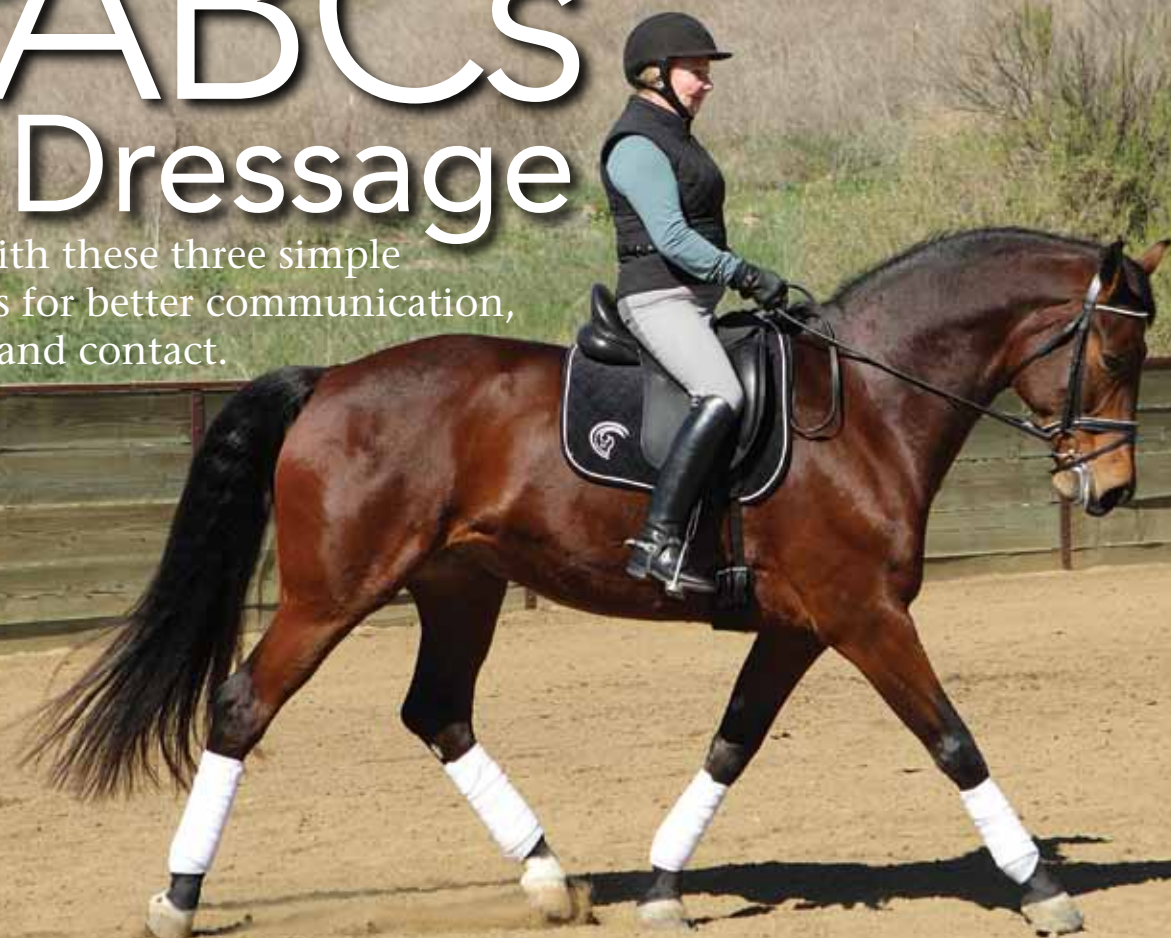


The ABCs of Dressage

Begin with these three simple exercises for better communication, control and contact.



By Gail Hoff-Carmona • Photos by Tass Jones

One of the beauties of dressage is its simplicity and logic. That's why it's a shame that many dressage riders make it so complicated. If you're one of them, you tend to ride living inside your brain: *Do I have too much inside rein? Is there enough outside rein? How can I make this leg yield better? Should I use more leg? Should I use less seat? Should I go more forward or am I going too forward?* And on it goes. But guess what? Your mind may be going a hundred miles an hour asking questions, but you're not coming up with very many answers. In this article, I'm going to help you simply and logically turn off the internal chatter and begin a conversation with your horse based on the ABCs of communication and control. You'll use a simple but powerful series of in-hand exercises:

- A—Yield to rein pressure
- B—Turn on the forehand
- C—Walk–halt–walk transitions.

