

Introduction to The Pyramid of Training 101

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In this primer I will introduce you to the steps of the Pyramid of Training from the bottom up and encourage you to apply them to your own training.

Credit for the Pyramid of Training goes to the Germans who instituted its use in the 1950s. The Pyramid of Training (POT) is also sometimes called “The Training Scale” and it has gone through a couple of iterations in my career. Today we are working with the most current POT, so if you have one with slightly different wording, perhaps you can look for the differences in this updated version. Regardless of its name, understanding the contents and interrelationships of its steps is key to the progressive development and longevity of the sport horse.

The POT should be used as a guideline for developing the horse and used in every schooling session regardless of the horse’s level of training. All of its elements are interrelated and none are meant to be used alone but rather used as a general progression.

Rhythm¹

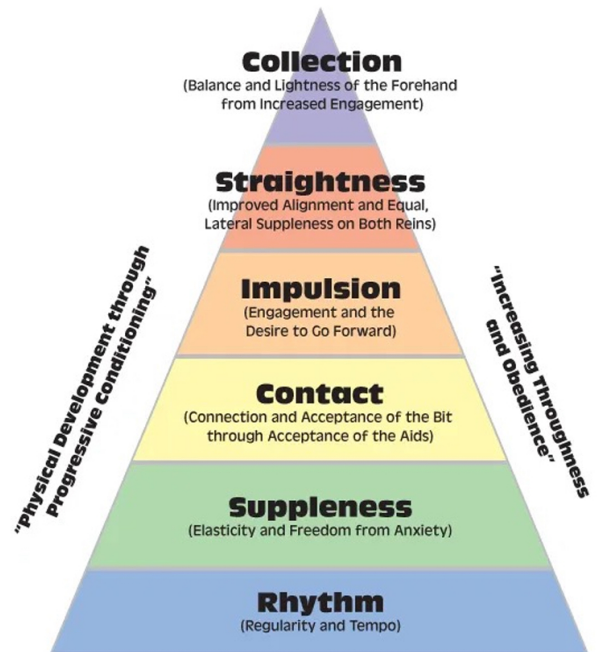
Rhythm is the first step at the base of the POT because it is so important. All the other steps of the POT are reliant on rhythm creating a strong foundation on which to build. Rhythm has two elements which make up its quality; **regularity** and **tempo**. Regularity refers to the sequential series of correct **footfalls (beats)** within each gait (walk, trot and canter). Tempo refers to the rate of repetition of the sequential footfalls of the gait.

It’s very important and worth your time to understand the correctness of the walk, trot and canter. Your ability to identify and correct rhythm irregularities will enhance your **basics**.

For example, if we were to vocalize the beats of the horse’s pure, correct walk, we could say: “Left Hind (LH), Left Front (LF), Right Hind (RH), Right Front (RF)” with even spacing between beats. We could also count it as “1, 2, 3, 4 1, 2, 3, 4.”

An **irregular** walk might look like this 1, 2, 3, 4. And the pattern would continue to repeat in that irregularity; 1, 2, 3, 4 1, 2, 3, 4 etc.

To count the rhythm of a gait, we call the beat out as the hoof/hoooves land on the ground. This is also called the “**stance phase**.” The walk has four beats and eight support phases. Support phases are moments when any combination of hooves are on the ground.



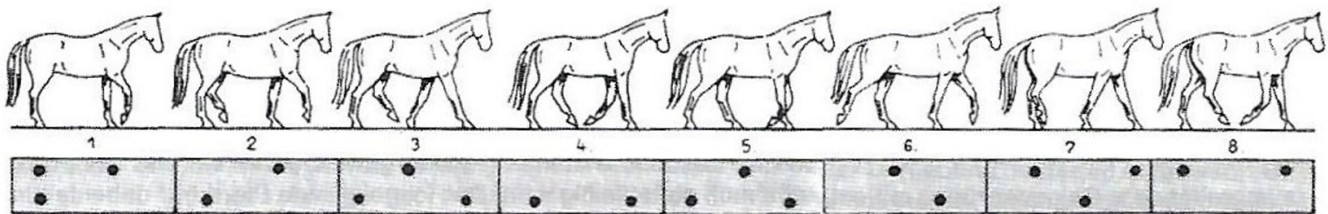
¹ Words in bold are defined in the Glossary of Judging Terms

In gaits with a moment of suspension when all four feet are off the ground as with trot and canter we refer to this moment of suspension (MOS) as an “aerial phase.”

