

“What should my horses training look like?”

Scales of training and their application, an overview

You should hear your coach and your judges refer to the **FEI Scales of training** during your work together, and use them to develop your horse through its training and grades with harmony and clear understanding.

Without the **application and understanding of the basics** you will not progress in your training and achieve the goals you have set. Keep in your minds eye what a horse at your horses level should look like. That is your goal using the Scales of Training to guide you.

Your dressage test is an assessment of where YOU and YOUR HORSE are in applying these scales at the level you are competing. Yes, everyone wants to win but use the test sheet and comments to then move forwards with your training and a good coach.



Above is an Intro level pony, relaxed, correct muscles but could be more supple through to a soft contact but working on correct lines with relaxed and harmonious picture. Note the length of frame and where her hind legs are at this point in training.



Here we see a horse working at medium level, with good use of the hind leg, well balanced in self carriage, and through his supple back taking the rider and contact forwards with uphill but ground covering elastic steps



Here we see a horse working with all the scales established in balance and supple and elastic steps, a true athlete enjoying his work. Note the freedom and expression and the power from the hind legs.

SELF REFLECTION

Now **look at your horse and assess where you are** and think about where you might need to work towards.

Answer these questions honestly as the basis for your training plan.

What does the frame look like? Is the balance onto the forehand, your rein or is it more evenly balanced? Am I developing the correct muscles in my horse? Does it have a stiff and hollow back? Does it have muscle under its neck? Is it a healthy weight?

Can you think of anything else to help direct your training? Judges comments? Are they all saying similar things? Did you action them?

Progression and expectations

At the lower levels Intro to Novice we are looking to apply the first three steps of Rhythm, suppleness and contact. However as you will see from the diagram they are all connected!

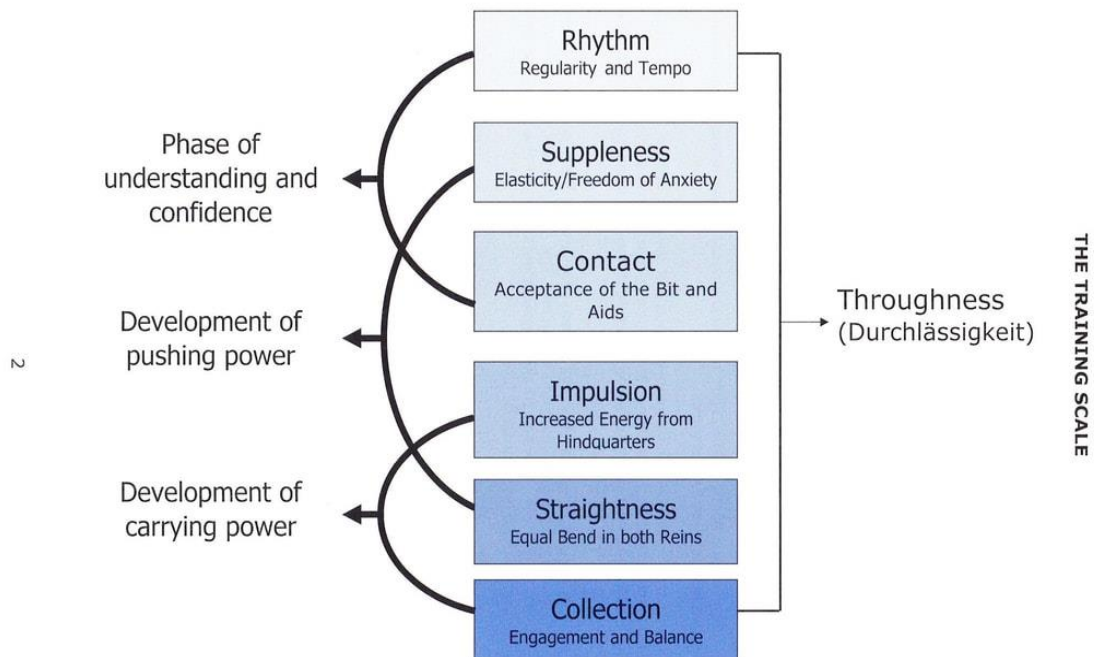
If a horse does not work in a correct rhythm in its paces there is a serious fault. However if the rhythm disturbance is due to tension that is resolvable and not seen all the time, so we have to look at the suppleness, mental and physical attributes in our horse and how we can reduce the tension.

Is there suppleness? Is there contact? Without suppleness through the back we cant work to an elastic contact. Don't forget the contact comes from the hind legs, see later.

As the training advances, is there impulsion? Is there straightness? And at the higher levels is there collection and how much are we expecting from Elementary up?

So lets look at how the Scales of Training will help you at your current level.

