



Nicole Chastain of Ventura, California, demonstrates a leg yield at trot on her 8-year-old Trakehner gelding, Zuchtmond.

EXERCISES FOR SUPPLENESS

Establish this principle element in your horse's dressage training.

By Gail Hoff-Carmona, PhD • Photos by McCool Photography



Gail Hoff-Carmona

Suppleness is part of the systematic progression of the dressage Training Scale (rhythm, relaxation (suppleness), connection, impulsion, straightness and collection). For a horse to be supple, he must be relaxed throughout his body (without being flaccid) so that he can easily and willingly obey the aids of the rider. But suppleness can be an elusive quality. The centeredness of the rider, the forwardness and straightness of the horse and a good warm-up are all key ingredients for creating a supple horse.

Rider Suppleness—Create Body Awareness

The position of the rider and the correct use of the aids are paramount to suppling a horse. Even the most well-trained and supple horses will become stiff under a rider who does not sit well or uses the aids incorrectly. Many students of dressage compromise their seats and go to the hand, not noticing that their body tells the horse something different. Ask someone to hold your horse while doing these mounted exercises that will help you achieve clarity with your seat:

1. Correct your position. Align your ear, shoulder, hip and heel and stretch your legs down. Sit on both sitting bones, and feel where they are located. Both of your sitting bones should be in contact with the saddle and centered with one on each side of the backbone of the horse.

2. Be aware of weight distribution. Turn your body to the left, and notice what happens to your weight. Very often, one sitting bone—most likely the outside one—will lift a bit out of the saddle. Do this exercise in both directions.

3. Center your body. Now turn left and right again, keeping both sitting bones in contact with the saddle. For example, if you try to supple a horse in the poll going right using your right hand and pushing with your right leg against the horse, you also have to increase your weight on the right side. However, if you accidentally lift your outside sitting bone, you're pushing your horse to the left, even though you think you're asking him to go right. Your horse will be confused because your sitting bones are telling him one thing, and your rein is saying another. He'll most likely try

to follow your sitting bones but become crooked in his body while trying to obey the hand, too. In such a case, suppleness is impossible. The rider's outside leg turns the horse around her inside leg, but she has to stay centered.

4. Ride straight lines and circles without reins. Remember to stay centered on your horse. If the horse isn't turning rapidly enough, most riders instinctively lean to the inside, which exaggerates the problem—the horse starts to push to the outside.

When riders learn to make circles without the help of reins, they notice two things: They need to keep their weight centered, and the horse does not bend his neck more than the rest of his spine when circling.

Remember that the horse needs to bend his body primarily with lateral flexion at the sacroiliac joint (just behind the loin area). The thoracic (rib area) vertebrae have very little lateral flexibility but the neck can easily be bent from side to side. Too often, riders try to create bend in the horse by just bending his neck. Instead, this makes a horse crooked and unbalanced.

5. Practice holding a short whip in each hand together with the reins.

This keeps students from taking up their reins to steer the horse like a bicycle. The whips are parallel to the ground and held between thumbs and index fingers. This helps riders' hands stay quieter and even. It also helps them ride more from their seats and legs, thus giving clearer signals. Many riders will notice that when they take up the reins their hands want to "play the piano" or move around uncoordinatedly but, because of the whip, they are holding together with the reins, they can't actually do it. They must keep their fingers closed with the thumbs the highest point of the hand.

Longitudinal Suppleness



Longitudinal flexibility is a prerequisite for suppleness. One good exercise is to stretch your horse down over his back (left) and bring him back up again (right). Maintain your good connection and avoid a loose rein (left).

6. Ride accurate figures. The mere accuracy of a figure will help you and your horse communicate better and find better balance. For instance, on a 20-meter circle at the walk, as you cross the centerline, let's say at C, make sure you're parallel to C for a step. When you get to the long side, touching the wall between M and R, again make sure to be parallel to the wall of the long track for a step.

As you continue the circle and cross the centerline again, make sure you're parallel to A and C for a step on the centerline and then parallel to the long side again as you touch the track between F and H. Thinking of being parallel to the wall for a step on all four circle points will help you stay more centered and keep the circle rounder and more accurate without overbending the horse's neck.

Riders must always learn to release the contact after using it to allow self-carriage on the part of the horse. If you continually hold the horse, you will create crookedness and stiffness. As you release the reins, follow through with your driving aids to encourage your horse to seek contact. As you release the

contact, do not change the length of the rein, change only the pressure on the rein. Impulsion is a prerequisite to straightness, and you must keep the soft contact by driving the horse into it so the horse can stay connected longitudinally and laterally.

