

DRESSAGE TODAY

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# EXTRA

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Collection



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# Collection with THROUGHNESS and FORWARD DESIRE

An international trainer and competitor explains the process behind finding perfect collection.

Scott Hassler rides Harmony's Diamo Gold, a 9-year-old Oldenburg gelding by DiMaggio, owned by Harmony Sporthorses. The pair demonstrates a balanced, uphill collected canter as they start the transition into medium canter.



By Scott Hassler with Beth Baumert • Photos by Amy K. Dragoo

Learning to develop collection is one of the most important aspects of horse and rider education. Collection can be poorly produced unless both horse and rider understand the principles of what it should achieve. In defining “collection,” I like to use the word “compression” because when you compress something such as a spring, it wants to push back. If you take a spring that’s 12 inches long and you compress it 1 inch, it wants to push back that 1 inch. If you think of collection as “fluid compression that wants to push back,” you’re ahead of the game, so don’t lose that concept!

## Degrees of Collection

Collection is introduced to the horse at Second Level, but very few horses have truly established collection at that point in their education. The Third Level horse should have true, mature collection. I loved being the USEF National Young Horse Dressage Coach because during those 4-, 5- and 6-year-old years, horses gain the “college education” that gives them the mental

understanding of how to use their bodies to collect. Then they can utilize that technique as they develop through the years. Horses continue to develop the ability to compress to greater degrees as they mature beyond their young horse years and their collection becomes more advanced, more purposeful and more confirmed. So, for example, a Grand Prix horse has much more established engagement and cadence than the Third Level horse as a reflection of the degree of collection.

For every degree of ground coverage that is reduced in collection, your horse should come up that much higher. His inclination from the beginning should be to lower the croup and lift in the shoulders.



## The Importance of Rhythm

Riding through the numbers (see p. 5) is a rhythmical process, and rhythm is the key to relaxation. If you don't have a relaxed rhythm, the horse cannot change his body the way he needs to in order to collect and compress. So concentrate on the regularity of the rhythm and tempo as you do this exercise. If you don't have comfort at a certain level, then you don't have permission to go further. It's that simple. This method gains more thoroughness, better rhythm, more time for the horse to feel and understand the transition of developing compression in a gradual way.

### What is Perfect Collection?

I often compliment a rider whose horse is cantering with expression, but then when I ask that rider to show me how she collects the canter, the quality is often lost. The bottom line is that collection should make the horse more beautiful than he was beforehand, not less beautiful. If the horse loses the expression, the elevation, the beautiful contact, the energy, the fluidity of the gait or the way his legs are animating, we can't be satisfied that we've

achieved collection.

As you ask for a degree of collection, you should feel a gradual yet energetic coiling, and for every degree of ground coverage that is reduced in collection, your horse should come up that much higher. His inclination from the beginning should be to lower the croup and lift in the shoulders. Period. Your horse should understand that clearly.

Then later, when you're asking for higher collection in, for example, the

preparation for a pirouette in the Prix St. Georges, your horse knows to compress or collect himself and the croup becomes lower and the shoulders higher. When you're going from an extended canter to a collected canter, he still has that concept that the croup is lowering and the forehand is rising.

Collection requires an incredible ability to communicate with your horse's body. You must be able to show the horse how to collect fluidly without running through you, dropping behind the leg or falling left or right. These resistances are often simply a lack of understanding in the horse. Here are the exercises I use to help my horses understand collection.

### Collecting the Canter

The canter is a very natural gait from which to learn collection, because the horse can innately canter very fast or almost in place. Trotting is different. It's more artificial and usually more difficult, so let's start in canter.

I teach collected canter in two ways. I start some horses with Exercise 1, "Schooling through the Numbers," and some with Exercise 2, "Changing the Balance Rapidly." However, eventually, your horse needs to understand both.

#### Exercise 1: Schooling Through the Numbers

In this exercise, I ask my horse for collection very gradually, thinking about the rhythm and the speed—or ground coverage—of the canter. For purposes of illustration, we might consider that the speed of a quality working canter is 15 mph, the Third Level collected canter might be 12 mph and the FEI collected canter of the Prix St. Georges might be 10 mph. Finally, the highly collected canter in a pirouette is only 1 mph.

How do we get from 15 mph to 12 to 10 and finally from 10 to 1? Try this exercise to coach your horse to quality collection.

## Staying on Track

You'll never overface your horse, if: (a) he has rhythm and (b) his topline is soft and pliable so he can receive your messages.

