

First Level Lesson

We bring the experts to you. This month: trot lengthenings

BY CHRISTINE RIVLIN HENKE

LAST MONTH, USDF CONNECTION began a series of virtual lessons, one each month discussing a specific gait or movement at each level, from Training Level through Grand Prix. The lessons are all conducted by USDF-certified instructors.

This month's instructor is Christine Rivlin Henke, of Concord, CA, who is a faculty member of the USDF Instructor Certification Program. She has earned the USDF bronze, silver, and gold medals. In this lesson, she'll discuss the trot lengthening that's required at First Level.

Before We Begin

Before you start working on trot lengthenings, your horse must already meet the requirements of Training Level according to the training scale (below). He needs a clear two-beat trot rhythm. He should show a comfortable level of mental and physical relaxation by accepting the rider and your aids, and by moving with a supple back. He should be able to maintain a consistent and energetic working-trot tempo.

I want my students to be aware that every horse develops at a different rate,



NICE LENGTHENING: The writer aboard Nora McGee's seven-year-old Hanoverian mare, Larissa's Jas (by Lanthan), at First Level Test 4. I'd prefer it if her profile were slightly in front of the vertical.

and that there are times when the trot is stronger than the canter or the canter is stronger than the trot. As you work with your horse, keep in mind

that each gait can help improve the others and that exercises done in one gait can, in the long run, help improve the other gaits.



THE TRAINING SCALE or "pyramid of training"

Lengthening Defined

What we are trying to achieve with a trot lengthening is elongation of the horse's stride and outline. In a First Level trot lengthening, your goal is to demonstrate that your horse has developed an increased amount of balance, "throughness," and thrust (pushing power). With these objectives in mind, let's get our lesson started. ➤

Warm-Up and Assessment

If you were my student, I'd start by watching you warm up at the walk, trot, and canter in both directions to see where your horse's strengths and weaknesses lie at this point in his training. I like to check to see how my students feel about their horses' strengths and weaknesses so that we are on the same page. I like to keep communication open for student input as to what they are feeling, for what I see and what they feel is not always the same thing.

Before you even try to lengthen your horse's stride at the trot, you need to understand that, as you ask him to lengthen, you want to slightly increase your driving aids (seat and legs) to encourage him to take longer strides while remaining in an even tempo and in balance. When I ride, I want to influence my horse as his inside hind leg (that is, inside relative to the exercise) is leaving the ground. If you have access to

mirrors, they can be helpful in sorting out which leg is on the ground and which is airborne. Here's a tip for learning to feel the motion of the hind legs: In posting trot, while your seat is still in the saddle but beginning to lighten at the start of the "up" moment, what you feel under your seat is your horse's inside hind leg leaving the ground.

As you aim to produce a lengthening of your horse's trot stride, think of slightly increasing your seat aids to encourage him to "follow" your seat and take a longer stride. Your hands should remain in a soft, elastic contact with his mouth, neither pulling nor throwing away the contact.

One common rider error is to support or "carry" the horse with the driving aids at each stride. When I ride, I want to make sure that my forward driving aids produce an immediate reaction. However, a green horse might need a few more reminders to main-

tain the longer stride than a horse that is a bit further along in its training.

Exercises for Trot Lengthenings

The following exercises are arranged from easiest to more difficult. There are many more variations. It's important to always keep the training scale in mind and to understand that, if you have major problems with an exercise, you might have to take a step back and find the "hole." Strive to find the exercises that work best for your horse at his particular stage of training to further develop him physically and mentally. Plan short- and long-term goals for your horse's training but know that we, as riders and trainers, have to be flexible with our equine partners. Finally, none of the exercises is meant to be drilled but more explored and "played with."

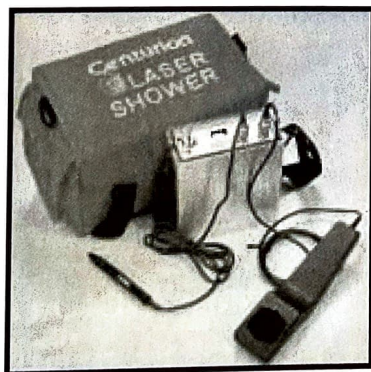
Do the exercises in posting trot first, especially if your horse is inexperienced and at a fairly elementary stage in his dressage training. Because your motion in the posting trot is more exaggerated than in the sitting trot, schooling trot lengthenings in posting trot at first will help you get the feel for the tempo and the timing of your aids. Plus, the earliest lengthenings in the dressage tests are ridden in posting trot.

