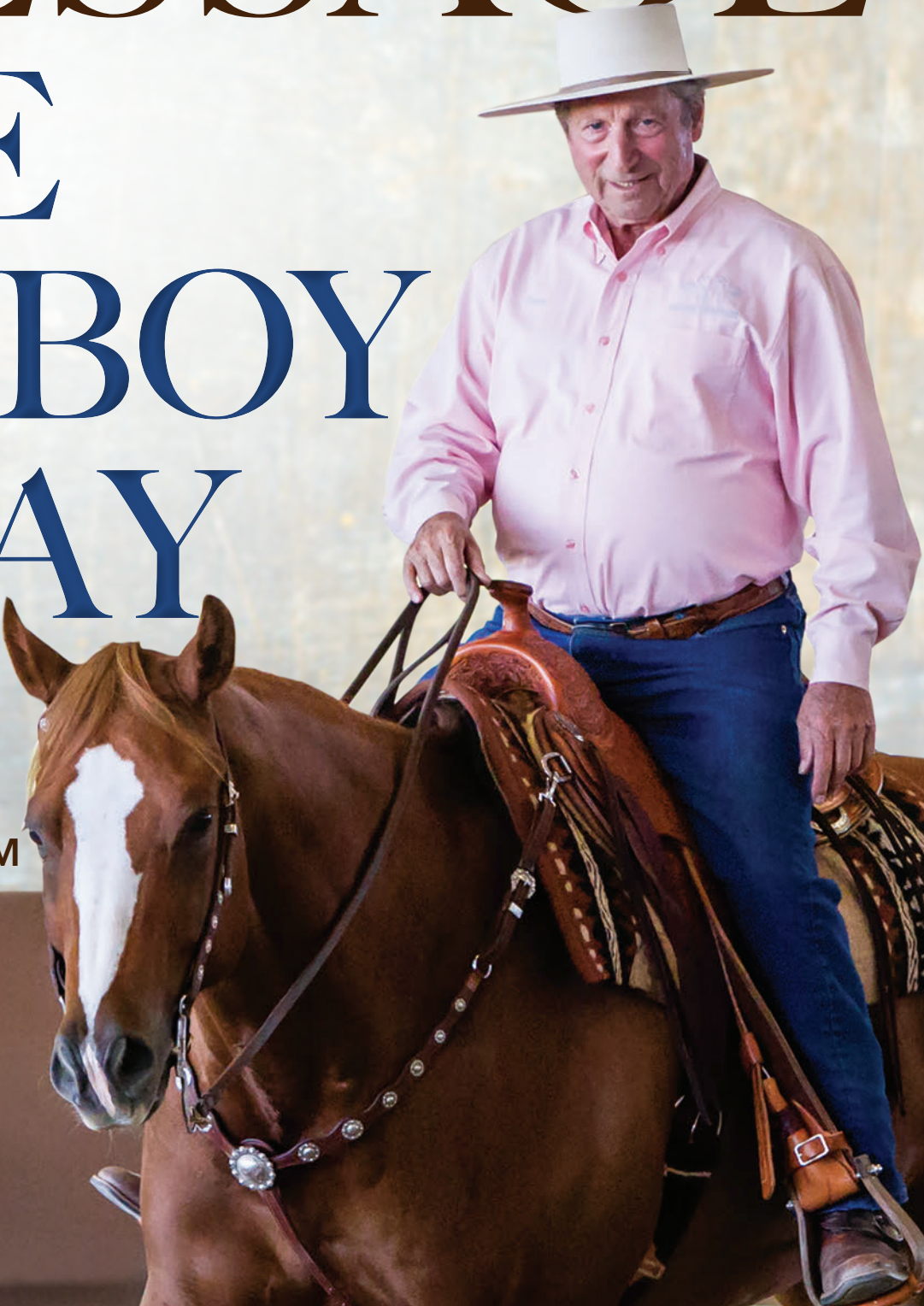


DRESSAGE THE COWBOY WAY

A man wearing a white cowboy hat, a light pink long-sleeved shirt, and blue jeans is riding a brown horse with a white blaze on its face. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. The horse is wearing a brown leather saddle and a decorative bridle with silver accents. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting.