Create Suppleness in the Horse

If your horse has been standing in a stall, get him out and walk him on a loose rein for 10 to 15 minutes until he has warmed his muscles. A horse that's been walking around the field all day usually needs less warm-up time.

As you walk, get a feel for how to use your seat and leg and how the horse responds to your driving and receiving aids so that you and your horse are in good communication. Driving and receiving aids should not contradict each other. For example, when you're telling your horse to go forward, make sure you don't hold the horse at the same time. Conversely, if you're taking contact and asking the horse to halt, make sure you're not driving him past your hand with your seat at the same moment.

There are several ways to introduce

the horse to the concept of yielding to pressure through relaxation of the neck and lower jaw muscles, thereby flexing at the poll. For instance, the use of side reins or rebalancing reins when longeing can teach a horse to accept contact because such reins are "passive aids," which do not give or take and never get tense. Side reins or rebalancing reins are relaxed when the horse is relaxed. However, they do not give or pull when the horse is pulling, so the horse can understand that he is creating pressure on his own mouth by pulling and relieving the pressure through relaxation. There are many other ways, as well. But once the horse has been trained to understand the concept of soft contact, the rider must work on maintaining suppleness while mounted.

Longitudinal Suppleness Exercises

I recommend these basic exercises to improve longitudinal suppleness.

1. Walk-halt transitions. These will help your horse to go toward your hand (reach for the contact) and improve longitudinal flexibility (connection from back to front), a prerequisite for suppleness in the poll. You will need to coordi-

nate your driving and receiving aids and teach your horse to make transitions until he moves easily from walk to halt, looking for the connection and not pulling against you in the transition.

2. Walk-trot-walk transitions.

The main thing to look for is that your horse goes forward to the hand in both upward and downward transitions.

Don't start with the hand and then suck the horse backward. Instead, try to keep the neck of the horse long and the poll at the highest point.

3. Alternately stretch your horse down over the back, and bring him back up again. This is a wonderful suppling exercise for the topline.

Lateral Suppleness Exercises

Once you have the feeling of your horse reaching for the contact, work on lateral flexibility. First, the horse needs to learn that if you use your left hand and your left leg (hip), he needs to move his haunches a little bit to the right yet stay within the boundaries the right rein and leg set—he must step over into the right rein and leg and not beyond.

When making the horse step from the inside to the outside aids, he should have some inside flexion at the poll. However, it is common for riders to overdo the hand, causing the neck to bend one way and the shoulders to push out the other way. The outside rein holds the collection of the horse and helps to limit how far down the neck and head can go. Together with the rider's outside leg, the outside rein keeps the outside hind leg of the horse in the same track as his outside front leg.

The inside rein is used to keep relaxation of the lower jaw and to allow straightness. The horse needs to accept even contact on both sides of the mouth without tilting the head and without grabbing on one rein or the other.

1. Leg yield down the wall. An exercise to help keep the connection on both sides is to leg yield the horse

SUPPLENESS & THE POLL

A supple poll is a necessary ingredient to creating suppleness throughout the horse's body. Stiffness at the poll can be a result of stiffness in the jaw when the horse fails to relax those muscles and accept a soft, yielding contact with the hand of the rider. This is especially common in young horses that have not yet been bridled and who have not yet been taught about contact pressure. However, such stiffness can also occur in trained horses who have become resistant, if only for a moment, or who have become inattentive to the rider. Stiffness at the poll can also be a result of tension in the neck and at the withers.



The poll is located near the ears, above a rotating joint between the first and second cervical vertebrae along the spine. This joint connects the horse's head to his neck. He can flex his head from side to side (laterally) as well as up and down (longitudinally.) A supple poll in dressage means that the horse has the ability and willingness to move that joint in a relaxed and flexible manner without having to move the neck. One way to understand how rotating joints work is to try these unmounted exercises that help you relate to your horse.

1. Stand straight and turn your head from side to side without turning your shoulders. This simulates lateral flexibility of the poll. If you put pressure on one side of the bit and ask the horse to relax his jaw and flex to one side at the poll, you will also often see him chew the bit and develop a moist mouth.

2. Move your head back and forth without moving your neck. This simulates longitudinal flexibility of the poll. Notice that if you lower your head too close to your neck, it creates pressure on the base of your neck which is equivalent to the poll of the horse. Over-flexion causes pressure on his poll and creates what dressage judges refer to as "broken at the third vertebra."