Later, you'll work toward developing lengthenings in the sitting trot, and that's how you'll have to ride them in the dressage tests, beginning with First Level Test 3. The more difficult of the exercises I'll give you should be ridden in the sitting trot because you'll be able to influence your horse more with your seat. It's important, however, always to remain aware of how your horse feels. For example, if you begin riding a lengthening in the sitting trot but your horse's back starts to feel hollow, or if he isn't strong enough to sustain the lengthening in sitting trot, it's OK to go back to posting. It's fine to go



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back and forth at this stage of training. We are only talking about developing lengthenings, not medium trot or extensions, which require a greater degree of carrying power.

Exercise 1: 20-meter circle to long side. Establish a 20-meter circle in working trot at A or C. Exit the circle onto the long side of the arena, where your horse might naturally want to move more forward. As you start onto the long side, ask for a few lengthened strides—six to ten, or more if he is further along and able to maintain his balance. The approaching corner will be the natural place to return to the working trot because he'll see the fence or wall and "want to come back."

Possible problem #1: Your horse loses balance and "runs," taking faster and more hurried strides instead of lengthening his stride while maintaining the tempo of the working trot.

Solution: Go back onto a 20-meter circle to regain the working tempo and balance before trying the exercise again.

Possible problem #2: He breaks into a canter.

Solution: Return to the 20-meter circle without pulling back on the reins. Then calmly bring him back to a trot to reestablish rhythm, balance, and tempo.

Possible problem #3: He won't come back from the lengthening and runs through your aids.

Solution: Turn onto a circle without pulling back to politely insist that he must come back and follow your aids again.

Exercise 2: Leg-yield to long side.

Establish a 20-meter circle at A or C in working trot. On the circle, position your horse in a leg-yield, with his hindquarters moving toward the outside of the circle. (Think of his forehand moving on a nineteen-meter circle and his hindquarters moving on approximately a 20-meter circle.) When

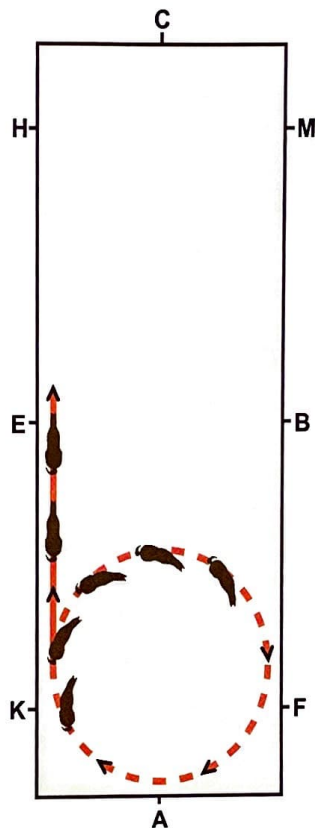


ILLUSTRATION BY BETSY BELL

EXERCISE 2: Leg-yield to long side

he is positioned correctly, his inside hind leg will step well to the midline of his body while his back becomes loose, creating more swing.

From the leg-yield positioning on the circle, direct your horse onto a straight line down the long side of the arena. As you move onto the straight line, immediately ask him to lengthen his stride in the trot. A variation of this exercise is to come out of the leg-yield position but remain on the 20-meter circle and ask for the lengthening on the bending line of the circle. School this exercise in both directions so that you work both hind legs equally.

Possible problem #1: Your horse finds this exercise more difficult in one direction.

Solution: All horses at some point have a stronger and weaker side and hind leg. Although you'll always school an exercise to both sides, work the weaker or more difficult side in shorter periods of leg-yield. ▶

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Exercise 3: Lengthening on a bending line. Start at A or C and develop lengthened strides as you ride on a three-loop serpentine or a 20-meter circle. This is a great exercise to develop even push from both hind legs. It also helps the horse that anticipates lengthening across the diagonal and shortening before the corner. It teaches him to be more honestly on the aids instead of just going through a pattern that he's learned from the dressage tests.

Variation: Practice adjusting your horse's stride for short periods as you ride on the circle or serpentine: six strides forward, six strides working, and so on.

Exercise 4: Short diagonals to shoulder-fore. I refer to this as my "freeway and off-ramp exercise," where you rev up coming into the corner so you can hop onto the freeway (the diagonal) with sufficient energy. You wind down

as you approach the off-ramp (the long side of the arena) using a slight shoulder-fore positioning to decelerate as you hit the off-ramp.