EITAN BETH-HALACHMY

& JENNI L. GRIMMETT, DVM

THE COMPLETE GUIDE to Training and Riding with **SOFT FEEL** and **KINDNESS**



CONTENTS



Foreword	xi
Introduction: My Journey to Cowboy Dressage	1
<i>Special Section: Soft Feel</i>	4
1: TACK.	7
Halter and Lead.	8
Saddle	9
<i>Special Section: Saddle Fit</i>	10
Bridle.	13
Apparel	22
2: WISDOM TREE	25
<i>Special Section: Skeletal Maturation</i>	27
Level 1: Partnership and Groundwork	33
Level 2: Communication and Moving the Feet	33
Level 3: Lightness and Acceptance of the Aids	34
Level 4: Ride Them Forward.	34
Level 5: Balance and Straightness	35
Level 6: Soft Feel and Self-Carriage	35

3: GROUNDWORK AND PARTNERSHIP ON THE GROUND . . .	37
Leading the Horse	37
Maneuvering the Horse's Body on the Ground	42
Groundwork Exercises	45
4: AIDS	49
<i>Special Section: Behavior Modification Terms</i>	51
The Hands	57
The Legs	63
Seat and Weight and Energy	65
The Voice	70
How the Horse Communicates with Us	70
5: THE COWBOY DRESSAGE COURTS	75
Setting Up Your Court	76
Challenge Court	81
Half-Court.	85
6: CADENCE AND GAITS OF THE COWBOY DRESSAGE HORSE	87
Cadence	88
Forward and Frames	89
The Queen of Gaits: The Walk.	90
<i>Special Section: Muscles of Balance</i>	97
The Jog	109
The Lope.	113
Final Thoughts on the Free Frame	117
7: STRAIGHTNESS AND BEND.	121
Straightness.	121
Bend	123
Counter-Bend.	135

8: LATERAL MANEUVERS	139
Turn-on-the-Haunches	140
Turn-on-the-Forehand	145
Shoulder-In	147
Shoulder-Out	149
Shoulder-Fore.	150
Leg-Yield.	151
Haunches-In	151
Haunches-Out	152
Half-Pass.	152
9: SHORTENING THE FRAME	155
Teaching the Short Frame.	157
10: THE GATHERINGS	165
Family	165
Education	166
Celebration	167
Divisions	168
<i>Special Section: Picking Your Tests.</i>	169
Judging	174
<i>Special Section: The Cowboy Dressage Horse</i>	176
11: BEYOND THE COURT	181
Trail Riding	182
Mountain Trail	183
Cattle Work	184
<i>Special Section: More About Musical Freestyles</i>	186
Retreats and Getaways.	191
12: THE FUTURE OF COWBOY DRESSAGE.	195

Appendix I: Glossary . . . . .	.200
Appendix II: Cowboy Dressage Exercises and Maneuvers. . . . .	.206
10-Meter Figure Eight . . . . .	.206
Quarterline Loop . . . . .	.208
20-Meter Circles . . . . .	.209
Square with 5-Meter Bend . . . . .	.210
20-Meter Diamond. . . . .	.211
10-Meter Serpentine. . . . .	.212
Broken Arrows . . . . .	.213
Circle Inside the Box . . . . .	.214
Bow-Tie . . . . .	.215
Circles . . . . .	.216
Turkey Tail217
Acknowledgments218
Personal Note by Dan Grimmett.219
Index221

