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VOL. 2

# EXTRA

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# Prepare to PIROUETTE

Part 1: Learn how to develop ultra collection and achieve the pirouette canter.

*By Shannon Dueck with Hilary Moore  
Photos by Susan J. Stickle*

**T**he six to eight strides of a beautifully performed canter pirouette can be one of the most elegant moments of an upper level test, but it can also be the most difficult, as the horse's forehand circles around the hind limbs. (He must do this at a distance



equal to the length of his body while he is slightly bent in the direction of travel). The key to training canter pirouettes is progressively developing the collection, bend and suppleness needed for the final product—a fluid 360-degree turn in canter. You need to begin your training much earlier than during the horse’s advanced work. Before working on the pirouettes, it is essential that Second Level is mastered and you and your horse are well on the way to mastering Third Level. When ridden correctly, all of the lateral movements and required collection introduced at Second and Third Levels will develop the connection,

suppleness and balance of your horse—the prerequisites for properly training the pirouette. Once you confirm the Third Level work, you should be ready to train ultra collection, also known as the pirouette canter. This is more collected than collected canter and encourages the high level of engagement, lightness of the forehand and self-carriage required to perform the pirouette.

**Test Exercise:** To see if you are truly well on your way to mastering Third Level collection and suppleness and ready to work the pirouette canter, try the following exercise. It will show you if you have holes in your training

that need to be addressed. Although the exercise is not easy, if you are successful at using your half halts to help your horse complete it with some accuracy, impulsion and throughness, you are ready to start canter pirouette work. Try this exercise on both leads to ensure that you are developing your horse’s athletic ability equally on both sides (see photos below):

1. At A, pick up the right lead, collected canter.
2. From K to E, shoulder-in right.
3. From E to X, half circle right, 8 to 10 meters.
4. As you approach X, prepare to half

**Test Exercise** Shannon Dueck rides Sentimiento, a PRE stallion owned by Tamara Gerber of Wellington, Florida.



## Ultra Collection on a 20-Meter Circle



**Training the pirouette canter on the 20-meter circle is a straightforward way to introduce the pace since the circle already encourages the horse to step underneath himself.**

circle left from X to B, 10 to 12 meters, in counter canter.

5. From B to M, renvers in counter canter (in right lead canter).

6. From M to H, straighten your horse but maintain the counter canter and proceed from H to F in medium or extended canter.

You have passed this test once you are able to execute each aspect of the exercise—the shoulder-in, half circle, counter canter, renvers and medium/extended canter—as well as if you were doing each on its own. If you are not able to do everything in a series, work on a few of pieces at a time until you are comfortable with the entire exercise.

I approach training the pirouette from two different directions: The first is developing ultra collection and the second is the working (or big) pirouette. Over time, these directions come

together into a finished pirouette. Here, in Part 1, we will focus on the ultra collection or “pirouette canter.”

### Developing Ultra Collection

Ultra collection is tested in Fourth Level, Test 1, because you cannot turn a pirouette without mastering the pirouette canter. When done correctly, this exercise will improve your horse’s strength over the back and hind legs, his balance and his longitudinal suppleness.

It is important to note that most horses get slow behind as their riders bring them into more collection. So the rider needs to remind the horse to keep quick behind. “Remind” is a key word in the last sentence. Try very hard not to use more and more leg to keep your horse going in this exercise. Expect your horse to keep his hind legs engaged and remind him to keep working.

**Ultra collection exercise on the 20-meter circle:**

1. Develop a nicely forward collected canter on the right lead.

2. At E, circle right 20 meters, maintaining the same canter.

3. Your horse should be quite straight in the spine; slight bend and flexion to the inside is all you want.

4. Bring the horse more and more collected in the canter while trying to maintain the purity of the canter rhythm. Use half halts to correctly achieve this:

- Apply enough pressure to your seat and rein aids to gently rebalance your horse into a more collected canter.
- Your outside rein is an incredibly important part of this half-halt, and when it is done correctly, you will feel your outside elbow and rein bring the outside hind leg into more engage-

## Ultra Collection on a Straight Line



**Once you are comfortable with ultra collection on a circle, you are ready to try it on a straight line. This will test that your horse is able to develop the pirouette canter without avoiding hind-end engagement by throwing his haunches in.**

ment. (In fact, many of my students have said they really start to understand what an outside rein does when they are successful at ultra collection in the canter).