Ride working trot from H to B. As you come into the corner by H, ride a reasonably deep corner that sets your horse up for the short diagonal, getting his inside hind leg to come well underneath his body. As you ride onto the diagonal, ask for a quick response and a burst of energy into a trot lengthening.

As you approach B, position your horse into a bit of a shoulder-fore position, again to develop the ability of his hind leg to reach under in the transition back to working trot. He'll learn to follow your seat aids in the transition back to working trot, thus preventing you from pulling on the reins and causing him to stiffen.

Possible problem #1: Your horse's hindquarters swing out in the first corner.


Solution: Make sure before you start that you and the horse meet the training scale requirements, and that he readily accepts your aids and understands what you are asking. You might have to come back to the walk a few times and school him so that he doesn't push into your leg in the corner.

Possible problem #2: He breaks into a canter as you turn onto the diagonal.

Solution: Make sure that you are able to ride a *balanced* corner so that you can influence his hind leg to come under while he's still in the corner.

Exercise 5: Corner halts. Start on the right rein in working trot. Ride a fairly deep, balanced corner at M, revving and preparing your horse to come out of the corner in a lengthening. Then ride from M to F in lengthened trot. As you approach F, prepare to halt. A little shoulder-fore positioning may help the preparation. At F, halt. Ride

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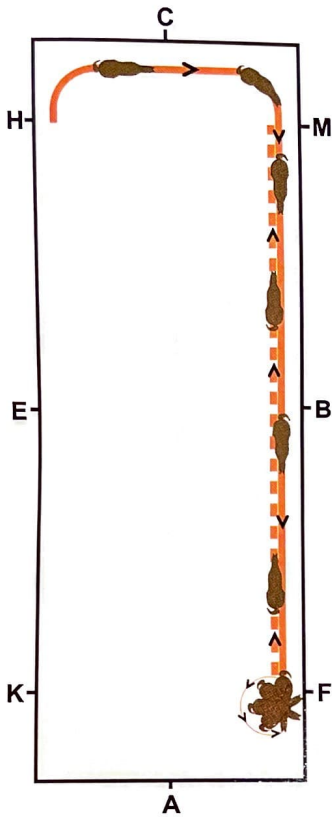


ILLUSTRATION BY BETSY BELL

EXERCISE 5: Corner halts

a turn on the forehand from your left (outside) leg, and immediately move off at a trot, developing a second lengthening from F to M as quickly as possible. As you approach M, prepare to halt. At M, halt. Ride a turn on the forehand from your right (outside) leg, and move off immediately into another trot lengthening.

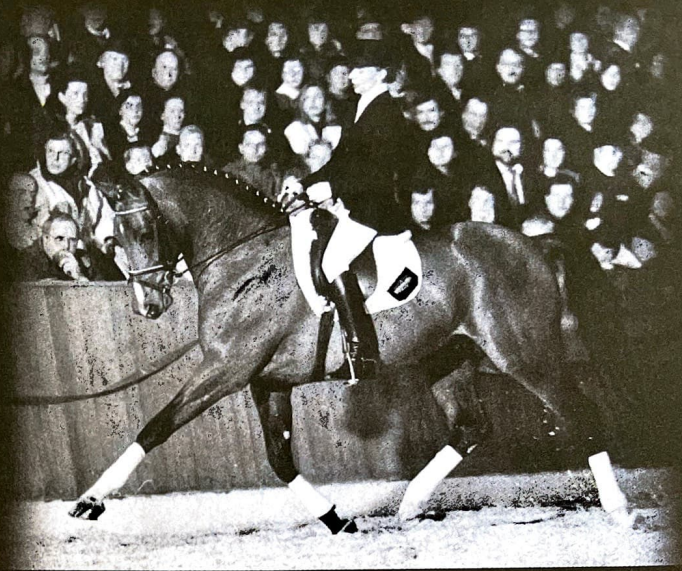
Possible problem #1: Your horse is reluctant to move forward promptly.

Solution: With the corner to begin with, and then the halt and turn on the forehand all happening relatively quickly, he'll develop a sharper response to your aids.

Possible problem #2: He resists the turn on the forehand.

Solution: Go back to more basics through the training scale. Make sure that your horse is on your aids and that he fully understands the requirements of the more basic exercise of turn on the forehand. ▲


Next month: Rachel Saavedra discusses the Second Level canter serpentine.



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