

THE PYRAMID OF TRAINING – RELAXATION

With Elasticity and Suppleness

Definition

“Relaxation refers to the horse’s mental state (calmness without anxiety or nervousness), as well as his physical state (the absence of negative muscular tension). Usually, the mental and physical states go hand in hand. The horse learns to accept the influence of the rider without becoming tense. He acquires positive muscle tone so that he moves with elasticity and a supple, swinging back, allowing the rider to bend him laterally as well as lengthen and shorten his frame.

A horse showing the correct responses when allowed to chew the reins out of the hands is relaxed.” [USDF Glossary of Judging Terms]

“Looseness has been achieved when the horse will stretch its head and neck forward and downwards in all three gaits. A horse working with looseness should swing through its back and move with rhythmic, unspoiled natural paces; it should not rush forwards, quickening its steps, i.e. running. It should accept the forward-driving aids, and the rider should be able to sit the movement and not be thrown out of the saddle. Indications of looseness (and mental relaxation) are:

- a contented, happy expression (eyes, ear movements);
- a rhythmically swinging back;
- a closed but not immobile mouth (the horse should mouth the bit gently);
- tail lifted slightly ‘carried’ and swinging in time with the movement;
- ‘snorting’, which is a sign that the horse is mentally relaxed”. [Principles of Riding, p 156]

“One recognizes Losgelassenheit by the swinging back. When giving such a horse the reins, he will reach gradually forward and downwards with his neck without pulling the reins out of the rider’s hands. It must be achieved at the beginning of each lesson through practicing such things as rising trot, transitions between trot and canter or cavalletti work. Nervousness can also stop the horse from becoming losgelassen.” [The Dressage Horse, p 113]

Purpose

“The free horse instinctively uses his muscles in an economic way. When we put a rider on him, we upset this relaxed state. The horse will resist and get tense, his muscles hard. It is therefore one of the main objects of schooling to adapt the horse’s muscle-work to an efficient and economical use of his power in spite of the presence of the rider.

Loosening work aims at removing the tension and creates smoothness and elasticity in the alternating muscle-work by encouraging the stretching muscles to stretch and the collecting work. Collecting work aims at increasing the muscles’ ability to contract, thereby building them up in strength.

Work in collection should also be loosening as increased contraction requires an equal amount of stretching. If the schooling has failed to supple him sufficiently, this increased work will make him tired because of resistance, his steps will shorten and become less active. He will have lost his back-action and will be moving without connection between forehand and hindquarters.” [The Art of Riding, pp 38-41]

Faults

“If we restrict the horse in the use of his head and neck (his balancing rod), the horse will have to adapt himself to this (restriction) and alter his whole pattern of movement. In front, he will use the muscles along his neck to keep it fixed in a forced position. His neck will be wider at the top than in front of the withers. There will also be hard and inflexible muscles on the underside of the neck as he is forced to use his front legs more and more for propulsion. His action will deteriorate, as the back action isn’t allowed to develop.

His front legs will be later coming off the ground, further back, behind the perpendicular. His front legs will, consequently, be put down sooner without reaching out in front of the shoulder. There will be less room for the hind legs so that they will operate further back, carrying less weight. The walk will be shortened or ambling, as the near foreleg is in the way of the near hind leg, etc. The trot will lose its cadence and suspension and the canter will be stiff and choppy

and might lose its regular three-beat. All this, because of a restriction in front which the horse is not ready for and has to find ways around. It is completely unnecessary and a violation of nature.

People take shortcuts in order to more quickly produce a 'trained' horse. But for those who are trying to produce a genuine and lasting article there are no such shortcuts. You cannot go against nature without paying a price." [*The Art of Riding*, pp 38-41]

Relaxation is indispensable to any further achievement. It must be both physical and mental. With a green horse, this goal must be the rider's consuming task for the entire riding period. As the horse shows an absence of tension, transmits the propelling energy originating in his haunches through a relaxed musculature, his impact on the ground will soften and the rider will need to spend less and less time and effort on relaxation. He will be free to go on to more complex and sophisticated goals. Without relaxation, the horse cannot render himself attentive to the rider's aids, accept the bit, and listen to correct guidance concerning the haunches. Without mental relaxation, the horse cannot achieve substantial physical relaxation. [Training Strategies for Dressage Riders, p XXX]

"Good development of strength and agility is not possible if the horse is tense; relaxation is essential for muscular control, for good reflexes, for good breathing technique, for any kind of activity. However, the body cannot relax unless the mind is also relaxed. Horses, even when they are at liberty outdoors, show different ability to relax and if they are startled, we notice that some of them gallop with beautifully coordinated movements and others with tense backs and a choppy action. We cannot predict from this observation how they will behave under saddle because this will depend as much on their temperament as on their physical aptitudes; initial experience of men and early training days are determinant factors; an unintelligent and impatient trainer will aggravate the physical and mental tensions which all horses feel at the beginning, while a good trainer eases these tensions because he knows how to get the horse to trust him and accept his weight in the saddle.

Relaxed use of muscles, of groups of muscles or of the whole body is not inherent and cannot be learnt quickly just in a few lessons at the beginning of training; it is an ability which comes with practice and habit; it is the final result of education, exercise and gymnastic schooling; it is an ability which once acquired is never forgotten, but can continue to be perfected.

To produce movement, muscles can alternately shorten and lengthen to their maximum possible extent; they then produce optimum range of movement. All muscles can also be maintained in a shortened, contracted state. If they remain in this contracted state, they start aching, become fatigued, and lose their power. Muscles are under tension in this state of sustained contraction, but an excessive, therefore harmful tension. It is hypertension that is undesirable. Therefore, what we mean when we say that the horse must not be tense is that he must not be hypertense. We certainly do not want absence of tension, which is slackness." [*The Way to Perfect Horsemanship*, p. 71]