

Make the Transition—First to Second Level

by Mary Flood with Stephanie J. Corum

Do you feel that you and your horse are stuck at First Level? Do you wonder how to move up toward the elusive collection that is required at Second Level and above? The answer to moving forward is to go back and answering the following questions. But you have to be honest with yourself. Any denial will prevent you from making the progress you desire.

- Take a good look at your position. What needs to be changed?
- Does your horse have a poor response or lack of response to your aids? And when he does respond, how do you handle his reaction?
- Can you feel when your horse is out of balance?
- Do you have difficulty adjusting your horse longitudinally (back to front)?
- Does your horse respond easily to your lateral requests?
- Do you feel your horse is one sided?
- Are you getting low scores at First Level? Do you keep getting the same comments about your lack of engagement, the horse being on the forehand or not enough impulsion?
- Are your goals realistic for you and your horse?

Now that you've answered these questions, let's take a look at some solutions.

YOUR POSITION

Your horse is your mirror. Listen to what he is telling you. Are you lacking vertical balance? For example, are you twisting your spine or lifting your right hand and losing contact when you go left. Are your legs in front of your seat and do you have the core strength to maintain your own balance independent of the horse?

Developing a seat independent of your hands and learning to feel the three types of seat (neutral, driving and allowing) takes time. I find many riders have a tendency to either have a driving seat or a passenger seat. Understanding what type of seat you currently have starts with body awareness. Seatwork on a good lunge horse is invaluable and a critical part of your advancement. It takes practice to be balanced enough to have a neutral seat most of the time because you need good core strength and stability. The two other seat aids are the momentary driving seat to bring the horse into better balance and the allowing seat, which gives the horse the chance to step forward from behind. You have to be able to control your own balance before you can change where you want the horse to go.

Only when your balance is stable can you give effective aids. But it takes more than just riding to improve your balance and strength. Stay aware of good posture throughout the day. Improve your fitness and flexibility by doing other types of exercise such as Pilates, yoga, stretching, running, swimming or cycling. What other activities you do are less important than finding one you enjoy and sticking to it.

THE HORSE'S RESPONSE TO YOUR AIDS

I find that one of the biggest mistakes riders make is not requiring an answer from the horse for a request that is made. If you barely touch the horse with your leg, do you get the response that you want? Do you know what you want? Have you gotten no reaction or too big of a reaction from your horse? Initially, any reaction to a request is on the right track. Once you have a reaction, then you have to clarify what response you want from the horse.

Consistency in your training is critical. Without consistency, your horse will remain confused and your aids will get lost in translation. Some horses will shut down, ignore you or just get

heavy and dull. Some will become tense, over reactive or run away from the aids. Ask yourself how the horse translated your request. I find that some riders have a tendency to try to pull the horse into a round frame without understanding the thoroughness needed to connect all parts of the horse. They are randomly giving and taking without requiring the horse to give first before rewarding with a softening hand. It takes a long time to develop the feel necessary to maintain a complete circuit from the hind leg energy to the bit and back to you.

REALISTIC APPRAISAL OF YOUR FIRST LEVEL SHOWING AND TRAINING

Have you been getting away with mediocre scores at shows? Do you make excuses for your horse when he scores low? I personally want to be scoring consistently around 65% and above before I move up a level at shows. I want to be schooling a level above what I am showing. If you want to show First Level then your horse should easily be schooling above those requirements. Success builds more success.

Do you know the training scale and do you keep it in mind in your daily training? This information will keep you on track when things start to go wrong. By setting the right goals you can prevent your horse from getting you side tracked. Your daily riding should improve your horse's way of going, develop his musculature and, most importantly, maintain his confidence in what you are asking. A partnership with your horse enables him to give you feedback.

DEVELOPING A PLAN

You need a plan for every part of your riding, from warm up to cool down. You also need to set short term (6 months) and long term (6 more months) goals. But you also have to understand that these goals must be flexible based on your horse's feedback.

EXERCISES FOR DEVELOPING YOUR HORSE THE SECOND LEVEL

Above all else, when working your plan, keep these three categories in mind:

Where—Check the accuracy of your schooling figures.

When—For example, when your horse goes from trot to canter, was he balanced, did he ignore your request, or did he over react? Your horse needs to be obedient to your aids. He needs to respond when you ask, not two strides later.

How—how is the horse's connection, relaxation, energy, and balance.

Note: the **Where** can help the **When** and **How**.

WARM UP

Whatever level you are riding, a correct warm up is critical to the success of further training. I find that many riders do not really have a plan for their warm up and may start schooling movements before recognizing what part of the training really needs to be addressed that day. Warm up gives you the chance to improve your awareness skills and increase your sense of feel for how your horse is actually moving and responding.

