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## THE SHORT-COUPLED HORSE

Very short-backed, or “square,” horses have the advantage of a strong back that can carry weight well. However, they also have a tendency to hold their back tensely and lack the desirable “swing” through it. When the horse can’t “swing” through his back, his general movement has a “stuck” quality—his muscles aren’t supple and loose. As a result physical relaxation suffers, and then mental relaxation diminishes, as well.

The short-coupled horse’s carrying capacity is often quite good but his “pushing power” leaves something to be desired, which in turn limits his development of impulsion. Short-backed horses that do manage to generate good pushing power tend to track wide behind in trot extensions. Moving sideways is usually easy, but true bend from poll to tail (also within lateral movements) is a challenge due to reduced flexibility of the spine.

### Common Training Mistakes

Many riders are fooled by the short-backed horse’s apparent ability to collect and do not devote enough attention to lengthening and suppling the horse’s neck and back muscles.

This Warmblood has a rather short back for his breed.





Lateral movements such as shoulder-in, shown here, are important for suppling a short-backed horse.

### Training Tips

Short-backed horses can be any breed, commonly Baroque horses, such as Andalusians, and Quarter Horses, which have been intentionally bred with short backs to help them serve an intended purpose. The muscular difficulties that arise in short-backed horses are the same in all breeds, regardless of whether the horse is a Baroque horse, a Western horse, or a jumper. When working with this type, even if only for reasons of keeping the horse healthy, special emphasis should be placed on stretching in order to relax the muscles.

A useful tool for these horses is riding and or longeing over trot poles and cavalletti. This requires the horse to lengthen his neck and stretch his frame forward and downward, which not only positively affects his back but his hindquarters, as well. Thus, a short horse

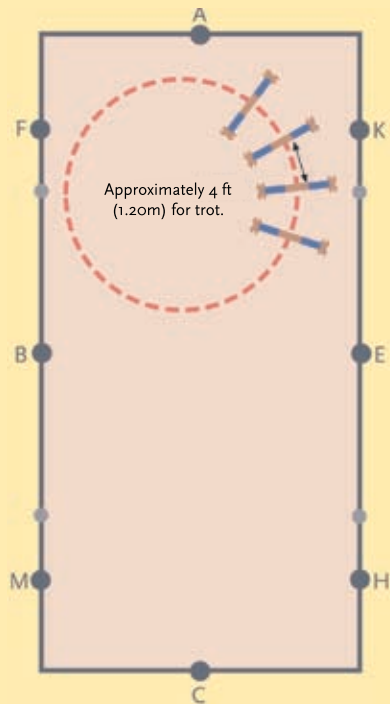
is made longer, and as the back and neck muscles are stretched the horse's movement is better able to swing through his whole body.

A very useful way of improving the horse's ability to stretch forward and downward is riding lateral movements. At first leg-yield can be used, and for more advanced horses shoulder-in, travers (haunches-in), and renvers (haunches-out) are helpful. Short-coupled horses should be especially well gymnasticized to avoid further shortening (and therefore tension) in their muscles.

Another recommendation is to let the horse stretch while cantering out on the trail or on a galloping track. (Attempting to stretch forward and down at an extended trot is not as helpful for two reasons: Firstly, riding repeated trot lengthenings is strenuous for the tendons and joints, and secondly, short-coupled horses tend to become quick rather than truly lengthening their stride, which leads to muscle tension rather than stretching.) In an energetic, forward canter, the

### TROT POLES ON A CIRCLE

When riding trot poles on a circle, the distances between the poles can be easily varied by angling them: When the horse trots on a smaller diameter circle, the poles lie closer together, and when trotting on a larger sized circle, the poles are spread further apart (this causes the horse to stretch more). Alternating smoothly between more stretching on the larger circle and more bend on the smaller circle increases the horse's suppleness and ability to "swing" over his back.



horse must stretch and use his whole body to maintain a consistent rhythm. It is important that the rider allows the horse to stretch and doesn't restrict him with his hands. A short-backed horse that is worked in this manner will be better able to maintain the desirable "swing" through his body during collection.

Another key factor with this type of horse is the careful selection of a saddle. On a short-backed horse, there is—of course—not very much room for a saddle. When the saddle is positioned to allow for the necessary freedom of the horse's shoulders, the panels of certain saddle designs extend too far back over the horse's kidneys. In this case the assistance of an experienced saddle fitter is crucial.

**Short-coupled horses must be encouraged to stretch forward and down. Here, the horse's nose could reach outward slightly more.**



## HUBERTUS SCHMIDT: RIDING ACCORDING TO CONFORMATION



Hubertus Schmidt and  
Wansuela Suerte.

“During my riding career I have had a number of extremely different horses to ride. Long-backed horses, short-backed horses, croup-high horses, geldings, mares—really everything. In my experience, it isn’t as important how the horse is built, but primarily whether or not the horse’s conformation—ideal or not—will allow him to do dressage. And the next factor is whether the horse is, by nature, willing to cooperate.

“At one point a gelding came to my stable. He was extremely long-backed and somewhat croup-high. When I first saw him without a saddle on, I was shocked and asked myself, ‘How can this horse do advanced dressage movements?’ To my great surprise, the gelding had a wonderful piaffe and passage, despite the fact that his conformation did not at all predestine him for this. He didn’t let his imperfect body

get in the way of his willingness to work. We must let go of the notion that a horse must have perfect conformation; what is important is whether the horse can work with the conformation he has.

“The rider should try to identify the horse’s strengths and weaknesses and use gymnasticizing exercises to improve areas in need. For example, I ride a hot horse (p. 34) a little under tempo and implement many curved lines and rounded figures, whereas I will send a slow, stolid horse (p. 29) freshly forward. A short-backed horse tends to move more upward than forward, so I will work him in a deeper frame.

“On the whole, when training a horse, the rider must do the opposite of what the horse tends to overdo by himself.”