- Don't release the half halt until you feel the horse change his balance more onto the hind leg, and soften your half halt only a little at first.
- When you can soften your half halt and your horse stays balanced underneath you in a more collected canter, you can quietly ride more forward and take the pressure off.

5. Repeat this exercise on the left canter lead.

This exercise is a relatively straightforward way to introduce ultra collection since the circle already encourages the horse to step under himself.

**Ultra collection exercise on a straight line:** After ultra collection

is easy on a circle, you are ready to progress to straight lines. Ultra collection must be trained on the straight line because it tests that your horse is able to develop the pirouette canter without avoiding the engagement required by throwing his haunches in.

1. Develop a nicely forward collected canter on the right lead.

2. Ride down the quarterline, maintaining the same canter.

3. Repeat the same aids used for ultra collection on the 20-meter circle while maintaining the straight line of travel down the quarterline.

4. When this movement is done properly, your horse's haunches will not fall inward. If they do, ride straight and reapply the aids for ultra collection.

5. Repeat this exercise on the left canter lead.

Combined with the ultra collec-

tion on the circle, this exercise on the straight line will improve your horse's strength in his back and hind legs as well as develop suppleness and lateral balance. It will also put you well on your way to developing proper canter pirouettes. When you can easily go in and out of ultra collection on a straight line, train these variations:

**Shoulder-in/shoulder-fore exercise on a straight line in pirouette canter:**

This exercise tests that the horse is not trying to avoid engagement. When done properly it makes ultra collection easy to do straight. Additionally, this is an extremely important part of your pirouette training because to ride a finished small pirouette you must be able to ride in shoulder-fore for a stride or two before beginning the pirouette.

1. Develop a nicely forward collected canter on the right lead.

## Shoulder-In/ Shoulder-Fore



## Pirouette Canter into a Corner



Here, Shannon and Sentimientto perform ultra collection in shoulder-fore (pictured left) and into a corner (pictured right). These are both helpful exercises for strengthening the horse's back and hind legs—key elements in preparing the pirouette.

### Shannon Dueck

represented Canada at the 1999 Pan American Games (individual silver medal), the 2002 World Championships, the 2003 World Cup Final and the Open European Championships aboard her self-trained horse Korona. She competed her self-trained mare Ayscha at international Grand Prix. In addition to being an FEI-level trainer and international competitor, she holds a master's degree in equine nutrition and physiology, and served on the faculty of Lakeland College, Olds College and Johnson & Wales University. She lives and trains year-round in Loxahatchee, Florida ([dueckdressage.com](http://dueckdressage.com)).



2. Ride down the quarterline, maintaining the same canter (you can also practice this exercise on the centerline).

3. Once you are straight on the quarterline, ride into shoulder-fore. Try not to deviate from the line as you position your horse.

4. Ask for ultra collection while continuing down the quarterline.

5. When the movement is done properly, your horse's haunches will not slide inward. If they do, return to shoulder-fore in a more active canter and ask for ultra collection again.

6. Repeat this exercise on the left canter lead.

#### **Pirouette canter into a corner:**

1. Develop a forward-thinking, collected canter on the right lead.

2. In the corner, between C and M, ride six to eight strides of ultra collection.

3. At M, ride forward again, straight down the track (make sure the shoulders come first around the corner, so

the haunches do not lead).

All of these exercises that train ultra collection should be ridden almost every day you ride in the ring. Do them for just short periods of time, as they are very demanding strength-training exercises and the horse's muscles need time to recover. Ride in ultra collection for just a few strides and then allow the horse to go forward. After a few repetitions, walk on a long rein.

