U.S. Dressage Federation Instructor Certification Program. She is a German native who earned her Reitlehrer (federally certified instructor) certification with the highest score attained by anyone at that time. Many thanks go to Eileen McKenna, Olivia Frost and K.C. Barnes for an early morning photo shoot.*