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WHEN TWO SPINES ALIGN::
DRESSAGE DYNAMICS

HOW TWO MINDS MEET

The Mental
Dynamics of
Dressage

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CHAPTER

4

**The
“Consequent”
Trainer**

4

CHAPTER

Remember the German adjective *consequent* (see p. 29)? The Germans say you should be *consequent* in your training. This means that when you give an aid, it should mean something very specific and you should expect a very specific answer from your horse. Horses can learn very specific aids and give very specific responses—for example, to lengthen the stride 2 inches.

Communicating clearly requires that you *know* exactly what you want. For example, the rider who wants a “lengthened stride” needs to know how long a stride she wants and exactly how she will ask for it. Do you want the stride to be a modest 2 inches longer? This a wise goal because it’s better to lengthen the stride 2 inches and retain the integrity of how your horse uses his body instead of trying to do the maximum, only to have the horse go fast, lose his balance onto the forehand, and be unable to come back in balance. After your horse has mastered the 2-inch lengthened stride, 3 inches shouldn’t be too hard; then 4 and 5 and so on. You can see where this is going.

In an effort to be *consequent*, the rider’s mental expectation is a key element of success. Let’s use “riding the corner” as an example. One hundred percent of horses try to cut the corner! After all, why should your horse go into the corner and balance through it? It’s much easier for him to cut it, but the astute dressage or jumping rider knows that a corner or a turn is the place where you can help your horse become more balanced. Of course, it’s also where the horse can lose his balance, which is what happens when he does the corner on his own. Let’s take a look at a couple of situations that instructors see all the time:



*Does your horse
think you're fun
to be with?*



• **Rachel** is task-oriented and mentally committed to what she wants. She and her horse are tracking right in working trot toward the corner. Before the corner, Rachel half-halts in the shape of a 10-meter bend in preparation for the corner, but the horse doesn't "hear" her and he falls in. Rachel is surprised because she was expecting a balanced corner. "OOPS! Wait a second!" she instantly says to her horse with a series of half-halts that ask for a downward transition to a balanced walk. She then pushes him a bit with her inside leg over to the left in a little leg-yield. She trots again, and before the next corner she does a downward transition to walk, half-halts in the shape of a 10-meter bend and walks him through the corner in balance with bend to remind him of how he should respond to her aids. She retries it in trot.

Bottom line: Rachel's horse didn't hear her aids, and he was immediately and kindly reminded of how to respond.

• **Michelle** doesn't have quite so much confidence. She and her horse are tracking right in working trot toward the corner. Before the corner she half-halts in the shape of a 10-meter bend in preparation for the corner, but the horse doesn't hear her and he falls in. This is just the same problem that Rachel had, and Michelle may, in fact, be an equally skilled or even a better rider, but she blames herself and follows her horse by falling in both physically and mentally. She goes down a rabbit hole of wondering what she did wrong. She's no longer in the moment. She's no longer in any moment. Maybe my inside leg wasn't strong enough, she reasons, but his rib cage was bulging into it and that rib cage is stronger than my inside leg. The "moment" is long gone while Michelle is analyzing the situation.

Bottom line: Michelle's horse has no idea he made a mistake by blowing through her aids.

In situations like this, riders can easily lose track of what they want, because they unwittingly compromise. To use the same example, the next time around, Michelle's horse keeps the line of travel, but he loses the bend. Michelle is pleased with that result, but the bend is actually the essence of the turn. Michelle lost track of what she wanted. Rachel's horse understood clearly so she got 100 percent of what she wanted.

To be fair, rider education and skill matter, and it's a good idea to do a little compromising in some ways. Make the task easier by making a shallower corner with, maybe, a 15-meter bend.

WHAT TO DO

– Take Advantage of Gravity –



When it comes to balancing through a corner—or balancing in any situation—your riding position is the primary factor that dictates your success. You are either the leader who can help your horse balance or the follower who, like the fictional Michelle (see p. 67), follows her horse out of balance.

I explained in *When Two Spines Align* that “the rider’s feet serve as the extremely important bottom building block, and when the rider is vertically aligned, she has the same reference to the ground as when she is standing on it. This ‘stance posture’ is grounded to the earth and balanced according to the law of gravity.”

