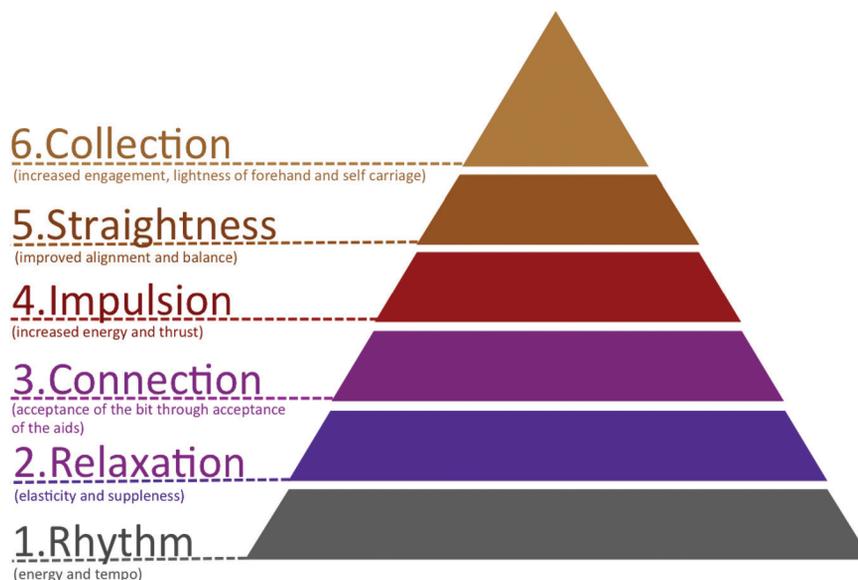


The Dressage Training Pyramid to Develop Hunters and Jumpers

By Greg Franklin

For over 2,000 years, man has been riding horses and discovering techniques on how to train them. People have come up with fantastic ideas, including inside leg to outside rein, figuring out that horses travel in a diagonal frame, and go forward first. While I am sure there were plenty of ideas that did not work, one of the best that has been developed is the Dressage Pyramid. This is a training tool with its roots in classical dressage.

I am a Hunter and Jumper trainer, and I frequently use the Dressage Pyramid in my training and lessons. It is a very basic visual aid that can be used when schooling young horses, flattening a more experienced horse, or teaching all levels of riders from beginner to advanced. We use this type of flatwork to help our horses become more elastic longitudinally (back to front) and laterally (left to right). This helps to shift the horse's weight from its front end to its back end, which in turn makes it easier for the horse to jump. Also, with more elasticity, the horse becomes more rideable in between the jumps.



Rhythm: This is the first building block of the pyramid. At the walk, the horse has a natural four-beat rhythm. As the horse walks, his head goes up and down, so the rider must have an elastic elbow, and the hand must move forward and back in time with the horse's head. This also happens at the canter, the difference being that the horse canters with a three-beat rhythm. The trot has a two-beat rhythm, and the horse's head stays still, so there is no forward and back movement with the hands. I like to work on this rhythm by

using cavaletti. At the trot, I set four cavaletti at 4'9" apart so that the horse has to take two steps with its left legs and two steps with its right legs. This is a comfortable distance for most horses and allows the rider to establish a consistent rhythm. At the canter, I start with the cavaletti at 9 feet apart, so they are set up as a bounce to help develop the horse's canter. Once the horse does this well, I move them to 18 feet apart so the horse has to do one stride between each of them.



Developing the horse's rhythm in all gaits is the first building block in the training pyramid. Photo by Carasco Photography

Relaxation: This is the second building block of the triangle. It may be the most important, but one that is skipped the most frequently. A relaxed horse is one that will be a willing partner in what you ask of him, whether that be going forward, collecting, or moving laterally. Elasticity and suppleness are the keys here. The horse needs to be able to demonstrate his adjustability by lengthening and collecting his stride. This is known as longitudinal suppleness.

One exercise that I like to do is set up two cavaletti at 72 feet apart. We first do this in a straight line, then set it up on a bend and have the rider do six strides, and then add another stride and do seven strides in between.

The horse also needs to be able to show his adjustability laterally by bending his body and his neck. A horse with lateral suppleness will bend around the rider's legs through his ribs. The first and most basic lateral movement is riding a corner. This then naturally progresses to riding a circle and continues on to leg yielding and shoulder-in. This is the beginning of impulsion.



Canterbury Farm's assistant trainer Caitlyn Shiels works on relaxation with her mount. Photo by Andrew Ryback Photography



Trotting or cantering cavaletti allows the horse and rider to establish a consistent rhythm. Photo by Emily Riden

In leg yield and shoulder-in, we are working on using lateral aids on the horse. Lateral aids is to say aids on the same side, left rein and left leg for example. In leg yield, the rider pushes the horse with left rein and leg to the right so that the horse moves forward and laterally at the same time. The horse will naturally cross the inside front leg in front of the outside front leg. The same exercise can be done with the right rein and right leg pushing the horse to the left.

In shoulder-in, the rider brings the outside front leg in and places it in front of the inside hind leg. The horse is bent to the inside at approximately a 30-degree angle. This position creates three parallel tracks. Standing on the ground observing, you will see the inside front leg on one track, the inside hind leg and outside front leg on a separate track, and the outside hind leg on a third parallel track.



Kathryn Berry demonstrates connection on Caitlyn Shiels' Cavalier II. Photo courtesy of Greg Franklin

Connection: This is the third level of the pyramid. Basically, connection is the acceptance of contact through the acceptance of the aids. By this point the horse has been ridden forward so that it starts to seek the contact of the hand. The horse will start to come round, with the poll being the highest point of contact and the horse's nose slightly in front of the vertical. In self-carriage, the horse has impulsion, a desire to go forward, is travelling straight, the inside hind leg tracks behind the inside front leg (same with the outside hind leg tracking behind the outside front leg), the horse's poll is just above the withers, and his nose is slightly in front of the vertical. It is at this point that the horse is carrying the rider and doing a majority of the work.

One must be very careful here so that you do not achieve hyper flexion, which is where the horse's nose comes behind the vertical and gets behind the bridle. The rider must ride with soft elastic arms and let the horse initiate the contact. As horses become more advanced, their balance will change. The young horse will start with a longer and lower balance, and as he becomes more advanced, the balance will become lighter in front.

Learn about the next three steps in the dressage pyramid next issue! Greg will continue the discussion by breaking down Impulsion, Straightness, and Collection.



About Greg Franklin

Greg Franklin is the head trainer at Canterbury Farm in Hampshire, IL. For over 35 years, Franklin has ridden hunters and jumpers to numerous championships nationally and has brought home numerous Zone 5 'Horse of the Year' awards. Franklin has qualified horses and riders for the Pennsylvania National, Washington International and the National Horse Shows including the Medal and Maclay Finals. He has also shown internationally at Canada's Spruce Meadows in the 1.40m and 1.45m divisions and is a certified trainer with USHJA. Additionally, Franklin holds his 'R' card in Hunters, Hunter Seat Equitation, and Jumpers, and judges throughout the country. For more information, visit www.canterburyfarmchicago.com.