Scales of training



Whilst you will hear people recite the Scales they are not in a pyramid where you master one level and move up. Even a Grand Prix horse needs all of them in his training and you may find that your focus at the moment is suppleness but another day really working on rhythm and balance in all your paces.

The three phases and what they mean to your training.

You will see from the diagram that the training scales show progression through three phases, the understanding and confidence, the development of pushing power and the development of carrying power.

Where is your horse at in his training? **Be honest!**

What have the judges highlighted as areas for your training focus at the moment?

Intro to early Novice test level

Our first aim is to reassure the young horse. The balance will be disturbed by our sitting on them and ours may be a little wobbly too! So our first training is to focus on working forwards in a correct rhythm, to relax the horse and work to reduce stiffness and improve the suppleness.

RHYTHM

SUPPLENESS

SOFT FORWARDS CONTACT

So we are looking at the understanding and confidence phase in our horses training, and maybe our own!

Novice to Medium

So now our horse is working in a rhythm,, through a supple frame and to an elastic contact with balance and we know he is strong enough on the hind leg to develop the pushing power.

We still need to continue to develop and improve our suppleness but now we ask him to generate pushing power by activating the hind quarters so the hind legs swing forwards in the moment of suspension in our canter and trot. The energy can travel through his supple frame to an elastic supple contact. So now we are asking for more impulsion, power from an active hind leg, NOT TEMPO/SPEED, and in a correct balance.

We will start to see the horse develop his balance, lighten his steps and work through a more open shoulder, freedom.

Developing carrying power, beyond Medium

Eventually with correct training we will enable our horse to progressively transfer the weight from the forehand and onto the hind leg, especially when the strides are shortened for collection.

In **collection** the horse maintains the regularity, same tempo, suppleness, contact impulsion and straightness. IT **IS NOT A SLOWER TEMPO**.

Training and development through the Scales takes time and cannot be hurried or short cut! Each horse and type will vary but a correctly trained coach will work with you to enjoy your progress and success. Any shortcuts will show and prevent the correct development.

So now let's look at what this all means to you and your horse

RHYTHM

Rhythm should be correct for each pace and at the same tempo (speed of the rhythm) with a pronounced clear beat. The horse should not speed up or slow down whether on the straight or a corner, whether shortening or lengthening the strides.

SUPPLENESS

The aim is that the horses muscled will have tone and be free from resistance, the joints are loose and do not tighten against the riders legs. The test of whether the horse is supple and working "through" the back and neck is when the rein contact is eased eg free walk, and the horse wants to stretch forwards and down and not hollow and lift its head.

CONTACT

The ideal contact is light, even, elastic feel in both reins and is achieved with aids FROM the seat and legs NOT the hands. The legs are the driving aid and the horse steps under and through the muscles along its back, neck, poll and to the bit. The

rider feels the energy through the reins and the horse works in a round not hollow outline. The horse is then said to be “connected”.

IMPULSION

This is the contained power of the horse. It is created by the hindquarters and the hind legs come more under the body. There should be no blocking of this energy as it flows through so he must be supple and connected for impulsion. This energy enables the rider to demonstrate the horse's ability and athleticism but must be controlled!

STRAIGHTNESS

Like humans, horses are born one sided! Crookedness can get worse through riders sitting to one side, or keeping a stronger contact on one rein. If a horse is crooked it will affect his balance and impulsion as the hind legs will not step into the track of the forelegs on a straight line or on a circle resulting in an uneven feel on the reins.

COLLECTION

To enable the horse to perform the higher movements he slowly develops the ability to rebalance and carry the weight of the rider on the hind leg and not rely on the rider's hands to keep his balance.

Over time and correct training the horse will bring his hind legs more under the body and develop the carrying power of the hindquarters.

At Novice level no collection is required but exercises to start to develop his training are halts from trot, medium paces with clear balanced transitions showing uphill frame not on the forehand. This way he learns to shorten his steps and come more under the body with his hind legs and transfer a little more weight onto his hindquarters.

SUMMARY

The Scales of Training provide a framework to help the judge, rider and coach/trainer assess the way of going when performing a movement.

SELF REFLECTION TIME

Am I applying these to my training? Do I understand their relevance and how to apply them? Does my trainer underpin the scales when working with me?

Take your time training your horse but keep a focussed eye on your goals. It's not a race, the time and correctness to your training is a long term investment.

Your horse is your friend and whilst there are only four on a countries Olympic Team you can still improve and develop to enjoy your time together.

Apply your Scales with clarity understanding and patience in your training and you will develop your happy athlete.

Good luck together.

Resources FEI Judges Book, British Dressage Members Handbook (on line), You tube and books by reputable trainers and dressage riders,