When your leg is even slightly lifted, causing you to grip the saddle, you are in your horse’s balance and you can’t influence that balance or improve it. You’re with the saddle, and the saddle

will always be in your horse’s balance. You will go where he goes—and that will be out of balance—because he can’t balance on his own.

When the length of your leg is maximized and “grounded to the earth,” your balance is independent from your horse and his saddle (figs. 4.1 A & B). You’re stretched, with positive tension, which is very strong! When you’re in this state of positive, grounded balance, your horse is inclined to come to your balance. It never pays to argue with Mother Nature. Gravity is free to those who remember to take advantage of it. ●

- {4.1 A & B} You want the length of your leg to be maximized and “grounded to the earth” so your balance is independent from your horse and his saddle. Liz Caron demonstrates how a rider can be ungrounded (**left**) and then grounded (**right**). Her horse’s posture improves dramatically when she is grounded.



When a rider is consequent, she clearly explains what she wants to the horse, and then the horse understands and willingly complies with some level of specificity.



It's wise to *knowingly* compromise by lowering the expectation and asking for less bend. But don't make the task easier by ignoring the essence of corner riding, which is bend.

Set realistic goals and achieve them in logical steps. It's not okay for a performance to be poor just because the "*What do you want?*" got squishy and unclear to the horse.

Remember, when a rider is *consequent*, she clearly explains what she wants to the horse, the horse then understands and willingly complies with some level of specificity. The results of Rachel will usually surpass the results of Michelle, even if Michelle has superior riding skills. Rachel is clear and *consequent*.

Know how to ask for what you want with active—but eventually subtle—aids that the horse understands. Then passive aids involve listening to your horse's response and either responding with gratitude for an appropriate response or responding with a clearer explanation of what you want when your horse's response was inappropriate.

● Engage Your Horse's Mind

When a horse engages his hindquarters, his hind-leg joints bend, his croup lowers, he carries more weight with those hindquarters, and as a result, the forehand becomes lighter. But engagement isn't just about the hindquarters. You also want to engage the horse's mind. Some horses are very smart and their minds can—and like to—carry "weight."

Halt-halts and transitions engage the horse mentally as well as physically. They say, *Let's do this now!* Riders who are leaders always have something interesting to say to their horses. But some riders complain that their horses don't pay attention to them. "He's not listening to me," is the common lament. Why isn't the horse listening?

Consider these ideas from your horse's point of view:

- **Are your messages clear?** Some riders may not be giving the message in a clear way because it is cluttered with unintentional aids or aids given at a time when the horse can't respond. That's often because the rider's position and her aids need to improve. For example, maybe she is unintentionally kicking the horse every step. That's not uncommon, but when she wants to give a leg aid, the horse doesn't "hear" it. Maybe the timing of the rider's aids is off because she's not in her horse's rhythm. Maybe her hands are unsteady so the horse is never completely relaxed in his topline and accepting the bit. Some riders, especially those who are very cerebral, think they are giving physical aids when they are not. Whereas a rider's aids are intended to be subtle, they

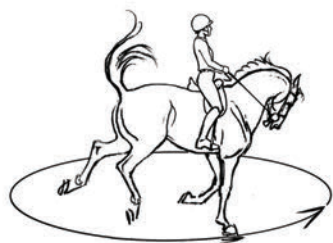
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might need to be louder if the horse doesn't hear them. When a rider's skills need to be honed, the best the rider can do is become aware of these shortcomings and work to improve them. When this is the case, a horse often somehow understands and meets the rider halfway.

