

Dressage Today

“Ask the Experts” Column

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Question:

"Articles about dressage riding always mention that one should drive the horse but not let it go fast. Could you explain what that means? How do I know my horse has the correct tempo? I'm a beginner dressage rider who's just starting to learn about this mystical discipline."

Submitted by Lucy Earle, Madison, WS

Answer By Dr. Gail Hoff-Carmona:

This is a very good question and one that can be confusing.

Many riders think that in order to move *“forward”* they must move faster. In dressage, however, when a horse moves forward, he also needs to maintain balance, i.e. not rush onto the forehand. Hence, the words *“forward”* is associated with *“impulsion”* – the creating of air time in the moment of suspension, which results from thrust and the releasing of energy stored in the hind legs by engagement. When a rider develops impulsion, the gaits become loftier.

On the other hand, if a horse is made to move too rapidly, the moment of suspension is decreased and the gaits become flatter. To visualize this, look at dressage horses doing extended trot or canter with big, unhurried steps compared to racing Thoroughbreds. “Impulsion” does not apply to the walk, since there is no moment of suspension, i.e., a moment when all four feet are off the ground at the same time. But, walks can show greater or lesser activity and ground-covering steps.

Because forwardness is associated with “impulsion,” it encompasses ground-covering steps as well as a clear, marked rhythm and tempo. Rhythm is the recurring characteristic sequence and timing of footfalls and phases of a given gait. Tempo is the rate of repetition of the rhythm. Quick, hurried steps and irregularity are the enemies of forwardness.

To achieve forwardness, one must shift the horse’s center of gravity more backward. When you ride, imagine that your horse is like a seesaw. If there is equal weight front and back, your horse will be in a horizontal balance. If all the

weight of your horse shifted back and behind you, then the horse would be rearing and standing on his hind legs. On the other hand, if the center of gravity shifted totally forward, the horse would be kicking up behind and standing on his front legs. In dressage, we try to shift the center of gravity back a little so that the horse lifts the forehand and engages the hindquarters without standing on its hind legs. This means that the rider must work with half halts to move the center of gravity backward followed by forward, ground covering movements. The horse is not only more engaged in his hind legs, but also pushes off more strongly with his hind legs. This sequence of half halt then forward needs to be repeated frequently and in fairly rapid succession to help the horse find balance, develop impulsion and lift the forehand, and above all, remain “forward.”

It is clear that forwardness requires energy. There are two types of energy a horse can produce: potential energy and kinetic energy. Potential energy can be likened to a compressed spring that is ready to expand but is kept in that readiness. Kinetic energy can be likened to when the spring is suddenly allowed to unfold and rapidly expand. Potential energy produces power and the possibility to expand whereas kinetic energy produces speed and ground cover. A dressage horse that is in good balance and is forward will have the right mix of potential and kinetic energy. If you have the right mix of potential and kinetic energy, your horse will be able to quickly either lengthen or shorten its steps without changing tempo (speed of the rhythm).

To test your horse’s balance, see if, with almost no effort on your part, he can make a downward transition (such as trot-walk or trot-halt) almost immediately and, at the same time, be able to lengthen its stride (without changing tempo) or change gaits almost immediately. As you’re trotting, ask yourself “*could my horse go to walk with almost no effort?*” If you can, you’ll be able to simply allow the walk at a predetermined spot. As you’re trotting, if you feel you can’t walk with almost no effort, you’ll have to force the horse to walk using quite visible aids. Vice versa, when you’re walking and you’re planning to trot at A. for instance, you should feel like you have your horse on the edge of the trot, i.e. not trotting and not losing the rhythm of the walk. When you get to A. you’ll have to do almost nothing – no big leg aids, not leaning forward or backward – to trot. One could say you just “allow” your horse to trot. If you can do both of these transitions by simply “allowing” them to your horse, you will know that your horse is in good balance. I like to call this balance the “zone of all possibilities.”

If you test the horse, for instance, at the trot and find that he could halt easily from the trot but not make an upward transition (i.e. trot-canter) or take longer steps (collected trot-extended trot), you know that he is not moving forward enough. On the other hand, if your horse is ready to run forward or quicken his tempo but cannot readily make a downward transition (extended to collected gait or halt), then you have the horse on the forehand and he is probably going too fast but not forward.

The correct tempo will vary from horse to horse, and also with the degree of training. An untrained horse will usually have a faster tempo than one that has been trained in dressage. This is because the trained horse will have learned about impulsion and uphill balance - shifting the center of gravity backward to create a relative lifting of the forehand. Therefore, as you train your horse in dressage, you will likely find that his tempo will change some as he progresses up the levels.

In the end, dressage is all about balance on the part of both horse and rider. The rider must have a good seat to allow the horse to find his own correct balance. If the rider leans too far forward and gets in front of the movement of the horse, the horse will likely try to quicken its steps to support the rider's weight. Likewise, if the rider leans too far back or sits too heavily, the horse will tense his back to support the weight and that, in turn, will then interfere with the horse's natural ability to move with freedom. To find balance is to find harmony, freedom of motion and expression without tension. It is truly the "zone of all possibilities."