These exercises are very basic. They teach you and your horse about contact, connection and leg aids, and they are a great way to start a young horse correctly. They're a terrific "do over" for a more advanced horse that's superstiff or never learned to come on the bit the right way. They are also an excellent refresher course

for a horse that's coming back from a layoff or injury. And once you've done them in-hand, you can repeat them under saddle. Best of all, in the clearest, simplest, low-pressure way, they create a strong, reliable foundation for everything to come.

A—Yield to Rein Pressure

Stand next to your saddled and bridled horse in a normal resting position. Hold the left rein with your left hand as you would for riding—between little finger/ring finger and index finger/thumb—about four to six inches from the bit. Establish a firm, steady pressure to the corner of the mouth and maintain it until you feel and see him yield to the pres-



Gail Hoff-Carmona rides L.A. Baltic Finale, her 8-year-old Swedish Warmblood mare by L.A. Baltic Inspiration.

A—Yield to Rein Pressure



1. I hold the rein about four inches from the bit, as if I were riding, and apply pressure to the corner of Finale's mouth.

2. I want to feel and see her relax her jaw, stretch down (yielding to the pressure) and flex at the poll—both laterally, so there's a little angle between her cheekbone and her neck, and longitudinally, so she rounds up and over her topline.

3. As soon as I get this response, I let her know that's what I want by immediately and completely releasing the contact, dropping the rein and patting her. Note that Finale not only maintains this position, she continues to stretch even farther.



sure by relaxing the jaw, stretching the neck down and flexing at the poll—both laterally, with a little angle between his cheekbone and neck, and longitudinally so he rounds up over his topline.

As soon as he responds, immediately and completely soften the contact, let go of the rein and pat him. Why? I give my students three reasons: To keep you from inadvertently hanging on the mouth; to show you that even when you let go, he can continue to stretch down; and to clearly show him that this was the response you were looking for.

What else can happen? While you're waiting, you may think, *Gosh, this is way too much pressure.* Well, it would be too much pressure if you were riding and

your horse was on the bit. But he isn't on the bit, so you have to exert as much pressure as it takes to convince him.

Instead of flexing, he may turn his neck toward you. If he does, take the opposite, outside rein and straighten his neck again before proceeding. He may stick his head in the air. If he does, apply pressure to the bars of his mouth to convince him to come down and at least start thinking about coming on the bit. He may relax his jaw and flex his poll but not stretch his neck down. Be patient, be persistent and wait him out because you haven't finished the job and neither has he. Above all, get a response and be consistent. Ask and then release the pressure when your horse responds.

If you are inconsistent, he learns nothing and you have nothing to build on.

Even if your horse gives you the response you're looking for on your first request, pick up the contact and ask again. Your goal is to make his responses prompt, complete and easy. To achieve that goal, you have to repeat the exercise three to five times in about three to five different places in the arena until the correct request/response becomes "generalized" in his brain. When that does happen, switch sides and repeat the exercise as if your horse's right side is the inside. Then come back to the left and this time take hold of the right rein with your right hand, either reaching for it under your horse's neck or over his withers.

B—Turn on the Forehand



- 1. I stand next to Finale with my left hand on the inside left rein and in my right hand, a dressage whip. I apply pressure on the rein to ask her to relax her jaw, stretch down and seek the contact ...**
- 2. ... I reach back with the whip to touch her inside left hock and ask her to move her haunches one step to the right by picking up her inside left hind and crossing it underneath her body in front of her right hind leg.**
- 3. After that, she will step with her right hind around and square up. I could do more than one step, but I don't because the transitions always teach faster than constant repetition, so as soon as she gives me that one step, I release the pressure and reward/pat her.**

Apply the same kind of pressure to ask for the same response but note that the flexion will be less lateral and more longitudinal, engaged and over the back—just as it will be when you're riding.