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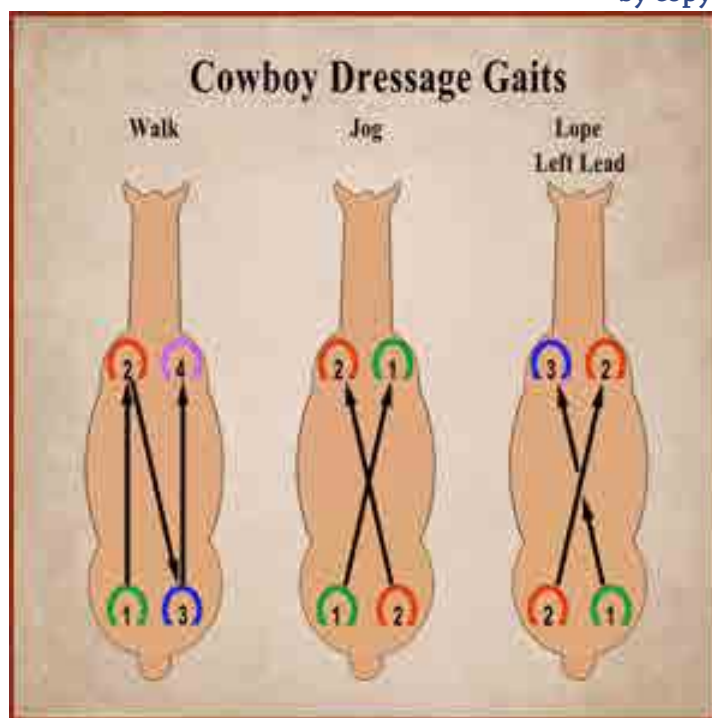
CADENCE AND GAITS OF THE COWBOY DRESSAGE HORSE

*“The secret is to ride the stride
that hasn’t happened yet.”*

EITAN BETH-HALACHMY

We often say that the Cowboy Dressage horse is defined by his gaits, and indeed, in the competition arena the gaits of the Cowboy Dressage horse are quite different from the gaits that we see in Western Dressage, as well as in most traditional rail classes. Cowboy Dressage attempts to create in the horse a gait that is pure to the movement of the individual horse, while cultivating a shortness of gait and handiness unique to the traditional Western working horse. The gaits showcase softness, cadence, and make the Cowboy Dressage horse a pleasure to ride all day, whether on the Court or on the trail of a herd of “doggies.”

The walk, trot, and canter, or gallop, are the natural gaits of the horse. The Cowboy Dressage jog and lope are cultivated gaits that were born on the ranches of the West. Instead of a fast ground-covering long trot, the shorter jog is better for slipping from pen to pen without spooking the cattle. The rocking-chair lope that is comfort



6.1 - The footfall pattern of each of the natural gaits of the horse.

able to sit all day is the shortened form of the rougher and faster canter. Many Western horses are now bred to more naturally move in these slower gaits but it is much more than just a change in nomenclature from traditional dressage. The Cowboy Dressage gaits are as unique as the discipline, and we believe, when done correctly, will help to build balance and harmony in the horse.

While only the jog is considered a true diagonal gait, all of the gaits share a diagonal component pattern in the footfalls (fig. 6.1). In the walk, the diagonal movement happens once in each stride as the weight is shifted from the front with the second beat to the opposite back leg. As the stride is completed, the diagonal weight

is transferred again from the fourth beat back to the first beat. In the jog, each stride has two diagonal components as the diagonal feet move as a pair. In the lope, that component is split into a broken diagonal. The second beat is the movement of the diagonal pairs, and it splits the diagonal movement of the first and third beat. Aside from just academic curiosity, this principle is important to understand because it directly affects your balance and timing in all three gaits. As you cue for the next gait, you should be thinking not about going faster or more forward, but about how it will change the movement of the diagonal pairs of feet.

Cadence

Cadence can be defined as the rhythm of the ride. It is the musical beat that is the background of the gait and it should remain consistent throughout the gait. When the cadence speeds up, this is a change in *tempo*. The same 2/4 rhythm common to both soft rock and hard rock varies not in cadence but in tempo. Cadence is one of the things that makes a well-balanced horse a pleasure to ride because it is easy for the horse and rider to get in time with each other. Green horses often have poor cadence under saddle as they attempt to adjust to the awkward feel of the rider on their back. The gait is irregular and it's difficult for the rider to maintain a balanced seat because the horse is moving forward with uneven steps. Cultivating good cadence in your horse's gaits is an important part of building a willing and soft partner.