On a day that is more focused on training ultra collection, do a few sets with short rest periods in between. Make sure that at the end of your sets the horse is well stretched in a forward, active trot or canter. The next day should be an easier work day or a stretch day to allow the muscles of the back and hind legs to recover. 🐾

Read Part 2 at [dressagetoday.com/instruction/perfect-pirouettes-shannon-dueck](http://dressagetoday.com/instruction/perfect-pirouettes-shannon-dueck)

# My Fight Against Breast Cancer

In 2009, three members of my family were diagnosed with breast cancer—my mom, my aunt and myself. That year, three things happened that changed how I look at breast cancer and detection:

1. Before 2009, my family had no genetic history of the disease. I learned not to assume that “not yet diagnosed” means “cancer free.”

2. My mother was diagnosed with Stage IV inflammatory breast cancer. (According to the National Cancer Institute, this is the final stage and at this point it has spread to other organs of the body, most often the bones, lungs, liver or brain.) I learned that it is important to know about inflammatory breast cancer. It does not feel like a lump, so any change in appearance in the breast or the nipple should be taken seriously. It is not often found until Stage III or IV.

3. Until that year, I had been getting baseline mammograms since I was 34, just to be on the safe side. The first year I did a digital mammogram, they found my cancer. Then, when they went back and looked at my old mammograms, they were able to find it. This has caused me to be a big spokesperson for early detection. I believe in doing self-exams and getting digital mammograms whenever possible.

I was very lucky to get early diagnosis. As soon as I got my diagnosis, I ordered the top three breast cancer books and had them shipped overnight so I had more knowledge of what was happening and what my options were. Additionally, it really helped that I took someone with me to my doctor appointments to help as an extra set of ears and ask questions I didn't think of. My husband was absolutely amazing in doing this. I have so much empathy for people going it alone.

In the end, I didn't have to have chemotherapy or radiation. Again, my early detection was helpful. Though I had the option of a lumpectomy with radiation and chemotherapy, there is still a risk of the breast cancer returning. So I decided the first time around to have a double mastectomy. I was fit and relatively young, which helped with that decision. In the end, they also took out some of my lymph nodes.

In planning for the whole thing, my doctors and I were aware that getting back in the saddle soon and not having long-term issues was important. As an equestrian, I was careful that when I went in for reconstruction they did not take my latissimus dorsi from my back or muscles from my belly.

You have that as an option, but I chose to get expanders and go back for a second surgery. They split my pectoral muscles and inserted my implants. I had to work on range-of-motion exercises after that. I probably can't bench press anymore, but, thankfully, I don't have to do that to ride well.

I think they were in a hurry to get me out of the hospital because they discharged me the day after surgery, and I didn't know what was going on with the drugs and everything. I had an anaphylactic episode just after I left and was back in the hospital for four days. I would encourage people to try to stay a little longer and have an advocate look out for you when you are in no condition to make decisions.

Once I was home and on the road to recovery, the key was to get back in the saddle as soon as possible. I had my surgery

Oct. 23, 2009, and 17 days later I was riding a little. I was definitely doing this before my doctors recommended—I couldn't raise my hands up and needed someone to help me get on the horses. I don't suggest that anyone else make this a goal, but I did. All I can say is that it was what I needed to do and I rode only quiet horses.

Six weeks after surgery, I was back to my full schedule. After six months, I had my full range of motion back, however, I still feel it a little (over a year later) though sometimes I forget, until I look in the mirror. I am sure my fitness level helped my recovery. I was used to riding eight or 10 horses a day.

I was very lucky: I had a great support team to keep my training business running. My barn runs at my house, and I have loyal clients, so I had no concern that anyone was going to pull

a horse away because I was away for three weeks. I got out as soon as I could to teach, but no one made demands. I taught a little the week after surgery and having my students was helpful. I counted on my clients being great and they were.

Robert Dover, the Canadian technical coach/advisor at the time, rode my horse and my working students longed or hacked the others for the two weeks after I had surgery. Before my diagnosis, my horse had done her first Prix St. Georges, and we were looking ahead to the possibility of Grand Prix competition and representing Canada. With my cancer and surgeries, my focus definitely changed. I remember wondering if I was ever going to enter international competitions or even get down centerline. However, having that goal got me out of the house and back to the barn. I sure know that having the horses was a huge psychological benefit.