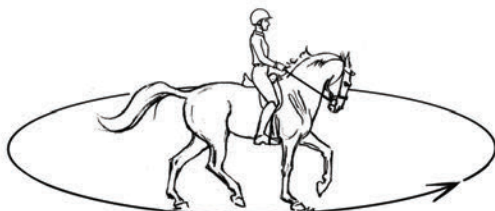
- **Does your horse think you're fun to be with?** Some riders are just plain entertaining, and horses would agree. Others are boring because the language of their aids doesn't send an interesting message. They don't challenge themselves to be the leader, and are satisfied with going around and around (and around) in a less-than-ideal balance. Maybe they are not engaging their own minds. When you ask your horse interesting questions, every ride is like a game and he has fun. He looks forward to his rides, which challenge him.
- **Does he think you're fair?** Sometimes a rider may not have a pleasant message for her horse because the emotion behind it isn't positive. This rider may not be respectful of the horse's nature. She might not honor all his innate needs that were described earlier. Later (see p. 95). I'll discuss if the emotion behind a given message is a subcategory of fear or love? Fear and love can't reside in the same place. Ideally, the rider's emotion is a subcategory of love, and she is able to express her message—even a strong message—in a way that honors the nature of the horse.
- **Is he physically comfortable?** As you know, horses can't concentrate on the work if physical comfort is an issue. Check out his teeth, feet, eyes, muscles, and joints. Pay attention to clues that he may be giving you.

Some trainers say, "The way to a horse's body is through his mind." And others say, "The way to a horse's mind is through his body." Which is it? Either can be argued. It can be said that without physical harmony, there can be no mental and emotional comfort, which is why I wrote the book about the physical aspects of training first. But it is also true that you can't train a horse well unless you're his friend to begin with. Either way, the mind and the body are, indeed, closely aligned. Empower yourself to engage your horse's mind as well as his hindquarters.



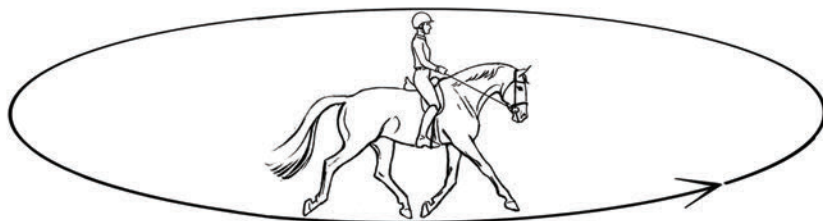
Level (C)

Panic Zone



Level (B)

Stretch Zone



Level (A)

Comfort Zone

● The Comfort, Stretch, and Panic Zones

Experienced riders are aware of the spectrum of emotions between comfort and extreme discomfort. These zones apply to both horse and rider (fig. 4.2).

- **The Comfort Zone** is exactly that. It's a place of comfort. Although learning doesn't take place in the comfort zone, it's an important place to spend time, gaining confidence, trust, and pleasure, so it's important to spend time there. Pleasure riders spend most of their time in the comfort zone, and perfectionists sometimes make the mistake of not venturing outside that comfortable place where the work is easy so the quality is high.

- {4.2} The Comfort Zone (A) is the place where horses and riders both gain confidence and trust, the Stretch Zone (B) is where learning takes place and new tasks might be physically or mentally challenging for horse or rider, and the Panic Zone (C) is a place where negative emotion is so high that learning can't take place.

- **The Stretch Zone** is where learning takes place. It's a place where effort is required and may even be a bit of struggle, physically and mentally. There may be some anxiety over the learning of a new task. It might be uncomfortable but it's never dangerous or physically damaging.
- **The Panic Zone** is exactly that. In this place, the horse or rider is emotionally freaked out, and learning can never take place in this zone. The rare circumstance in which both horse and rider are in the Panic Zone is dangerous.

Some riders are inclined to stay in the Comfort Zone all the time. Learning doesn't happen there, but it's important to remember that learning isn't always the goal. Some riders need and want to ride for pleasure and relaxation. Horses in training need days when they're just going to have fun. They shouldn't feel that the saddle always means hard work because they should have fun under saddle, too.

The Comfort Zone is where horses often need to be. It's the place where previous learning is confirmed and horses build confidence, trust, and pleasurable experiences.

Some riders (the brave ones) can inadvertently put a timid horse in the Panic Zone. The ideal situation for training *horses* is with an experienced rider in her Comfort Zone while her horse is in the Stretch Zone. The ideal situation for training *riders* is with the experienced horse in his Comfort Zone while the rider is in the Stretch Zone. Hence the saying, "The old riders teach the young horses and the old horses teach the young riders."



It's easy to become overly serious, but an effortless, fun attitude is one of a rider's greatest assets.