Forward and Frames

We cannot speak of gaits without first speaking of *forward*. While cadence is the rhythm of the individual gaits, forward is required for the cadence to occur in the first place. Forward is that quality within the horse that is always asking to go. A forward horse is one that is ready and willing to get something done. If you are consistently begging the horse to go forward, you are already behind the game. While the desire to move forward will vary by horse, it is our job as riders to always encourage the forward

because the loss of it affects everything you try to do with your horse.

In each of the gaits we will also be talking about the separate frames and how they affect the gait and cadence. There are three frames of the Cowboy Dressage horse: the *short (collected) frame*, the *medium (working) frame*, and the *long (free) frame* (fig. 6.2). In the Cowboy Dressage tests, you will be asked to perform in the working and the free frame. We use the short frame primarily as a frame of preparation and transition, though many advanced dressage maneuvers



6.2 - The three frames of the Cowboy Dressage gaits are the short frame (collected frame), medium frame (working frame) and long frame (free frame). Notice not only the shortened stride length but also the horse's head position in each of the frames. With each shortening of the frame from the lengthened frame, the center of gravity shifts farther back toward the hindquarters. The only thing missing from this illustration is the adjustment in the rider's position as was discussed in chapter 4 on the aids. The rider's hands would mirror the horse's head position and the rider's seat would rock backward slightly as the center of gravity is shifted toward the hindquarters.

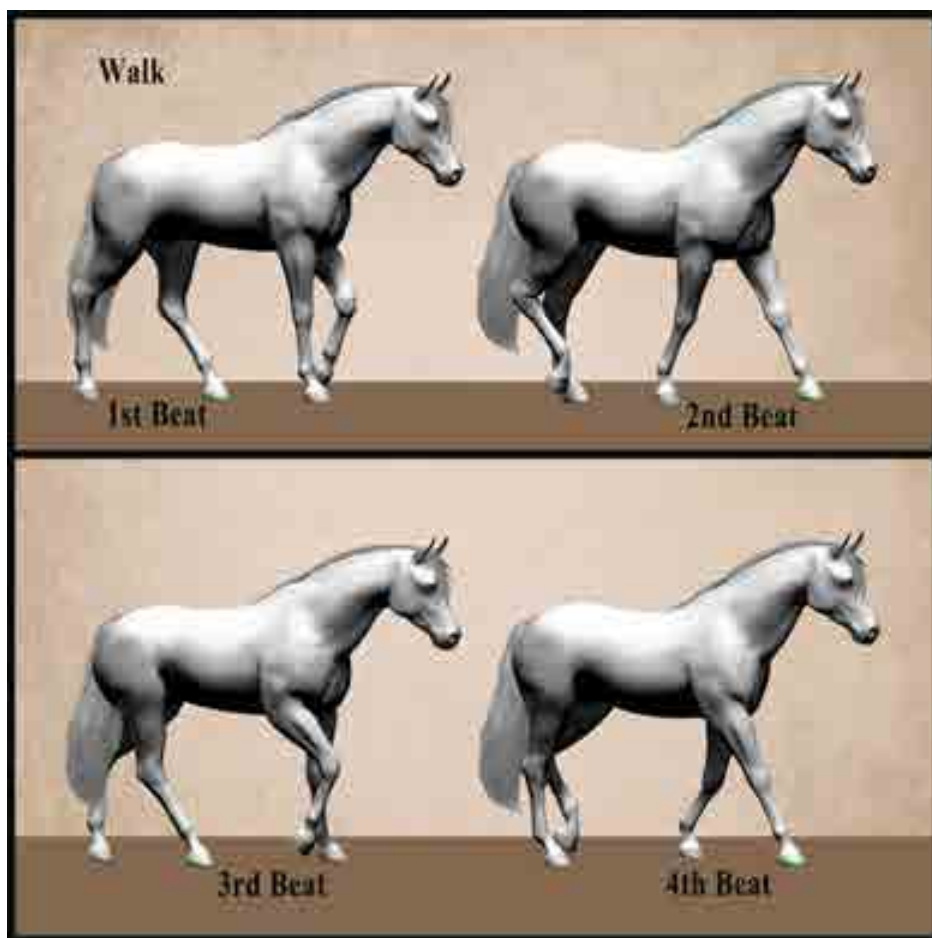
are performed in the short frame. We will discuss the working and free frames in each of the gaits in this chapter, while the short frame is covered separately in chapter 9 (see p. 155).