**Shannon and Sentimiento at the 2010 Challenge of the Americas to benefit breast cancer research.**

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# Equine Fitness And Strength

Understand the most important components

By Mark T. Donaldson, VMD

**B**uilding muscle and strength in the dressage horse requires physical health, proper training and sufficient nutrition. When I evaluate body condition, and specifically muscle development, I look at the uniformity of muscle overlying the neck, back and pelvis. If one area is underdeveloped, I look for a cause of discomfort that is limiting muscle growth. For example, if a horse has excellent muscle in the neck and pelvis but poor muscle in the saddle region, I will explore the possibility of poor saddle fit or other causes of back pain. Joint, tendon, ligament, nerve or muscle pain will limit development of muscle and should be considered in the evaluation of an underdeveloped horse. Similarly, sys-



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**Conditioning should be a component of training for every performance horse.**

temic metabolic, endocrine, genetic and neurologic disorders may lead to muscle atrophy. Evaluation of body condition should also occur in the context of the horse's genetic potential—a lean Thoroughbred may never have the same muscle mass as a Friesian. Proper nutrition is critical to growing healthy muscle. High-quality protein, sufficient calories and micronutrients are essential. The quality of the protein is determined by its amino acid composition and digestibility. Some proteins lack certain amino acids and the missing amino acid may be added to the ration in commercial diets. Although guidelines for caloric intake are provided with many commercial feeds, there is a large variation in horses' metabolic rates. Therefore, body condition should be carefully monitored and feed adjusted accordingly. Obesity can obviously be an impediment to the fitness required for top performance. The accumulation of abdominal fat can prevent development of core strength, which is necessary for a strong topline. Nutritional energy requirements are dependent on the intensity of training and metabolic rate; the latter varies with age and breed. Areas in which horses accumulate fat can be learned by reviewing the Henneke body condition scoring system. Age must also be considered when monitoring body condition. It is difficult to build muscle in a geriatric horse who has experienced a period of inactivity or illness. Horses over 20 years of age are commonly considered geriatric. Young horses require time to develop the coordination and physical maturity necessary for the stimulation of muscle. Old horses who are in a regular program of modest activity maintain muscle mass better than sedentary horses. Lean muscle mass decreases with age in older horses.

In the presence of physical health and proper nutrition, correct training methods

are vital to muscle development. Cardiovascular fitness is necessary to provide adequate delivery of oxygen and nutrients to muscle; therefore, conditioning should be a component of training for every performance horse. Assessment of fitness is subjective and the degree of fitness required is dependent on the level of desired performance. For example, the fitness required to perform a Training Level test versus a Grand Prix test is clearly different. Furthermore, the ability to achieve fitness is dependent on genetic factors.

Warm-up in the beginning of a training session increases the elasticity of muscles, tendons and ligaments. Stretching ensures adequate range of motion necessary for muscle growth. Each training session should begin with five to 10 minutes of walk followed by five to 10 minutes of stretching and suppling. A healthy balance between repetition and variety of movement will increase strength without inducing repetitive stress injury. Similarly, variety in the surface upon which the horse is trained will stimulate healthy bones, muscles, tendons and ligaments. This can be achieved by diverse training in the arena, hacking and longeing. Although rest is essential, light activity the day after strenuous work provides blood flow to muscles and the removal of metabolic waste. Because muscle development is a complex process, the coordination of trainer, rider, veterinarian and nutritionist is required for optimal results. 🐾

**Mark T. Donaldson, VMD**, received his bachelor of science from Villanova University and graduated from the School of Veterinary Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, in 1993. After completing an internship at the University of Georgia, he returned to the University of Pennsylvania for a residency in internal medicine. He is a member of the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine and is a partner at Unionville Equine Associates. His wife, Emily Donaldson, is a professional dressage trainer.