Finally, switch sides and repeat the exercise with the left side as the outside. By the time you've completed these four positions three to five times in three to five different parts of the arena, your horse should be promptly yielding, flexing, stretching and relaxing his jaw. He may even be salivating. He's already more supple and chewing and looking for the bit, so it's time to move on to the next exercise.

B—Turn on the Forehand

Stand facing your horse's shoulder on the left side with the left rein in your left

hand and a dressage whip in your right hand. As you apply pressure on the rein to ask him to relax his jaw and stretch down, touch his hock area with the whip to ask him to move his haunches one step away from you by picking up his left hind, crossing it in front of his right hind, then squaring up. As soon as he gives you that one step, release the pressure and pat him. That's all you need— one step. Even if you can do more, going around and around is a waste of time and effort. Transitions train your horse more quickly and effectively than constant, repetitive drilling.

Remember, you want the horse's inside hind to cross up and in front of the outside hind. You don't want the outside hind stepping out sideways and the inside hind following. Whenever you

touch the bit, you want him to think *step under and over with my inside hind*.

If he tries to step back or sideways with his outside hind instead of crossing, use a touch of the whip to encourage him to move a little bit forward and up into the contact. Even if he gives you a perfect crossover step the first time, repeat the exercise at least three to five times more in different parts of the arena to generalize the idea in his mind.

Switch sides and repeat from the right side, then come back, stand on the left side and apply pressure on the right rein—reaching under or over your horse's neck as necessary. As you do, use a touch of the whip to again ask him to move his haunches away from you, this time straightening to the outside instead of flexing to the inside. You may be

C—Walk—Halt—Walk



1. With Finale square on the rail, I stand on her right side facing forward, holding the inside right rein in my left hand and, so I can touch or tap her hind leg if necessary, a dressage whip in my right hand. Just as before, I ask her to yield in the jaw and stretch her head down, seeking the contact. Then, maintaining a soft feel—and without moving my body—I use my voice and a touch or tap of the whip to ask her to step up into my hand.

2. Finale responds by stepping energetically forward from behind into the contact.

3. Look how engaged and tracking up Finale's steps are as we walk on for several strides. It's not the walking that teaches her but the transitions ...

4. ... so I ask her to halt squarely and on the bit with her hind end well-engaged.

surprised at how easily this comes, probably because your horse will be in better balance. By the time you've done three to five repetitions each way, your horse will understand and respond to the unilateral aids (the inside rein and leg, represented by the whip) and the diagonal aids (inside leg to outside rein). Now it's time to add the third exercise.

C—Walk—Halt—Walk on the Rail

This is a great exercise for your horse, but it's almost more beneficial for you in that it asks you to maintain a relaxed and supple connection while your horse steps up into your hand and actively comes forward into contact.

Position your horse on the rail tracking right. Stand on his right side facing forward and holding the inside right rein in your left hand. In your right hand, hold a dressage length whip or one long enough for you to reach behind yourself and touch or tap his hind leg when necessary. Ask your horse to yield in the jaw and stretch his head down. Then,

maintaining a soft feel, use your voice and a touch or tap of the whip to ask him to walk forward into the contact. Wait for it. Resist the temptation to drop the contact or worse, drag him forward.

Whenever you use a driving aid, you want your horse to come forward and say, *Where are you?* Even if he gives you a lazy reaction, do not pull and do not walk forward yourself. Instead, reach back again and tap his croup, hock or gaskin—anywhere that says to him, *Move forward. Come with intention. Come up into the bridle. Don't just lag and not go to the bit so the rein gets slack.*

If the horse walks forward but little by little raises his head and looks around, he hasn't truly gone into the bridle. Apply a little more rein pressure and use another touch of the whip to drive him up into your hand so he rounds his back, lowers his head, relaxes his jaw and honestly steps into the connection. Walk on, enjoying the feel for a few strides, then ask him to halt straight, round and in balance. Don't

use too much driving aid or he'll walk through your hand. Don't hold too much or he'll circle around you rather than halting. Do not slam on the brakes and plant yourself without warning because he's going to smash into your hand, stiffen and lose his roundness. The horse may be many things, but he is not a mind reader, so use your voice and body language, slowing your step and bringing your shoulders back.