The Queen of Gaits: The Walk

The most important of all the gaits—and the gait most often neglected in the training of our Western horses or show and working horses—is the walk. The balanced walk is a four-beat gait requiring even distribution of the horse's weight between all four feet as he carries his weight

forward. The footfall pattern of the walk is left hind, left front, right hind, right front. A single stride of the walk includes movement of all four feet beginning with the left hind and ending with the right front (fig. 6.3). Because the rider's body moves side to side in a two-count rhythm as her horse is moving in a four-count rhythm below, the walk is often counted with the steps of either the front or the hind feet. While technically incorrect to count steps rather than strides of the walk, it can be useful to begin to both get in time with the horse, as well as learn where the horse's feet are as he steps.

An elemental exercise performed in riding schools across disciplines is to call out the steps of the horse's front feet until the rider can successfully feel when the right front foot is traveling and when the left front foot is traveling. Learning to



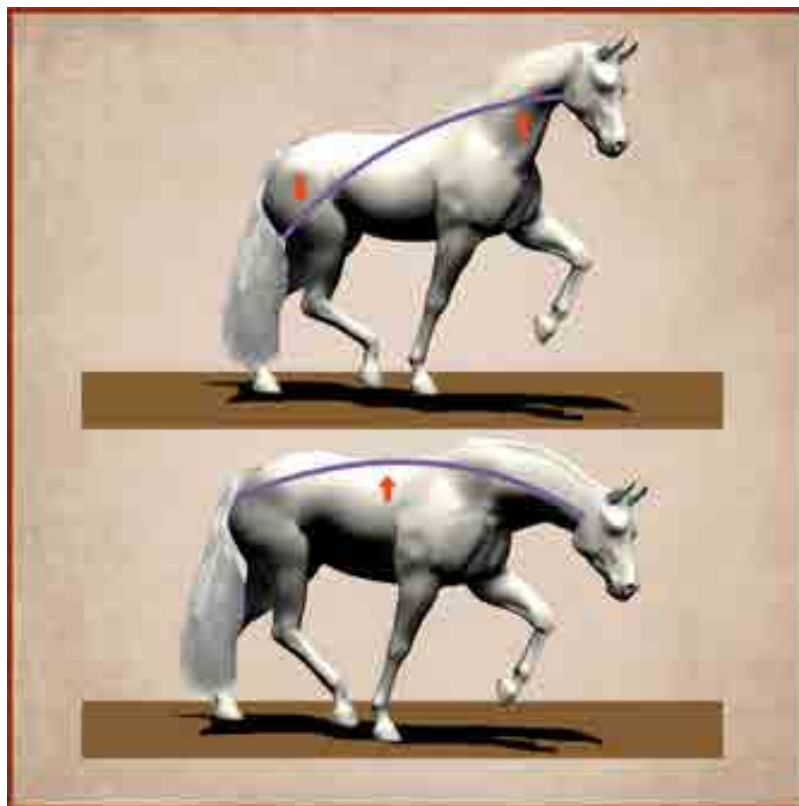
6.3 - The four-beat gait of the walk, beginning from the left hind: The footfall pattern is left hind, left front, right hind, right front. If the horse has stopped square he will always initiate the walk from the hindquarters, pushing himself forward into the gait. The first foot to move is the front foot to catch the balance as the horse moves forward. Therefore, the hindquarters drive the horse forward in the walk, and the forehand balances him.