Here's how you might think about these two qualities:

**Rhythm.** The aids are given within the rhythm of the gait and your power source must be in that rhythm so you have timing and a feel for the motion of your horse. Without rhythm, you don't have access to your horse's back, which means his topline will be tight and as a result, you don't have permission to get louder. If your aids get louder when the topline is tight, your horse will scoot, break or lock. If you have rhythm, you can explain your wishes clearly to him.

**Topline.** If you try to bend a board, it's going to snap before it shapes itself. The horse's back must be shapable and soft like wire coat hanger. It must bend so you can ply it. The topline must feel like it can be molded and you have access to it.

As you do the numbers exercise, the topline should be tended to all the time. You're shaping and suppling so your horse can receive the message with the next number and the next number. With rhythm and with a topline that is able to receive your message or your directives with clarity, you will rarely overface a horse. You can easily add more energy, more motivation, more precision or get a quicker balance shift.



#### For the Horse Just Learning Collection:

**Step 1:** Start in your working canter at 15 mph. Within the rhythm of canter, go to 14 mph. That slight reduction in ground cover should translate into more animation. The rhythm shouldn't get choppy, slow or tense. The contact should remain the same. Confirm the quality and comfort of each step and when 14 mph feels good, try 13 and then 12. When 12 is comfortable and beautiful, try 11 and then 10, which is approximately a Prix St. Georges canter.

**Step 2:** Slowly—one step at a time—go from your 10-mph collected canter to 11 and gradually back to your 15-mph working canter.

#### For the Educated Horse:

**Step 1:** The Prix St. Georges horse has a collected canter that might be about 10

mph. Ask for a 9, and if that 9 feels comfortable for a few strides, you can go to 8, and if 8 feels supple and you've retained the beauty of it, then try for a 7. Make seven comfortable and then go to 6. Make 6 comfortable and go to 5, and so on.

**Step 2:** Next, work your way back up to 10, one step at a time.

*What he should learn:* Your horse should have the experience, the feel and the understanding of gradually utilizing the rhythm to coil, lower the croup, lift his shoulders and shift his balance. Because the exercise is so gradual in nature, it has the advantage of building confidence as well as understanding. This method is ideal for nervous and sensitive horses. But later you will have to mature the process so you can go through the numbers much more rapidly without losing any of those positive

Hassler is riding Harmony's Diamo Gold, demonstrating the ultimate in collection in an exemplary piaffe with throughness and clear uphill tendency.



## The Half Halt and the Half Stop

The half halt is different from the half stop. I like to clarify this difference in both my teaching and my riding. The half stop is a corrective tool that says, for example, “Please stop leaning,” or “You’re not doing this well enough.” A half stop is a fix—a correction—that re-establishes the horse’s balance or refocuses his attention on the aids. That fixing, by the way, might be needed, but it’s something different from a half halt.

In contrast, the half halt is fine-tuning and finessing, rather than fixing. A half halt is a beautiful thing that says, “Let’s keep the dance going.” When you’re watching a pair on the dance floor, you never see a moment of tension or stiffness. The half halt is a finessed communication between horse and rider that allows fine tuning to happen.

When the judge says he wants to see more half halts,

he doesn’t want more fixes; he wants more fine-tuning and preserving what’s already good. The half halt should help the horse before he loses his balance. Ride more half halts when the horse is good. Don’t wait until you lose quality because then it’s too late.



qualities. That nervous, sensitive horse will eventually need to understand Exercise 2: “Changing the Balance Rapidly.”

*What you should learn:* The rider who asks for collection this gradually has the tendency to use the aids more appropriately and rhythmically than the rider who is trying to make a sudden change and might be inclined to grip and hold.

Ultimately, however, the goal isn't just to get through the numbers gradually; you must teach the horse how to shift his balance promptly, again without losing fluidity in the back or any of the other basic qualities. The power and compression shouldn't get choppy, he shouldn't lose his balance, he shouldn't feel any tension in his ears or in his tail. He shouldn't feel different in the contact. You'll learn how to meet the needs of your horse whether he is lazy or hot.

## Exercise 2: Changing the Balance Rapidly

With a lazier horse, you'll want to make a change of balance more rapidly to add some energy and inspiration to him and then do it more fluidly later. With this lazier horse, you want the rapid change of balance to say, “Come on! Wake up and do it now!” Then, after your horse is awake, you go back to Exercise 1—going through the numbers with fluidity and getting the beauty of it. With the sensitive horse, after you gradually go through the numbers, he must learn to do it quickly because, in fact, a rapid change of balance is often needed. All horses need to do it both ways. You want to do it fluidly with rhythm and comfort and you want to do it rapidly to get a complete balance shift.

