

DRESSAGE TODAY

VOL. 26

EXTRA

*ISABELL
WERTH:*
Develop
Elasticity

Transition
Your Horse's
Coat for Fall



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Developing ELASTICITY



German Olympian Isabell Werth and the Westphalian mare Bella Rose at the 2014 World Equestrian Festival CHIO in Aachen, Germany

Isabell Werth explains how elasticity and suppleness allow your horse to do his job well.

By Isabell Werth with Beth Baumert • Photos by Arnd Bronkhorst

When I sit on my horse, elasticity and suppleness are the key qualities that make all things possible. Suppleness comes from good riding and elasticity is the development of even more flexibility in the horse's body that allows him to show his quality. When the horse is stiff and strong, it's not easy for the rider or the horse and it's not nice-looking either! But when the horse is flexible and elastic, he can do his job well.

First Things First

Rhythm and a good connection. The seat and the hands of the rider must be independent of each other. That is, a rider must be able to sit the rhythm of the horse without moving her legs or hands. The movement of the whole horse goes directly into the hands of the rider, so when the hands are not independent, the rein aids disturb the mouth and interrupt the rhythm, making fine-tuning impossible. In order to achieve a good contact, it is necessary to ride the horse from behind to the front with a quiet hand.

A Common Connection Problem

Many riders straighten their elbows and then their arms get long and strong. They end up hanging on the reins and they can't be deep in the seat.

Try this: Keep your elbows on the side of your ribs and swing your seat and your back between your elbows. Then sit as independently as possible.

Every horse is different but these basic ideas are always the same:

- The horse needs a clear, fluent rhythm and flexibility.
- The rider needs an independent seat and hands for a good connection.

Whatever you do with your hands, they must be independent of the seat.



Whether in collection or stretching or something in between, you must establish flexion, bend and the connection from the inside leg to the outside rein.

Flexion and Bend for Positive Connection

Whenever I enter an arena as a teacher, I always say, “Come on! Inside leg to outside rein!” and everyone laughs because it’s always the same story

from me. But this is really the key. In whatever you’re doing, you must have the feeling that the movement goes through the horse from behind in a fluent way, not in a stiff, running-against-the-bit way. No matter what you’re do-

ing, whether in collection or stretching or something in between, you must find a way to put the horse in flexion, which determines the inside and the outside of the horse. Then you can ride from the inside leg to the outside rein and bend your horse. Without this ability to flex, bend and supple, the horse is inclined to run straight against the bit, and he will be stiff. Of course, you need a straight horse, but he must be straight in a supple, flexible, bendable way, going fluently through a swinging back to the bit, and he has to stay in front of you.

When you have this positive connection from behind to the rein with flexion and bend, you’re not stopping the horse with your hands. With the connection between the inside leg and the outside rein, you can keep your horse on your seat and whatever he does in front, he has also already done

Improved Breeding

The breeding of dressage horses has improved their quality to a huge degree over the last 20 years. The horses I had many years ago had good movement but they weren’t as flexible as they are now, so it was much harder for me to keep them together. Today, the modern horses are more elegant and have better movement, lightness and self-carriage. This makes it much easier because the rider needs less power to keep the horse together. It’s much easier to play with them because they are more elastic and flexible by nature.



The shoulder-in enables the perfect connection between the inside leg and outside rein and it develops freedom of the shoulder. For that reason, it's considered the mother of all lateral movements.

behind. Then you can improve the collection and the extension. Remember: In whatever frame you want, whether a lower one or one that is more “up” in collection, pay attention that you have the positive connection to the mouth from back to front because then your horse will improve his muscles in the right way and his attitude also. Of course, you can't always have the ideal, but make this your goal.

Transitions Improve the Gaits

When the rider has an independent seat and hands and the horse has flexion and bend, easy transitions develop elasticity and improve the gaits. Little things can bring about very big changes: trot, canter, trot, canter,

trot, canter. Soon you will see how these transitions improve the trot, the canter and the connection.