become attuned to the movement in *your* body as you feel *the horse's* body moving below you is essential in developing feel and timing to cue the horse's feet as they are preparing to travel, rather than when the horse's feet are on the ground. The walk is the most important gait for the rider to cultivate to successfully get those cues working for the horse. You can only influence the movement of the horse's foot *when it is moving*. When the foot is weighted the horse cannot immediately respond to your cues. While this is a simple enough concept to understand, the execution of the cues in time with the feet is one of the secrets that separates the good horsemen from the great.

Most instructors of horsemanship and equitation have their own methods of helping the rider to feel where the feet are as the horse moves. For some riders, it is helpful to first watch the shoulders of the horse to determine which of the front feet is moving. You can also look at the horse's poll in front of you.

Engagement and Disengagement

Understanding the walk by its essential parts of the stride can help you learn to identify, and thereby feel, where the feet are at any given time during the motion of the stride. The stride is composed of weight-bearing and non weight-bearing (flight) phases, which at the walk happen independently for each foot. Both the horse's head and hip shift in balance with the weight-carrying phase of the hind feet.



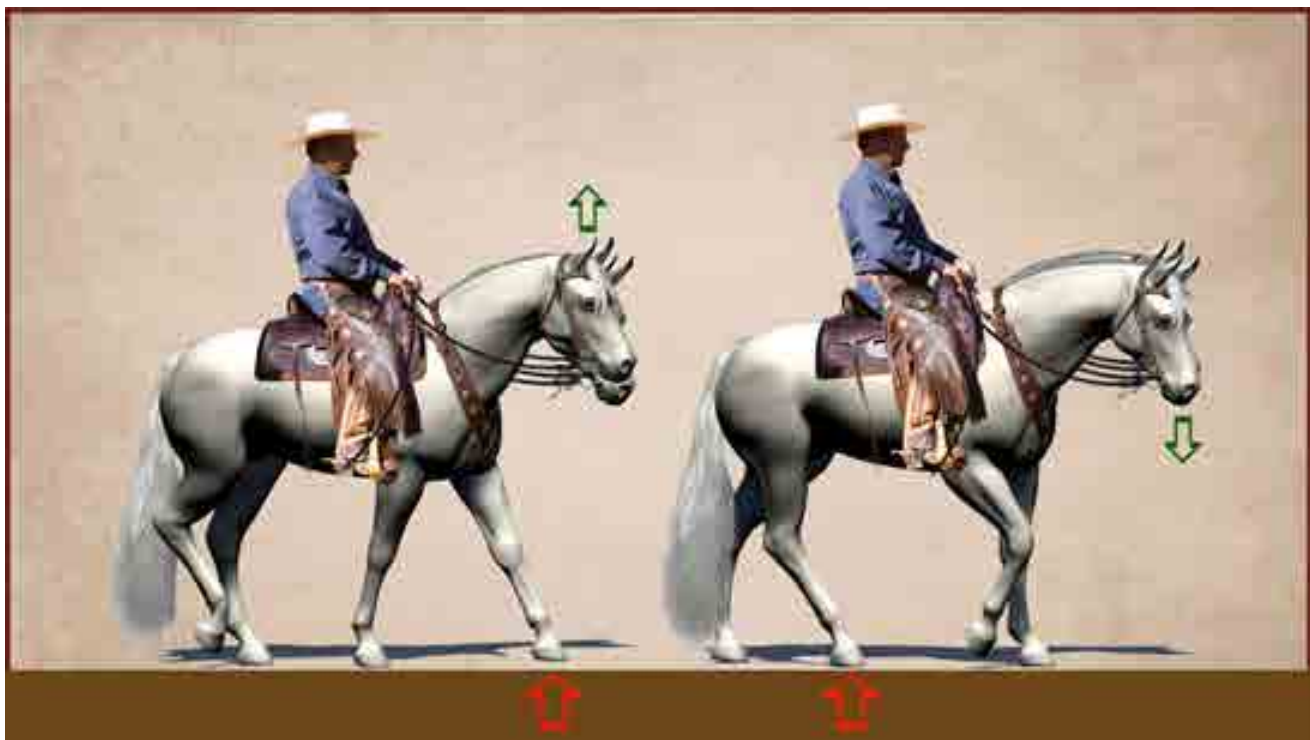
6.4 - *Engagement is the phase of the stride that is actively pushing the horse forward (in red). The engaged phase of the stride happens under the horse's body. By increasing engagement in the stride, you are improving the quality of movement, the balance, and forward drive of the stride.*

