

Introduction to The Pyramid of Training 101

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Last month we introduced you to the first three steps of the Pyramid of Training (POT) **Rhythm**¹, **Suppleness**, **Contact** and what their importance is as well as how they interrelate. This month we'll look at the next three steps, **Impulsion**, **Straightness** and **Collection**.

Impulsion

Impulsion with **engagement** and the desire to go forward is the next step. Desire to go forward in this instance, is a reference to the horse's willing capacity to carry himself with energy under the rider.

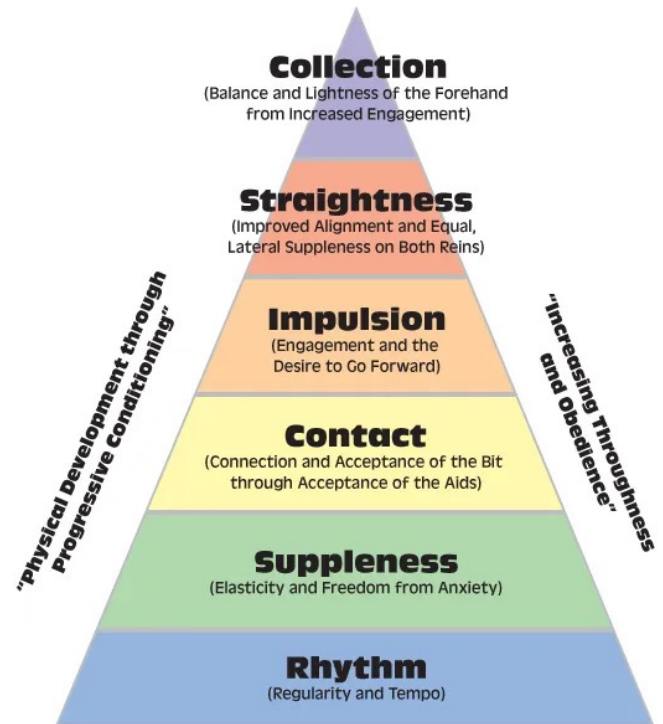
This is different from the Glossary of Judge's

Terms definition of forward which is: *"Moving or tending to move toward the direction in which the horse is facing (in contrast to sideways, backward, or standing still); it does not indicate how he gets there. References to specifics such as impulsion, energy, freedom, reach, length of stride, into the contact, responsiveness to the leg, and tempo more accurately express how the horse should proceed in a forward direction.* This is an important difference to remember so that the implied definition is correct in your mind while thinking of Impulsion.

Impulsion is also defined as "the transmission of an eager and energetic, yet controlled, propulsive **thrust** generated from the hindquarters into the athletic movement of the horse." A necessary basic skill needed to achieve impulsion is a **half halt** (rudimentary or sophisticated). Developing impulsion requires that we have a way to rebalance the horse in order to influence where his body weight is distributed (longitudinally and laterally). Additionally we need appropriate **tempo** to keep the gait in balance. Without the half halt concept in play, speed as opposed to impulsion tends to be the result. As training progresses, these rebalances take on a finer and finer quality until the horse appears to be doing the work of his own accord.

On your dressage tests in the collective marks, there is yet another list of qualities of impulsion which are useful to consider. These are *"Desire to move forward, elasticity of the steps, suppleness of the back, and engagement of the hindquarters."* Notice that this refers back to the step of Suppleness in the POT, which is supported by Rhythm but only possible with Contact. It's a tangled web we weave!

I'd like to touch briefly on horse's conformation. This is a quote from Gillian Higgins who is the author of How your Horse Moves. A unique visual guide to improving performance. *"The horse has no collarbone. The limbs are connected to the body by ligaments, fascia, and a powerful set of postural muscles, which stabilize the shoulder and elbow and attach the*



¹ Words in bold are defined in the Glossary of Judging Terms

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*scapula to the withers, spine and ribs. These soft tissue elements are collectively known as the thoracic sling. The sling enables the scapula to glide over the ribs and trunk and allows the body to move freely between the scapulae and to roll into a turn at speed. This is important for balance. **It also allows adduction and abduction of the front limbs, giving the body the capacity to move both forward and sideways at the same time.***

The reason I insert this here is that at some point, awareness of the importance of the thoracic sling needs to come into play in order to advance to the upper steps of the POT. That last sentence I put in bold. It describes part of the movement necessary for lateral work which is so prevalent in the training of the horse particularly at the upper levels where we are crucially dependent on the upper steps of the POT to succeed with our horses. The other parts of the paragraph are just as important, however the bolded sentence may help to convince you about the thoracic sling's value in lateral work. Activating the muscles of the thoracic sling is what is responsible for the feeling and look of the horse raising the withers, shoulders and "growing taller."