It is sometimes surprising that these transitions help everything. For example, to do flying changes, the canter must have jump. The rider can bring the quality of the canter from a 6 to a 7 or from a 7 to an 8 with these transitions. And the trot will improve, too. This is improving the basics—the basic quality and the movement—by improving suppleness and elasticity.

Remember in these transitions to keep the independent seat and hands, keep a good rhythm and a connection with flexion and bend. Then the energy comes from behind and goes forward to a positive rein contact. When you have

USDF Definition of Elasticity

The ability or tendency to stretch and contract the musculature smoothly, giving the impression of stretchiness or springiness.

this, your horse can be elastic and do all the exercises—beginning with shoulder-in, which is the most basic and important of all the collected exercises.

Shoulder-in and Half Pass

Shoulder-in is the mother of all lateral movements. For a young horse, the most important things as you know by now, are to have a clear, fluent rhythm and the correct flexion and bending. It's im-

possible for a young horse to have this perfectly all the time, but that's the goal. From this basis, you can ride a good shoulder-in with the perfect connection between the inside leg and outside rein. With control of the flexion, the inside leg brings the horse to this outside rein and it keeps the connection from behind to the mouth. The honesty of this con-

nection keeps the horse in front of you and keeps the shoulder in front of you.

With the shoulder-in, you develop this free shoulder, which is necessary for a good half pass. If you start with a good shoulder-in, you can do a half pass before long. It's impossible to always have the connection perfect but when it is, this is how it feels:

When It's Perfect

Your horse should have the confidence to look for the positive contact without coming against the rein or the opposite—becoming too light, giving you an empty, untouchable feeling in front. It's ideal when you feel the horse is carrying himself. Then you can keep all the power and the possibilities of the quality

Exercise Tips

Kee your horse honest. Sometimes I see new trainers who are trying to improve their horses but are making a common mistake. For example, they are doing four-tempis. After the second one, the horse starts to become crooked, he loses the canter or he's running away or whatever, and the rider keeps going. Riders must learn to make a correction. Before doing the next change, you have to make your horse straight and balanced and help him with whatever is needed. Change the line, walk and go again. The rider has to react directly. Correct the mistake and then keep going. It's not a



When you wake up in the morning and you feel stiff, you stretch your body gymnastically to make yourself more flexible and then you feel better. It's the same with the horse.

punishment; it's simply a necessary correction. You'll see, after a while, that your horse will improve more than if you continue doing four-tempis in the wrong way. This is a question of experience and having the right trainer on the ground who can say, "Come on, circle and start again."

Change keeps your horse happy and interested. Keeping your horse awake and interested will make him flexible and elastic, so change it up. In your trot–canter–trot–canter transitions, choose specific lines, but different lines.

Make big figures and then smaller ones. Change it up longitudinally, too. Ride him in a competition frame, but stretch him sometimes and ride in-between frames. It is necessary to always be able to influence the neck position.

Don't keep moving in one rhythm and tempo for long. I think it's quite boring for the horses if they are always on the track or always on a 20-meter circle, and I hate watching horses do the same routine again and again: shoulder-in, circle, half pass, straight. This is boring for both horse and rider.

When you wake up in the morning and you feel stiff, you stretch your body gymnastically to make yourself more flexible and then you feel better. It's the same with the horse. Move him in different ways.

Finally, horse and rider should work in the most positive way possible. Of course, there are situations when you have to take control or say "Hey, listen!" but that only lasts for a moment. The most important thing is to be sure your horse is really enjoying what he's doing. Horses like to move, and when they are elastic, it is easy for them to be playful and have fun. It's easy and fun for the rider, too!



Isabell Werth was born in Germany and grew up riding showjumpers and event horses on her parents' farm. When she was 17 she began riding with Dr. Uwe Schulten-Baumer—a neighbor and renowned dressage expert. She rode with him for 14 years before establishing her own training facility in Rheinberg. Today, with the help of friend and sponsor Madeleine Winter-Schulze, Werth is the world's most successful dressage rider with 10 Olympic medals, eight World Championship titles and numerous medals at European and German Championships. Her most recent win was at this year's World Cup Finals in Paris, France, on the Oldenburg mare, Weihegold OLD.