German rider Uta Gräf is an expert on fun, optimistic riding. Read her book *Uta Gräf's Effortless Dressage Program* if you want to understand more about how you can tap into your horse's desire to play. For Uta, that playfulness in the work is the key to lightness or responsiveness. It is also the key to success. Although most of us are very particular about correct technical riding, it would be mechanical and boring for both horse and rider without the positive attitudes that should accompany it. It's easy to become overly serious, but an effortless, fun attitude is one of a rider's greatest assets.

The primary responsibility of a competent rider is to keep her horse in physical comfort, and her secondary responsibility is to develop the horse and teach him. Everything from poor riding to ulcers to poor dental work and poor saddle fit to the full range of horsemanship concerns can cause discomfort and result in negative attitudes and emotions. Bad riding is, at least, uncomfortable and, at worst, torture. When the horse is balanced and "through," he's comfortable unless there's an underlying physical issue that has made work under saddle difficult.

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An experienced trainer develops her horse by playing on the edge of these comfort zones. If the horse is able to do a good lengthened stride on the short diagonal, she'll try it on the long diagonal. Was the horse able to stay engaged and relaxed? Can the horse do a free walk on a loose rein afterward? Next, the trainer tries the lengthened stride in the field on good footing. Can the horse still stay relaxed and engaged? Then she'll try it in the field going toward the barn. Is it still relaxed and engaged? Can the horse walk on a loose rein afterward? Horses enjoy little challenges that will increase their understanding.

When the rider honors and respects how the horse thinks and feels, she is aware of his fears, and she knows what he loves. She can help dispel his fears and help him love his work. When Olympian and top U.S. dressage coach Debbie McDonald teaches, she often tells the rider to “play” with the leg-yield or “play” with the shoulder-in. She wants her horses in training to feel that the work is fun. Her goal is to allow her horse's natural spirit to come through while retaining his physical balance and his mental interest.

summary of chapter 4

Essential Information About Being a Consequent Trainer

- ✓ Being “consequent” means that you can give very specific aids and expect a very specific reaction from your horse.
- ✓ Ideally, horses feel their riders are fun, challenging, and fair.
- ✓ Skilled riders are aware of their horses' Comfort Zone, Stretch Zone, and Panic Zone. They are conscious about giving their horses plenty of time in their Comfort Zone, and they use the Stretch Zone without panicking their horses.

SUMMARY 4

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CHAPTER

11

**Use Your Whole
Brain to Enhance
Growth for You
and Your Horse**

11

CHAPTER

Teachers study educational psychology and explore “principles of learning” that enable students to learn faster as well as increase understanding and retention. Although teachers might seem to be the best group to apply these principles, ultimately, the responsibility lies with the learner who, in this case, is the rider. Riders can help their personal learning curves by studying and implementing those same basic principles.

These principles can be applied to any learning situation—whether the learner is in first grade or riding First Level, whether she is doing post-graduate work or Grand Prix.

You’ll use both your right- and left-brained skills to implement these ideas. There are Nine Principles listed in the pages that follow, but maybe you can think of more.

● **1. The Principle of Imitation and Social Learning**

Most of us are inclined to think of riding as an individual sport, but in truth, we need other riders and trainers around us. Social learning theory posits that we learn primarily from observing others. Social learning involves four steps: We pay attention (to our role model); we remember (retention); and we copy or imitate (reproduction) because we have motivation to be like the role model.

Learning to ride and train horses is no different. We can’t learn to ride horses in a vacuum. Imitation is the most natural form and the



Social learning theory posits that we learn primarily from observing others.



most powerful form of learning. It can, however, work for you or against you. Riders who are able to watch a great rider on a daily basis have an incredible edge, and those who watch riders with flawed technique or poor attitudes almost inevitably follow suit. Those who understand the power of imitation—and the inevitability of it—have the slogan, “Never watch bad riding.” Bad riding is as contagious as good riding.

In this digital age, anyone can take the time to watch great riders every day of the week. Remember the story of Jessica Morgan who excelled because she made a habit of watching great European riders online (see p. 81). Make the power of imitation work for you instead of against you. That doesn’t mean you can’t respect those who don’t have the perfection gene, but if you want to train your horse as well as possible, find a mentor to watch—someone you aspire to look like. A picture is, in fact, more powerful than any number of well-chosen words.