In spite of that, if he continues walking, add rein pressure but not constantly. Apply pressure, then relax it, then repeat the pressure as necessary. Above all, keep everything very low-key so he gets the idea that, while he must halt, he has to stay relaxed and rounded up.

If he gets a little bullish or tough in the jaw, a few rein-back steps after halting can clarify the point of the exercise. Put more pressure straight backward on his mouth and wait. As soon as he takes a step back, release the pressure, reward and ask him to walk on again.

Continue around the arena, making a

transition about every 10 strides or so. Begin experimenting with how much to hold, how much to relax the muscles in your arm without changing your arm's position, when to slow down and when to speed up. If your horse is like most, he's an astute reader of body language. After just a few repetitions, you're going to find that when you slow your body or bring your shoulders back, preparing for the halt, he's going to stop while keeping the connection and without you applying additional pressure to the bit. Continue the exercise in both directions until your horse can do walk-halt, halt-walk transitions with energy and staying rounded, relaxed and soft in your hand.

Now repeat the exercise holding the outside rein. You should find that you have to apply almost no pressure because your horse has learned to step up and into the outside rein with turn on the forehand. He's getting straighter and rounder and is engaging his hindquarters even more. You should feel as if you have almost nothing in your hand—that's what a light feel is. As I tell my students, it's like holding a phone lightly against your ear so you can comfortably carry on a two-way conversation. And what is the topic of that conversation? With the inside rein, you're asking your horse: *Relax your jaw, stretch your neck down, flex laterally and step under with your inside hind leg.* With the outside rein, you're asking him to *get straighter.* And by doing this he's asking you to maintain a nice connection without pulling, hanging or stiffening.

The ABCs Under Saddle

For turn on the forehand, sit straight and square in the saddle with your horse's spine between your two seat bones. If you're doing a turn to the right, create an inside left flexion just as you did on the ground. Keep your inside left leg long around your horse. Move it back a bit behind the girth and squeeze to ask him to step over and

across with his inside left hind then square up with his outside right hind. If he doesn't respond to light leg pressure, use a touch or tap of your whip to reinforce the aid rather than get stronger with your leg.

Repeat with just inside rein and leg then begin to add the outside rein. Start with inside flexion and inside leg, then take contact on the outside rein so you straighten him and he's really stepping around into the outside aids with flexion. (Note: These are also the aids for leg yield.) After three or four repetitions, repeat on the other side. Remember to reward him.

To ride straight, start on the rail at the walk, again sitting evenly in the saddle with your horse's spine between your two seat bones. If you're tracking left, take contact on your inside left rein, squeeze with your inside left leg and sit a bit more on your left seat bone, without raising your right seat bone or tipping to the left, so your horse steps under with his inside left hind and stretches down looking for the bit. As he does, add a touch of outside rein and simultaneously relax the inside rein just enough for him to straighten.

To check up on your skills, drop both reins for just one or two steps. If nothing changes, you and your horse are in good balance. If he instantaneously stretches his head down, you were hanging. To stretch a lot, as in the stretchy circle, flex a little on the inside rein then, as your horse seeks the contact, relax the outside rein to allow him to stretch more. To ride a little more up? Use seat and leg to push him forward, and as he responds by elevating his forehand, maintain connection by shortening your reins.

Using the ABC exercises in-hand and under saddle teaches your horse that when you apply rein pressure, he's to relax his jaw, stretch his neck down, come on the bit and get soft in your

hands. He learns that pressure on the inside rein means *step under with your inside hind* while pressure on the outside rein means *straighten and step over with your inside hind into the connection*. Now he has learned about unilateral aids (inside rein and leg) and diagonal aids (inside leg to outside rein).

These exercises have shown you how your horse responds to pressure and what his response is—especially what light feel is like. You've established a conversational system of request and response in which you both maintain contact without dropping it, giving it away or hanging. Finally, you've instilled in your horse the habit of always going onto the aids correctly, whether he's focused and attentive at home or he's a little excited, distracted or frightened at a show. This will definitely pay off in better rides and higher scores. Anytime you feel him start to lose attention, a little inside leg and inside rein will say, *Hey, come back here; look for the bit*. A touch of outside rein will say, *Straighten again*, and he'll engage, round his back more and be right back with you. 🐾

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