We define *engagement* in the stride as the forward weight-bearing phase. In the hindquarters this phase happens from the moment the horse's foot becomes weight-bearing under the body of the horse to the moment it passes under the hip of the horse on its way to the flight phase. As the horse steps into engagement in the hindquarters, the horse pushes forward and the head goes up (fig. 6.4).

Disengagement is defined as the portion of the gait when the horse's leg is behind the hip as it enters the flight portion of the stride. As the horse shifts the weight of the hindquarters to the forehand, the head goes down. Therefore, as the left hind leg pushes forward, the head is up until the left hind is at the end of its weight-bearing phase, and then in its disengagement phase, shifts the weight to the horse's left foreleg, causing the head to go down.

This all takes far longer to write about and think about than it does to happen. As you study the horse's walk and learn to identify both the weight-bearing and non weight-bearing phases of the stride, as well as the engaged and disengaged portions of the stride, you can better learn to be in time with the feet.

Another technique for getting into time with the horse's hind feet is to feel the rolling of his barrel underneath you. When your legs are lying



6.5 - The movement of the horse's head can tell the rider where the feet are. The head bobs like a counterweight as the horse's weight shifts from the front to back in time with the footfall. The horse's head will rise as the horse shifts his weight to the hindquarters, driving forward in engagement with the left hind foot. This is also the point at which the left front foot strikes the ground. The head will bob down as the horse shifts his weight to the forehand and the left front foot is in weight-bearing engagement. This is also the time when the right hind foot strikes the ground.

along the horse's sides in gentle connection with the horse, you can feel the horse's barrel moving between your calves. As the horse lifts the hind end and steps with the left hind foot, the barrel will roll to the right. The rider riding in time with the horse will also feel the rhythm of the walk on the seat bones.

So, if you put this cadence together:

- The horse's hindquarters will lift as the horse begins to step with the left hind foot.
- The barrel will roll to the right against your right calf.
- Your left seat bone will follow that roll, then your left shoulder will roll backward slightly as the horse's poll lifts.
- The hindquarters drop and the horse's left front foot moves forward.
- Then the horse's hindquarters lift again, and as the right hind foot moves forward, the barrel moves to the left as your right seat bone follows.
- The horse's head lifts and your right shoulder rolls as the horse lifts the right front, completing the stride (fig. 6.5).

All that is happening at the walk, on a regular frame in a straight line! Obviously, it's way too fast for anybody to think about. Play with each of the pieces as you ride, experimenting by concentrating on the horse's poll and the timing of the feet, and then your seat with the timing of the feet. When you can put each of these pieces together to help you find the feel, you are reaching the ultimate goal. Until you can feel

the horse's feet moving with your body without thinking about it, it is difficult to master riding in time with your horse. Development of feel is a lifelong cultivation.

Working Walk

The *working walk* is the very foundation of all the work that we do in Cowboy Dressage and is the framework for introducing Soft Feel and self-carriage (fig. 6.6). In the working walk, the horse moves with the rider in a softened and slightly shortened frame. It is important to carry the energy of the walk into the working frame so that the gait retains a snappy energy without becoming sluggish. In the working frame, the horse carries his head and neck in a position to encourage shifting of the center of gravity backward toward the hindquarters with softening of the poll, relaxation of the jaw, and elevation of the withers from the shoulder.