3. Turn your body left and right from the waist without moving your neck and head. This simulates lateral flexibility at the sacroiliac joint. The upper body moves easily as you turn from the waist. However, if you also turn your neck in the same direction, you create pressure on your outside shoulder which is relieved if you drop the inside shoulder a little. This happens all too often when riders circle their horses. Instead of turning the horse from the seat and leg and following with the hand, they pull too much with the inside rein, bending the neck too much to the inside and causing the outside shoulder to push out.

4. Tilt your pelvis forward and back while keeping your upper body straight. This simulates longitudinal flexibility (engagement) of the sacroiliac. Notice that if you tilt your pelvis forward, it causes you to bend joints in your legs and allows your back to feel relaxed and strong. However, when you tilt your pelvis back a little, it hollows and weakens your back. The same is true for a horse. When he engages the hindquarters, he gives the back relaxation and strength, but disengaging creates weakness and pain.

Beginning at the poll, a series of tendons and muscles join the head of the horse to the hind leg so when a horse lowers his head and neck somewhat his back is raised. Likewise, when the hindquarters are well engaged (longitudinally flexed at the sacroiliac joint), this also has the effect of lifting (lightening) the forehand so that the withers, neck and head also become raised. But, if the horse raises his neck and head too high, relative to the engagement of the hindquarters, then his back stiffens which affects the gaits.

down the wall with the outside aids, so that the horse is facing the wall and keeping about a 30-degree angle to the wall. This helps riders because, by nature, they have to flex to the outside but, at the same time, they will not be able to keep the angle if they do not use aids on the opposite side of the horse.

If the horse is stiff, the rider needs to use as much outside leg and rein as is necessary until he becomes free in the jaw, lowers the poll and steps well under with the hind leg, thus offering contact to the leg and rein on the opposite side. For instance, if going to the left, the rider has to use right leg (hip) and rein to push the horse to the left.

Then, once the horse moves over, he will offer contact to the leg and rein on the left side. At that point, the rider can ask for left flexion at the poll and also turn his upper body to the left to bring the horse's haunches onto the track. The right hip and a little right rein will keep the horse straight while the left hip and rein put the haunches back on the track, creating inside (left) flexion.

Correct contact on both sides of the horse is key to suppleness and self-carriage. The horse must remain loose in the jaw, and the rider's arms and hands must be relaxed, thus allowing the horse to stretch the neck down and forward a little in search of contact with the bit.

2. The turn on the forehand. For a turn on the forehand to the left, flex the horse to the right and use your right leg and rein to push his hindquarters to the left. It's important that you don't just spin the horse around his forehand but that you keep him connected on both sides as in this leg-yield-type exercise. (For a complete description of how to do a turn on the forehand, go to the Web site DressageToday.com.)

3. Variations. Once your horse has learned to step up and over into the outside rein in the leg yield, you can change the flexion in front and have

Lateral Suppleness



Create lateral (side-to-side) flexibility and bend by riding a 10-meter half circle and returning to the track. Repeat the exercise in the other direction.

him leg yield first with flexion opposite to the direction of movement and then with flexion in the direction of movement. When doing this exercise, don't try to push too much sideways. Instead, try to keep the horse straight and forward and simply allow him to cross his legs and move to the side.

4. Change of direction and bending through half circles. Ride a 10-meter half circle to the left at K, returning to the track at E. Continue down the long track and make a 10-meter half circle to the right at H, returning to the track at E. Continue this exercise until you can make the half circles just from the seat and legs while maintaining a soft, even feeling with the horse's mouth.

5. Change bend and flexion. Ride a 20-meter circle in any gait while changing between shoulder-in, travers, counter shoulder-in and renvers.

The key to success in creating suppleness for the horse is in the rider's seat and use of the aids. Stay centered and

relaxed. Remember that you can "talk" to your horse during the moment of the half halt, but you need to relax and allow self-carriage in between so that you have time to also "listen" to your horse. Your goal is to do less and allow the horse to do more.

Stay focused on what is going right more than what is wrong. Keep rewarding yourself and your horse for all the right things and let the wrong things gradually slip away. Keep in mind the goals you are trying to reach, but get more attached to the process than to the goal. Enjoy the trip. 🐾

Gail Hoff-Carmona, PhD, is a U.S. Equestrian Federation "S" dressage judge and a "R" sport horse breed judge. She earned her U.S. Dressage Federation gold medal. She teaches students and trains horses to Grand Prix at Los Alamos Dressage Center in Ojai, California—losalamosdressage.com.