### Where do you do your exercises?

In doing your exercises, figure out what lines and patterns are best for your particular horse. It may be on a straight line or a bent line. Does your horse do better on:

- a 20-meter circle?
- a short diagonal?
- a long side?

## When Things Go Wrong

When things go wrong, try to think from your horse's point of view. It's futile to think in human terms (*He's pulling. He's running. He's not listening to my leg. He's on the forehand. He's running through me.*) because horses usually just need an explanation: “You need to shift your balance... you need to be more inspired.” Think in his terms. What does he need? He needs rhythm, he needs suppleness, he needs straightness. He needs to understand.

- in counter canter?

We don't talk enough about collecting the canter with counter flexion. Some horses collect more easily that way, perhaps because the weight of the horse's head and neck are no longer on the inside shoulder so it's lighter and freer and can come off the ground more easily. Also, the horse is more easily aligned and the rider's inside rein isn't blocking, which allows the inside hind leg to jump through instead of into a holding inside rein. For these reasons, explore counter flexion, but then you will need to go back to the true principles with true positioning. Explore how best to get collection beautifully in canter.

### Collecting the Trot

Collection in the trot has a very different feel. The principles of what we want to achieve in collection are the same, but the way in which you create it is very different. In the trot, we must be very careful not to muddle the clarity of the rhythm and tempo of the very defined collected, medium and extended trots and the very clear piaffe and passage. These gears must be well established and understood by the horse. The collected trot can't become passage. So going “through the numbers” is an unnatural exercise in trot and it can confuse horses. The horse should know his performance trot with whatever degree of collection is appropriate. For example, the Third Level horse will have a different degree of collection from that of a Grand Prix horse. Correct use of the half halt is the ultimate goal when developing collected trot.

### The Half Halt

The half halt is a beautiful, effortless way to ask your horse to engage and shift his balance without losing rhythm, relaxation or any aspect of the contact.

The half halt communicates this to your horse: shift your balance and compress while retaining your beautiful energy, suppleness and contact.

**Ask yourself:** *When I do a half halt, am I getting compression and animation or am I getting flattening, slowing down, loss of energy or a horse that's bracing or leaning?*

**How to teach that:** The principles are the same as in the canter. You start with the slightest momentum change in which you're not covering quite as much ground in the trot and you feel your horse understands the principle of shifting his balance and engaging.

**When it's right:** The horse compresses, lowers the croup, gets tall in the withers and the gait becomes more beautiful and cadenced, inviting a transition to piaffe or passage. If the half halt isn't beautiful, then the transition from trot to piaffe isn't going to be beautiful.

**When to ask for more power:** Only when half halts are beautifully performed, do we have the right to ask for more power in, for example, an extension. If the half halts are not rhythmic, effective and easy, you have no right to add pressure—either from the saddle or from a person on the ground. That's the best way I know to get a horse to run away or get nervous and scared.

## High Collection with Help from the Ground

Collection can be developed with the assistance of a ground person—either with the rider on top or not. There are pros and cons to these two methods. If you have a skilled person on the ground without a rider and the horse trusts the handler, you can take the pressure off the horse by having no conflict of aids. In this case, you never disturb the confidence of the horse-and-rider partnership and their communications always have the same meaning. The horse can learn the concept of compressing and listening without disturbing the confidence of the rider. In some situations, this is excellent. In other situations, the horse might be nervous without the rider, and tension makes the horse worse. The horse might tighten his topline, lose rhythm or even bolt forward. In this case, a skilled rider can provide suppleness, stability and confidence while the ground person assists by providing the incentive for the actual piaffe. The person on

top is doing exactly what we discussed throughout this article, which is providing the harmonious, supple topline before asking for piaffe.

Work in hand is not just a learning tool; it's also a fitness tool. Some people say, "I'll do ground work until he learns it and then I won't need it any more." In my opinion, that's not quite the right thinking. When you have someone on the ground, the rider's aids can be very refined because the ground person is a visual for the horse that he reacts positively to and as a result, you never get into the situation in which the horse is struggling and the rider riding with harsher aids. The ground person can just be the incentive program so the rider can stay soft and supple and the horse can get fitter until the work is effortless.

I'm a big fan of figuring out what's the best way for each horse to learn. Some horses shouldn't have ground work because they get nervous. Therefore, they shouldn't have to do it. It's a matter of exploring and figuring out what's best for your horse.