It is important to note that there isn't a "headset" in the Cowboy Dressage horse. The balanced carriage of the horse will depend in a large part on the conformation of the horse being ridden. An up-headed light horse such as a Morgan or Saddlebred will have a higher head and neck carriage in the working frame than a more levelly built traditional Western stock horse like the Quarter Horse or the Paint. The horse must be encouraged and rewarded for the carriage that best suits his individual build.

The *working frame* is developed in the horse by encouraging the horse to relax into light contact through the reins while engagement of the



6.6 - *The working walk is a soft, medium-frame walk with light contact.*

hindquarters carries the propulsion forward into the gait. The working gait is an unhurried yet snappy gait. It is the gait from which the horse is ridden one stride at a time in partnership with the rider, ready for the next maneuver or command. It is a frame of readiness for the execution of the next step. In the working frame, you should be intimately connected to the feet of the horse through the aids. You communicate with the front feet through the reins and to the hind feet through the legs and seat. When the horse is

going with Soft Feel, partnership, and in harmony with the rider, the slightest cue or change in signal from the rider communicated in time with the horse's feet should be met with immediate response from the horse. With this intimate connection, you are able to properly execute commands and guidance via a series of communications often referred to as *PERR*—Preparation, Execution, Release, Relaxation (fig. 6.7).

Because you are riding with the horse in readiness and Soft Feel in the working gait, you

can first *prepare* the horse by a subtle shifting of your energy to tell him a command or cue is about to be given. Then, assured that the horse is ready for that cue, you *execute* the command in time with the horse's natural movement. As the horse executes the desired movement, you release the command, then relax your body and energy as the final reward. The communication of PERR is a subtle conversation between horse and rider. When a horse and rider are operating with Soft Feel, the observer should not be able to see the *preparation*, the cue for *execution*, or the *relaxation* and *release*. Instead the horse and rider appear to be riding as if of one mind. That is Soft Feel at its best.

Teaching the horse to develop a good walk begins on the ground. You can teach the horse to respond to the energy in your body language through your groundwork—lengthening and shortening the stride at the walk. Groundwork exercises are a very important part of creating a good walk once the rider is aboard. The walk is also one of the best gaits to warm up the horse's joints and muscles before moving up to faster gaits.

Use your walk wisely in your schooling because failing to build a good walk as a fundamental gait in your horse is something that is difficult to rebuild later down the road in your training. The walk is the alphabet in learning to read. You have to know each piece of your horse's walk before moving on to the jog or the lope.

Encourage your horse to walk with energy and forward propulsion during groundwork



6.7 - Soft connection in the working frame allows for proper use of PERR—Preparation, Execution, Release, and Relaxation.

exercises. By allowing your horse to drag his feet or sedately walk around you during groundwork, you are encouraging the lack of *forward* that will also plague you under saddle. Remember that in groundwork you are always working toward riding your horse—from the ground up. Quality of gaits on the ground builds quality of gaits under saddle. Cultivate that quality by rewarding a snappy, productive walk on the ground.



6.8 - *The relaxed frame of the free walk demonstrated on the long diagonal.*



6.9 - *The free gait is long and low with extension of the topline and lengthening of the frame.*

Free Walk

The free walk is the four-beat walk in the horse's lengthened frame (fig. 6.8). It can be used as a reward to the horse after periods of working or time spent in a short frame, or when the horse has been asked to do something difficult mentally or physically. Because the muscles of balance are smaller and weaker than the muscles of extension in the topline, those muscles become fatigued more quickly and require periods of rest and stretching in order to be developed to their maximum potential. The free gaits, especially the free walk, allow the horse the opportunity to relax and stretch the muscles of extension and allow for a recovery period for the muscles of flexion (fig. 6.9 and see sidebar for discussion of muscles of balance).