The beginning portion of your ride should also be about you finding your own alignment. If you start telling your horse what to do before listening to him first you may not make the most appropriate choices in what exercises you will include in your training session that day. In general, allow at least 10 minutes at walk before picking up the reins. Then pick up enough contact to communicate and do a series of walk exercises that include various circles sizes and patterns. Keep in mind to **ride opposite your horse's tendency**, which means if your horse is on the lazy side, you should do long forward lines. If the horse likes to rush, you should ride soft round circles. If the horse carries his head too low, you should ride him higher, and vice versa.

When you are satisfied with equal contact from a marching hind end, go to the trot and allow the horse's neck to reach to the hand. Work circles and straight lines in both directions until the horse is relaxed but responsive. Ideally the poll should be about level with the withers in the working gaits. Stay aware of how responsive your horse is to both waiting and sending aids. Then

work canter in both directions, starting with the horse's easier side. Focus your attention on the feedback the horse is giving you, instead of what you are telling the horse. Then give your horse a break on a long rein.

TRAINING EXERCISES

With the training scale always in your mind, work the schooling figures from Training Level, which include 20m circles and simple transitions. If your horse cannot maintain relaxation and self-carriage in the basic movements then he is not ready to start the First Level requirements. Once the basic gaits feel loose and balanced, begin the transitions within and between the gaits. This is where you will begin to develop collection. When schooling transitions within the gaits begin with only a small difference in changing the length of stride. When the horse can successfully stay balanced in small changes, increase both ends of the scale. Ask for longer steps into shorter steps, then even longer and even shorter. Lengthening and shortening on a circle is very helpful in improving the support phase and the thrusting phase of a horse's stride. This is an invaluable exercise for improving thoroughness.

The quality of transitions between the gaits is very important. Ride a slight shoulder fore position, but more to the effect of where the inside hind leg is, as it should be slightly in between the lines of the front legs. Transitions must be done with a lot of feel for balance and that the hind legs step toward your hands.

For lateral suppleness, check the horse's response with some simple turns on the forehand. The horse should be very in tune to the slightest aid you can give. If the horse is slow to respond or does not respond at all, reinforce your request by increasing the volume with a kick or tap of the whip. If a horse can feel fly feet, expect them to respond to that level of reaction. When you have that prompt response, expect the horse to stay responsive in the lateral work. To further improve suppleness, ride transitions in your lateral work. For example, trot/walk/trot or shorter trot/bigger trot/shorter trot while in shoulder in. You will see a definite improvement in your horse's balance and obedience.

Shoulder-in is the foundation exercise of collection. Unfortunately there is a tendency for riders to ride the position of shoulder in but not ride the requirements of shoulder in, because they lack the necessary collection. The Glossary of Judging Terms from the USDF Directory defines collection as: "Increased engagement and lifting of the forehand, with shorter steps relative to the other paces of the gaits, while maintaining energy and self-carriage. The horse's outline becomes shorter from bit to hip, with the neck and withers stretched and arched upward. (Note: It is a common misconception that the hind legs step further forward under the body in collection. This is not consonant with the shorter strides required in collection. At the trot and canter, the hind feet are picked up relatively sooner after passing under the hip, and spend relatively longer on the ground (support phase) than in the other paces of the gait.)"

At canter begin with shallow loops on the long side. When the horse can stay in balance, increase the bending line. One exercise that is very helpful is for the rider is to ride the short ends in trot and the long side in outside canter lead, then trot again before the corner and through the short side, then canter outside again. When these transitions are balanced, you can continue around the corner in counter canter. This exercise will really let you know how effective your aids are and how balanced your horse really is. Without good balance your horse will not be ready to continue to develop toward collection.

This development takes time, but when the basics are good then the transition into the more collected gaits becomes attainable. When your transitions are balanced between the gaits then it is time to begin leaving out one of the gaits, for example trot to halt, halt to trot, walk to canter, canter to walk. Your proof of collection will be when your horse has clear balance in the canter to walk transitions.

MISSING LINKS

Developing feel takes a lot of practice. Stay aware that the timing of your aids is critical to the success of your training. If you give an aid at a time when your horse physically cannot respond then he has to either ignore you or over react. Respect the feedback your horse gives you. Enlist help from an experienced, qualified instructor whose strengths are teaching and not just riding. Learn the biomechanics of the horse and how they apply to training.

Know the requirements of the level you are showing. For example, showing a clear difference between a lengthened trot/ canter and working trot/canter is expected at First Level. When you can show a definite difference with balance you are well on your way to riding your horse in a more uphill manner.

Learn the purpose of each exercise that you choose. Be willing to change the exercise if the one you are doing is not working. Each horse learns differently. Respect his conformation, awkwardness, mistakes, and lack of understanding.

Be honest with yourself. Are you willing to put in the work that is required to ride successfully at Second Level and above?

OVERALL THOUGHTS

In general, you and your horse should continue to improve throughout your ride. The exercise itself is not the goal; the feeling of the exercise is. Make sure your horse is working harder than you are. If that is not the case, take time to evaluate what you are doing. If you give too much aid for too long you do not realize how strong it is. At the end of the day, do you have a happy horse? You should be proud of yourself if you can answer yes.