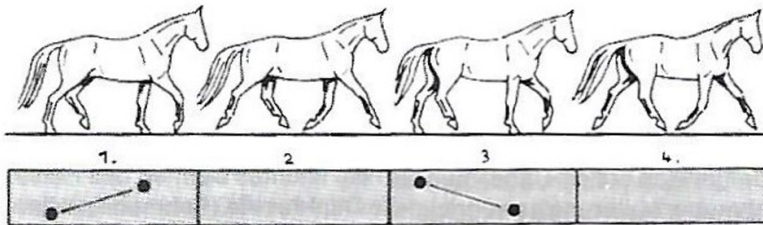
Trot has two stance phases and two aerial phases per stride. You can also just say it has four phases total. You can say a correct, pure trot as this: “LH/RF (lands as one diagonal pair), MOS, RH/LF (lands as one diagonal pair), MOS,” and repeat. Or you could count it as “1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2.” Each space between the beats is an aerial phase/suspension phase.

In canter we use the same premise for counting out beats. For right lead canter; “LH, RH/LF, RF, MOS.” The moment of suspension comes after the leading leg, in this case the right front, finishes its stance phase and all four hooves leave the ground. We can count this as; “1, 2, 3, MOS.” A pure canter has three beats but six phases. You may have noticed that each gait has twice as many phases as it has beats. That makes it easy to remember!

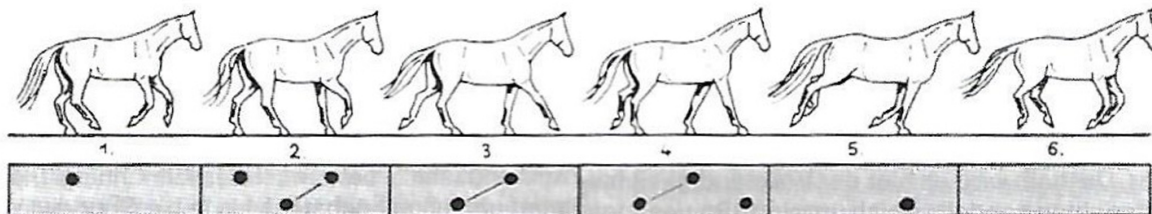
FOOTFALLS AND PHASES OF THE BASIC GAITS



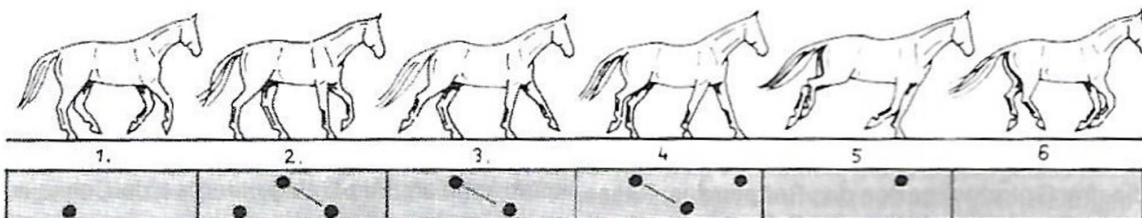
Walk



Trot



Right canter



Left canter

Suppleness

Suppleness is the next step in the Pyramid of Training. Suppleness also has two elements which determine it's quality; **elasticity** and freedom from anxiety. In prior years this was referred to as "physical and mental relaxation." We'll concentrate on the current description for ease of understanding. Things to think about relating to suppleness are **elasticity**, **lateral** suppleness (think, ability to bend both left and right with equal ease), **longitudinal** suppleness (ability to flex the spinal column) as well as having a harmoniously rounded topline from tail to poll with an appropriate amount of **engagement** for the level of training. Also that the horse displays acceptance of the environment (ie. mental relaxation).

Contact

Contact is acceptance of the bit through acceptance of the aids. Energy generated in the hindquarters flows through the horse's body, is received in the rider's elastic and adjustable hands and then recycled to the hindquarters. This "Circle of the Aids" results in a fluent interaction between horse and rider.

Contact also refers to all the parts of the rider's body that come into contact with the horse's body (even if it's through clothing or the saddle). A good way to think of the contact area is the entirety of the full seat, of full seat breeches.

Let's pause here on our ascent up the POT to consider how these first three steps, Rhythm, Suppleness and Contact, intertwine with one another as we implement them. Regularity of the rhythm and appropriate tempo are necessary to help the horse rebalance themselves under the weight of the rider or even on the lunge. If the horse is a little too slow or fast for him to find balance longitudinally and laterally (so now we're tapping into suppleness), he won't be able to accept the contact evenly on each rein. Also, the contact through your seat and legs will be firmer on one side than the other. A horse in this state will avoid carrying weight equally on all four legs which leads to irregularity in their movement (back to rhythm again). So in a holistic view, one of these steps can't exist without the others. This truism exists throughout the POT.

Next month we'll tackle the next three steps (Impulsion, Straightness and Collection) in the Pyramid of Training, how they relate to one another, as well as how they relate to the first three steps we've just covered.