**Ground help can build confidence, strength and expression. Here Hassler helps his daughter Sara Hassler, who is riding Harmony's Davidoff Hit, an Oldenburg gelding owned by Harm-ony Sport-horses.**





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## Relaxation with Energy

Relaxation must be obtained through the horse's back being supple and soft and the horse's mind trusting the rider's aids. Relaxation can be pleasant and boring, but dressage in collection requires energy. Energy can overwhelm relaxation and then we get tension. If you can get the formula for keeping relaxation with energy, you're ahead of the game. You need both.



**Scott Hassler** was the USEF National Young Horse Dressage Coach from 2005–2015, chaired the USDF sport-horse committee and has served on the USEF dressage committee for more than 10 years. A sought-after clinician, he has conducted many National Dressage Symposia for USEF, USDF and several national breed associations. Hassler Dressage is located at Riveredge in Chesapeake City, Maryland, and winters are spent at Four Winds Farm in Wellington, Florida, both owned by John and Leslie Malone.

The half halt is the hallway into the horse's body and into his mental understanding of how to adjust his gait. When he understands the half halt, he understands how the degree of his collection can become greater. When the rider learns to ride forward to a greater degree of collection without loss of rhythm or suppleness, he has the key to developing his horse's collection. 🐾

# Hoof Health and Weather Woes

*Moisture can affect your horse's hooves. Here's how to keep it from harming them.*

**K**eeping your horse's hooves in tip-top condition can be difficult during the summer. No matter how diligent your approach to care, it's easy to get tripped up by the one factor over which you have no control: the weather. Moisture, in particular, can have mild to dramatic effects on even healthy hooves as it varies from season to season, within a season and geographically. That said, it is possible for you to help your horse take the challenges of summer weather in stride. Here's how:

## Aim for the Ideal

In general, a healthy hoof has these basic qualities:

- a wall that is smooth, uniform and naturally glossy, marked with fine, faint vertical stripes formed by tubules of horn. These elongated cylindrical structures, composed of the fibrous protein keratin (also a component of hair, skin and nails), provide strength and density to the wall and allow it to be porous and maintain a certain desirable amount of flexibility.
- a rubbery, resilient frog
- strong bars and heels
- a scooped-out (concave) sole that protects the most sensitive parts of the hoof and serves as a shock absorber.

*Meeting the challenges that summer's sultry weather presents head-on can help your horse stay sound all season.*

## Moisture's Ill Effects

The structures that normally make a hoof strong and resilient are especially susceptible to the effects of excessive moisture in the environment. Porous in nature, the hoof absorbs wetness like a sponge, which can weaken the connective tissues that hold the horn tubules in place. This causes the wall to expand and stretch out of shape. The sole may then drop under the horse's weight. This "pancaking" can cause the wall to weaken further, crack, split or chip. And that makes it easy for bacteria and foreign material to penetrate the hoof capsule, which includes the hoof wall, sole, frog and the bulbs of the heel. This can invite the formation of abscesses and endanger the integrity of other structures within, such as the coffin bone. A weakened hoof is also susceptible to:

- thrush—a foul-smelling degeneration of the frog caused by bacteria
- white line disease—a mixed bacterial and fungal condition that originates



AMY K. DRAGOO

Work your horse on quality surfaces to increase growth-stimulating circulation to the hooves.

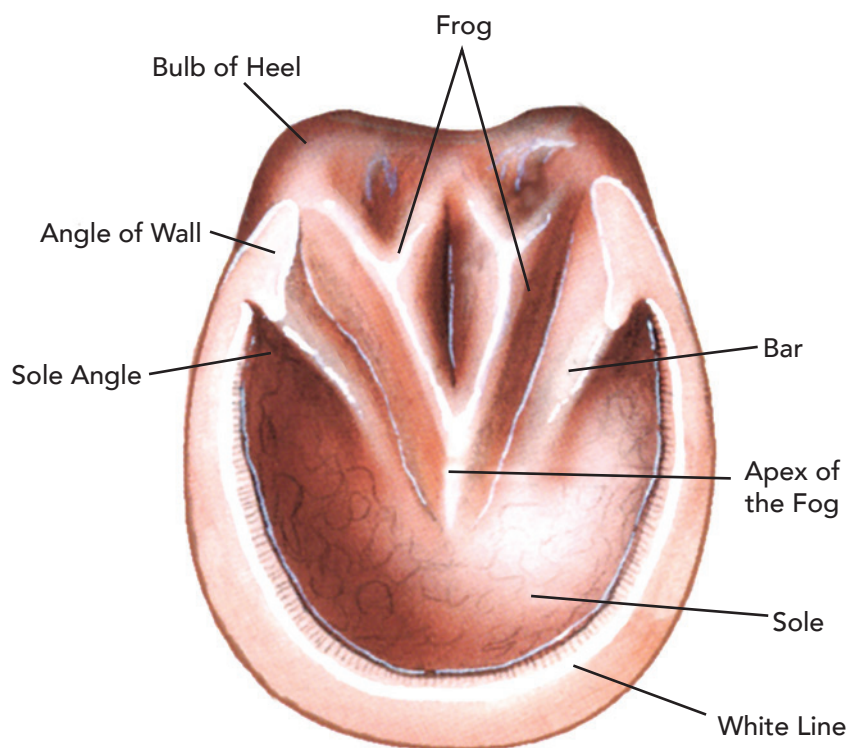
- on the bottom of the hoof and progresses upward
- coronitis—inflammation of the coronary band at the top of the hoof, caused by bacteria and other organisms
- scratches—a scabby or oozing skin infection above the heels that can cause lameness.