Straightness

Straightness is the next step in the POT and can be defined as "improved alignment with equal lateral suppleness on both reins (direction of travel as well as bridle reins). Also,"*Correctly aligned footfalls of the forehand with hindquarters on the same path, horse's longitudinal axis in line with straight or curved lines being ridden.*" This is the step where if you hadn't previously addressed the crookedness of the horse's body and equal weight bearing of all four legs, you can no longer ignore them. Hopefully the step of Contact gave you the introduction to straightening your horse and now you can more clearly address the ubiquitous question. "Is my horse straight?" What is the intent here? Are we talking about the entire body being straight as an arrow? What about on bent lines? Is it as simple as the definition of "*forehand and hindquarters on the same path, horse's longitudinal axis in line with straight or curved line?*"

Left to their own devices horses will travel crookedly, similar to the way a dog may travel with its hindquarters to one side. Imagine a rectangular table with a leg in each corner. Our horse/table comes with a skewed shape, one hind leg out to the side and one front leg on the opposite diagonal reaching/falling out on that diagonal line. If you did this with a table, it would no longer be a rectangle. Our aim is to get the legs repositioned in order to support our rectangular table top and rider (a leg in each corner). However, there's a catch.

In order to make the horse more influenceable for dressage, we'd like to have a narrower rectangle ie. the horse's left and right sides slightly narrowed as well as a little shorter in its length from back to front. This makes a narrower and shorter base of support which enables a rider to influence its shape and line of travel more easily. One of our tools to do this is the use of "First" and "Second" Position. First Position (also known as shoulder-fore) is when the horse's *inside hind leg* is stepping slightly toward its midline and is visible between the horse's front legs when viewed from the front. In this instance, the horse's outside hind leg and outside front leg are on the same path. In Second Position, (a prerequisite for travers/haunches-in) the *outside hind leg* is narrowed toward the midline so that it is visible between the horse's front legs. And the horse's inside hind follows the path of the inside front leg. Though small, these two positions are powerful tools for straightening as well as balancing our horses. On both straight and curved lines, these "straightening" positions enhance the quality of the gaits. Which position to use is dependent on which hind leg wants to escape the loading and carrying. It very well may be that you would target the same leg regardless of the direction you are traveling. Good training requires that you can access both hind legs as needed and this will

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lead to better success with the “mother of all lateral work”, the shoulder-in, which in turn prepares the horse for all other lateral work.

All of the above is also influenced by the positioning of the horse’s ribcage; left, centered or right, as well as the lateral positioning of the poll. Without addressing where these mobile pieces of the horse are carried, you may struggle to achieve your “in-position” work.

Collection

Collection directives on the POT are “balance and lightness of the forehand from increased engagement.” The horse lowers and engages (flexes longitudinally/bends) the joints of the hindquarters including the lumbosacral joint, shifting the center of gravity more rearward as the forehand becomes more mobile and the thoracic sling engages. The horse becomes light, supple and receptive to the rider’s aids.

It is helpful to understand two more phrases when thinking about collection; Relative Elevation and Absolute Elevation. In Relative Elevation, the hindquarters are engaged with a lowered croup thereby raising the withers and forehand. In Absolute Elevation, the poll and neck are artificially raised WITHOUT the lowering of the hindquarters with the withers frequently lower than croup. This is an important distinction to know both in theory as well as learning to see and feel the difference. Without relative elevation enabled by increased engagement and activation of the thoracic sling, the “collection” will be lacking in it’s quality.

True collection requires a “straight for dressage” horse as discussed in the section on straightness. This doesn’t mean there isn’t any bend at all in the collected work, but the degree of straightness is high. If maintained too long, collection will eventually rob your horse of his impulsion. Frequent breaks in a longer outline and varying the length of the strides as well as bending both directions will refresh the energy and help you access the straightness if it has deteriorated.

Impulsion, straightness and collection may be higher up the POT but each of these steps depend on rhythm, suppleness and contact to achieve and improve. I hope this helps clarify some of the mysteries of the POT or at least creates thoughts for discussion about your riding and training.

