

Combining Skills for Better Performance

When I watch a horse move, several factors come to mind, such as quality of the transitions, body alignment, responsiveness, self-carriage, resistances (of course!), and overall “**preparedness**” of the horse’s ability to perform the job at hand. A horse that is adequately prepared is a pleasure to watch, as he moves smoothly, confidently, and with grace which comes from proper athletic preparation. An unprepared horse makes us cringe at his performance, and makes us think that perhaps the rider would be better off going back to her schooling and starting over.

It’s All In the Training....

Training a horse to be prepared to move in balance from one skill to the other offers a great deal more in the way of athletic accomplishment than does training the two skills independently. For example, you can practice trotting forward from a stand still and you can practice the rein-back as two separate skills, which of course, they are.

But when you combine the two skills together, i.e., trotting forward immediately after the rein-back, you increase the effect of the training. Here, it is necessary to develop the transition between the skills. At this moment in the movement, both horse and rider must refine their ability to immediately and without delay, shift their weight and increase impulsion while staying in a balanced posture. By combining these skills together you are training the “preparedness” of the horse to adjust his balance, and the “preparedness” of the rider’s communication of the aids.

Another important result of combining skills is an **increased physical development** of the horse, which of course, increases their athletic and performance potential. Correctly executing combination skills requires additional strength and muscle development, as well as increased suppleness and responsiveness to the aids. These elements are easily observed when watching horses perform. In a Dressage test, for example, transitions between movements are judged heavily, and skills need to be executed precisely at very specific places in the arena. Likewise, hunters, jumpers and western horses not prepared to change their body balance will not perform well.

Successful Skill Combinations

In the *rein-back /trot forward* exercise used here as an example, there are several training factors to consider; 1) the horse must **change direction**, and 2) the horse must **change gait**, and 3) the horse must **change his balance**. To further improve training of the performance horse, we can add additional elements, such as a **change of bend, change of rein, and change of speed**. We can combine several skills and/or any number of

combinations of the above, always keeping in mind the quality of the skills and the further refinement of the movement, especially during the transitions.

AT ALL LEVELS OF RIDING, GOOD TRAINING EXERCISES INCLUDE CHANGES IN TRANSITIONS, BEND, GAITS, DIRECTION, SPEED, IMPULSION, SELF-CARRIAGE AND BALANCE.

At lower levels of riding, with less educated horses, our primary concern is with the ability of the horse to execute the movements. At the upper levels we are generally more concerned with refinement of the skills.

Developing effective combination skill exercises for any training program depends on the skill of the rider and their horse, obviously. Usually when first introduced to skill combination exercises, the horse will struggle a bit with the balance, and would likely exhibit some resistance. Regardless of the level of the horse, (assuming the rider does not create more resistances by inadequate aids and communication) practicing the exercises will inevitably reduce the horse's overall resistances, and this is a great benefit to any training program.

Combination Skill Exercises.....

I have recently given a clinic where I challenged the riders to put together an exercise for their horses which would encompass a combination of skills, each of which would require their horse to change his body balance. The goal was to include as many elements as possible (change bend, gait, direction, speed, etc...). Initially, many of the exercises appeared as a chaotic mess of movement by horse and rider (many 'Kodak moments'). But after some practice, their movements became smoother and the riders found the value of implementing their exercises in their training program.

Obviously, exercises must be adequate for the horse/rider level. Here is just one example of incorporating combination in your horse's training program using serpentines. Be creative and develop your own interesting combination skill exercises.

Begin with continuous 3 loop serpentines up and down the arena. 1- Change gait for each loop (changes gait, bend, rein and direction). 2- Add halt and rein-back between each loop. 3- Add direction to the rein-back by backing a half of circle so you are facing the direction you came from, continue serpentine. 4- Add collection by extending and collecting gait for each loop. 5- Add engagement by executing shoulder-in only across the short sides between each loop. 6- Add strength and suppleness by adding skills such as Piaffe or Passage. 7- Add loops to the serpentine. 8- Be creative, add cavalettis and or jumps (canter work will require deliberate change of lead or counter canter)

Remember, we are ultimately seeking quality in the movement and skill. Constantly assess your horse's performance for each exercise- is your horse straight, balanced, forward, non-resistant (of course!), responsive? Does he lose his frame, impulsion, bend, contact? Which element does your horse need to improve? Plan combination skill exercises to help him through that specific issue.

Sustained self-carriage between movements demands greater athleticism. In all disciplines of riding, training combining skills prepares the horse (and rider!) for successful performance by developing their ability to move easily from one skill to another in a balanced posture. A result of this training leads to the development of a better, stronger and more supple athlete (and less resistant too, of course!).

Until next time,

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