A weakened hoof wall is also less able to retain a shoe. Clinched nails will more easily loosen, pull out or tear away. Any loss of wall makes it more difficult for a farrier to reset the shoe.

## What You Can Do

To prevent excess moisture in the environment from harming your horse's hooves:

**Know how they grow.** During the darkest days of winter your horse's hooves grow at their slowest rate of the year. An increase in daylight as spring approaches triggers the production of hormones that cause the hooves to experience a growth spurt. The usual rate is approximately one-quarter to three-eighths of an inch per month, with young



horses' hooves growing faster than those of older horses.

**Schedule the farrier based on need.**

On average, that means every six to eight weeks, but as often as necessary, depending on how fast your horse's hooves are growing. That could be every four weeks in the spring and at a slightly longer interval in summer.

**Apply a hoof sealant.** It will condition and toughen the foot while maintaining the wall's natural moisture. It should also strengthen hooves that already are mushy, shelly, brittle or cracked. Plus, it can provide a protective barrier against fungus, bacteria and caustics. For the best results, apply sealant to a clean, dry foot, according to package directions. Resist

any urge to overdo. More won't help your horse.

**Look for ways to adapt.** Limit the time your horse spends in wet, muddy conditions. Keep baths to a minimum to spare hooves from prolonged periods in puddles. Avoid extreme changes of footing as best you can. This may be difficult during the summer when horses typically go from dew-covered pastures in the morning to areas where the surface underfoot is more likely to be sunbaked by afternoon. Sudden changes in footing can also occur when a horse is trailered from one locale to another, whether the destination is a new trail a few miles down the road or the grounds of a competition several states away.

**Rely on routine.** A quick check of your horse's hooves prior to turnout each day can reveal signs of trouble brewing: heat, cracks, abscesses, punctures and more. Picking out hooves before each ride allows you to check the condition of the sole. You may find yourself removing small stones and other objects that have become lodged. You'll also become aware of risen clinches or whether the shoe has sprung or shifted and needs attention.

**Feed wisely.** Enlist your veterinarian to evaluate your horse's ration and assist your efforts to provide a nutritionally sound diet. The addition of a supplement containing biotin (a B vitamin) may help to support hoof growth.

**Keep him moving.** Maintain a consistent exercise regimen, working your horse on a quality surface to increase growth-stimulating circulation to the hooves.

**Use protective gear.** Shipping bandages, bell boots and shipping boots all help to safeguard against hoof injuries during trailering.

**Take care of trouble spots around the farm.** Identify areas where drainage is poor and take steps to improve it, perhaps by installing French drains or putting down gravel. Direct rain off roofs with gutters. Reposition feed stations and water troughs if the footing in these spots where horses gather is showing signs of wear and tear. Keep stalls well bedded and clean.

Sultry summer weather may indeed present challenges to how you care for your horse's hooves. But meeting them head-on can help your horse stay sound all season—and that's good news for him and for you. 🐾

*Thanks to farrier Steve Kraus for his technical assistance in the preparation of this article. A member of the International Farriers Hall of Fame, he is the head of Farrier Services in the Department of Clinical Sciences at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine in Ithaca, New York. In his more than 50 years as a farrier, Kraus has shod horses of many breeds involved in a variety of activities. His extensive experience serves as the basis for his new book, *Shoeing the Modern Horse: The Horse Owner's Guide to Farriery and Hoofcare*, due for release this fall from Trafalgar Square Books.*