Freedom of the shoulder is necessary to develop a good half pass.

of the horse under your seat, and your horse offers a constant positive contact. He's balanced in the movement, so you can control the collection and the extension—and you can especially control the transitions: piaffe, passage, forward, back, turning right or left, whatever you want. The horse is really under your seat.

When he is elastic and on your seat with this constant positive contact, you feel like he's on a glider or on skis that are perfectly aligned with each other. It's easy, and in the long term it makes your horse healthy, both mentally and physically. 🐾

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How to Transition Your Horse's Coat for the New Season

Q Every fall I wonder how to best manage my horse's coat. I don't want to clip him too early and sometimes wonder if I should clip at all. What is the best practice to keep him comfortable and clean as we transition from summer into fall and winter?

Name withheld by request

CAT HILL

Crisp autumn air has arrived and so has new growth on your horse's coat. Seasonal transitions can pose challenges for your horse, but regular grooming can help. Coats already begin growing out as early as mid-August to prepare for the cooling temperatures. During this time, your horse may become itchy and uncomfortable. You can maintain your horse's comfort and health through the seasons by developing a seasonal grooming routine.

Determine your routine. Currying is always the go-to practice for new seasons. To remove loose hair and debris, vigorously rub circles all over your horse's coat. Use a gentle rubber curry comb, not a metal curry, on shorter transitional coats. For a very woolly horse, try adding a deshedding comb or rake to your routine. Using this tool on the longer areas of the coat can loosen the hair and make horses look more presentable through the season. A rake with closely placed teeth is ideal for dense, compact coats. While your horse's coat will likely determine the type of tools to use, you can also consider the horse's personality. Each horse is different and may have a preference between curry combs and clippers. Try a few different tools to see how your horse responds before finalizing your routine.

Try clipping your horse. Experienced equine groomers can opt to clip the horse if he is not yet shedding or has just started to shed. I recommend clippers that are cordless (for mobility) and have the ability to run for a few hours at a time. I also like clippers that have removable battery packs that can be swapped out during long grooming

sessions. You still need to curry a clipped horse, as he will shed the fragments of hair that are left from the previous season's coat. I like to use a grooming glove since you can get into every nook and cranny. This can also help you detect any health issues or discomfort your horse may be experiencing.

Keep the coat clean and dry.

Inclement weather—and the mud that follows—can leave a horse cold and wet. Try to make sure your horse spends a portion of every day in a nice, dry environment. As the weather cools, it's especially important to ensure that moisture does not get trapped in your horse's coat. A fine, short coat in the summer is more conducive to evaporating sweat and regulating your horse's temperature. As the coat grows longer, an active horse will require a regular grooming routine. Currying the coat as it grows out can prevent moisture from getting trapped. Clipping the legs and pasterns down the back also helps keep the skin dry. When trimming, avoid clipping in an upward motion, as that could nick or irritate the horse's skin and invite infection.

Take a closer look. If you notice your horse's coat is dull and has lost its luster or if your horse exhibits signs of discomfort during grooming, check his skin. Scratches, rain rot and other skin conditions can crop up at this time of year. Use your fingers to feel beneath the coat. Check the armpits, chest and face closely for any hidden issues like bumps, scabs or roughness. You can try working a bit of cornstarch-based baby powder through the coat or zinc oxide cream for moderate skin issues. If you



Arnd Bronkhorst - arnd.nl

By paying attention to your horse's environment and his coat length and luster, you can prevent skin issues and help him enjoy a healthy transition into the new season.

discover any major irritations, consult your veterinarian.

By paying close attention to your horse's environment, coat length and luster and any signs of discomfort, you can prevent issues and help your horse enjoy a healthy transition into the new season. 🐾

Cat Hill

grew up in New York riding ponies and later rode show hunters through college. After college, she moved to Ireland and worked at Mullingar Equestrian Center with show jumpers and eventers. She later returned to the U.S. and was a working student for a top Grand Prix dressage rider before being hired to manage eventer Mara DePuy's barn. Today she freelances as a groom for various disciplines and teaches lower-level riders in dressage, jumping and eventing. She and Emma Ford wrote the book, "World-Class Grooming."

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