

THE PYRAMID OF TRAINING – CONNECTION

Acceptance of the Bit through Acceptance of the Aids

Definition

“The energy generated in the hindquarters by the driving aids must flow through the whole body of the horse and is received in the rider’s hands. The contact to the bit must be elastic and adjustable, creating fluent interaction between horse and rider with appropriate changes in the horse’s outline.

Acceptance of the bit is identified by the horse quietly chewing the bit. This activates the salivary glands so the mouth becomes moist and production of saliva is evident. The softly moving tongue should remain under the bit.

The quality of the connection and balance can be evaluated by “Überstreichen”, releasing the reins (to demonstrate self carriage) or by allowing the horse to chew the reins out of the hands (to demonstrate relaxation). [*USDF Glossary of Judging Terms*]

“Contact is a soft and steady connection between the rider’s hand and the horse’s mouth. The horse should go rhythmically forward from the rider’s driving aids and ‘seek’ a contact with the rider’s hand, thus ‘going onto’ the contact. The horse seeks the contact and the rider provides it.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 156]

In **contact**, “the reins are stretched such that they form a straight line, not a loop. ‘Correct contact’, or ‘acceptance of contact’, is determined by the elasticity of the connection between horse and rider.” [*USDF Glossary of Judging Terms*]

In **connection or when connected**, there is a “state in which there is not blockage, break, or slack in the circuit that joins horse and rider into a single, harmonious, elastic unit. A prerequisite for Throughness.” [*USDF Glossary of Judging Terms*]

Purpose

Steady contact is closely connected with the development of rhythm and looseness. Contact gives the horse the necessary confidence to rebalance himself under the additional weight of the rider, and to find the rhythm of the various gaits.

“When the horse is losgelassen (loose) the energy generated by the quarters can be transferred over a swinging back through a giving flexion into the calm restraining hand. The rider has an even contact on both hands. This contact can only be developed out of pushing leg and back aids, not solely with a rein aid.” [*The Dressage Horse*, p 114]

Qualities

The acceptance of the bit is characterized by the horse’s softly chewing on the bit.

“In all his work even at the halt the horse must be on the bit. A horse is said to be on the bit when the neck is more or less raised and arched according to the stage of training and the extension or collection of the gait and he accepts the bridle with a light and soft contact and submissiveness throughout. The head should remain in a steady position as a rule slightly in front of the vertical with a supple poll as the highest point of the neck and no resistance should be offered to the rider.” [*USEF Rule Book DR101*]

How to Achieve

“Contact should never be achieved through a backward action of the hands; it should result from the correctly delivered forward thrust of the hind legs. The horse should go forward confidently onto the contact in response to the rider’s driving aids.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 157]

“Contact must never be obtained by pulling back with the reins. Contact is the result of well-developed propulsive

power. It must result from the correct development of the pushing powers of the horse's hindquarters. When forward driving aids are applied the horse moves forward into the contact." [*Principles of Riding*, p 156]

The driving aids of the rider cause the horse to step into the rider's hands with confidence.

"Using pushing aids, the horse must be urged up to the hand, through which the quarters and forehand can become connected to one another.

The horse should not seek support from the hand by leaning but should take and chew the bit. Should the contact become too strong the rider must use half-halts to re-establish a lighter contact." [*The Dressage Horse*, p 114]

When ridden on contact, the horse's outline is determined by his balance. At first he will carry his neck rather low and his mouth in line with the point of his shoulder, to allow the neck and back muscle to relax and stretch.

To establish a contact the rider must bring the horse's hind legs further underneath his body. This stretches and elasticized the neck and back band muscles [longissimus dorsi]. The rider can feel clearly in both hands and under his seat how the forehand and quarters are connected by the back muscle[s]. He can feel how the activity of the quarters causes the back to swing with suppleness and elasticity, resulting in powerful yet relaxed and regular strides.

Through this swinging back the propulsive force generated by the quarters can now be transmitted forward to the horse's mouth. The horse submits to the energy coming from behind: he flexes in the poll and chomps the bit—in other words he is on the bit. This situation also provides an opportunity to influence the hindquarters with the reins.

Faults

"When establishing a contact with the horse's mouth, many riders make the following mistakes:

False Bend

"This occurs as a result of the rider attempting to establish the contact by acting in a backward direction with his hands. The highest point of the neck is no longer the poll but a point further back, usually between the third and fourth vertebrae. This is a serious fault which can only be corrected by lengthy, systematic reschooling. While riding the horse energetically forward, the trainer needs to be able to prevent rhythm faults or hurrying by elastic use of the hands, and at the same time to 'give' sufficiently with his hands to allow the neck to adopt the correct outline." [*The Principles of Riding*, p 164]

Behind the Vertical

"Going with the nose behind the vertical is caused by using the hands too strongly. This fault may result either from a momentary mistake in applying the aids or it may be a symptom of long term incorrect schooling. The only way to correct it is by pushing the horse forward and at the same time yielding with the hands." [*Principles of Riding*, p 162]

"The head position in which the horse's nostril falls behind the imaginary vertical line dropped from the horse's eye. The horse may or may not be behind the bit." [*USDF Glossary of Judging Terms*]

Behind the Bit

Behind the bit may manifest itself by dropping the bit, pulling up the tongue, putting the tongue over the bit or letting it hang out of the mouth. Here the horse goes with a false bend and behind the vertical, but he also tries not to accept the bit by creeping behind it, escaping backwards. Incorrectly fitted tack can be a contributing factor. Check that the bit is not too low or the noseband too loose or too tight.

"An evasion in which the horse retracts or shrinks back from the bit/contact, avoiding stepping forward into the contact. The head may or may not be behind the vertical." [*USDF Glossary of Judging Terms*]

Above/Against the Bit

"A horse is said to be above the bit when the head is too high and the angle of the face too far in front of the perpendicu-

lar.” [The Complete Training of Horse and Rider, p 42] “A head position in which the horse avoids acceptance of the contact by putting the muzzle forward and upward, also usually retracting the poll.” [USDF Glossary of Judging Terms]

Against the bit: “Horse presses its mouth against the bit with rigid or unyielding neck/poll/jaw.” [USDF Glossary of Judging Terms]

When the horse does not “give” in the poll, he develops a ewe neck, and the dropped back is tense and stiff. He goes against the rider’s hand, with the nasal bone well in front of the vertical. To correct this, the horse has to be worked a lot on circles and large serpentines to make him supple and to bend him laterally.

“In this fault the horse’s nose is well in front of the vertical. The horse will not flex at the poll and uses the muscles on the underside of his neck to resist the hand, while at the same time stiffening and hollowing the back. If this is a long-standing fault, and the wrong muscles have been allowed to develop, lunging with side reins can be very beneficial.” [Principles of Riding, p. 164]

Source: Principles of Riding, 1987

The Horse’s Outline



On the Bit



On the Long Rein



On the Loose Rein