Years ago before there were many good trainers in our country, U.S. Dressage Team rider Shelly Francis was working on developing her own riding style with determination and perseverance.

She lived in rural, northern New England long before the years when she was vying for a spot on the Team. Her horses were stabled at a farm with an arena, good footing, and an empty judge’s booth, but she was without mirrors and without help most of the time.

Henry Wynmalen’s book, however, was her bible. It was called *Dressage: A Study of the Finer Points of Riding* and was first published in 1899. She put her little brother in that judge’s booth with Wynmalen’s book, opened it to her favorite photograph and told him, “Now, just tell me when I look like that picture!” Those New Englanders had (and still have) grit and determination that can outweigh any number of difficulties. Shelly Francis is one of them. In 1996, Shelly was second alternate for the U.S. Olympic team with Pikant. In 1997, the pair won the USDF Grand Prix Horse of the Year and in 1998, they represented the United States at the World Equestrian Games in Rome. Twenty years later, riding Doktor and Danilo, she amassed top placings at the Grand Prix in Europe as well as in the United States.

Shelly’s story began in the 1980s, and at that time, Americans had almost no chance in the equestrian sport of dressage. Why was it so hopeless? After all, each of those Europeans had only one lifetime, and each of us has only one lifetime.

Why were European lives more productive? *Because of this principle of imitation.* Our national dressage IQ was very low. We had no dressage culture, so there was no one to imitate, and technology was nowhere near what it is today. The Europeans had been breeding horses for dressage for many decades. The children of German

riders Georg and Inge Theodorescu, Reiner and Ruth Klimke, and many others were playing in the arena sandboxes at the feet of their parents' piaffing and passing footsteps. Those children included German Olympians Ingrid Klimke and Monica Theodorescu. Monica subsequently served as coach of the German team. There are too many examples to list. The dressage culture was deeply ingrained in Europe, and there were probably no dressage riders in the United States with that same degree of skill, never mind the layers of understanding that make up a complex culture of dressage horsemen.

As a result, the search for appropriate dressage horses in the United States began as a great exodus to Europe. What used to be a few determined riders going to Europe to ride with a mentor was now a number too high to count. Riders realized that their American horses were bred to run fast, and it wasn't that difficult to import a European horse that was born to do the job. In Europe you could find hundreds of Warmbloods for sale within the same geographical space of New England. The European culture was deep and rich. The equestrian population was dense; there were extremely competent riders everywhere. Not only were they thoroughly steeped in the finest equestrian culture, they often had an attitude of joy about their riding, which was adopted by their children and their grandchildren. Americans who actually settled in Europe could experience that culture firsthand; they could *see* the path, and they were on it!

Dressage has become a much more global sport now. There are genuine experts on other continents; however, Europeans may enjoy top



Think about the culture of your barn, and think about how you contribute to that culture. Is there a team spirit?



billing for years to come because their training barns, sales barns, riding clubs, and shows are still in close proximity to one another, and their culture still runs deep. They feel quite comfortable on the top podium at the biggest events.

Learning happens most easily in social situations such as Europe enjoys. The culture of the Aachen Horse Show, for example, reflects the excitement that comes when the best dressage, show jumping, and eventing riders, along with the best drivers in the world convene. The audiences are educated and socially engaged throughout the week. Whereas the competition is keen, friendship and camaraderie abound. There are countless riding clubs and fabulous horse shows in Europe. In this country, Wellington, Florida, has a similar culture of friendly competition and love of learning. Other centers are developing around the world, but the sport in Europe is still the most dense.

The Barn Culture

Learning to ride is very personal. Dressage trainers differ tremendously even though they all tend

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to read the same dressage books and magazines and hear from the same experts. We all tend to ride our horses a bit in the same way that we live our lives. For that reason, the choice of a teacher or a mentor is very personal. Each trainer and instructor has a system of values or a culture that either feels right or does not feel right to the student. It's like choosing a college or a spouse or a dog. We each are drawn to whatever "fits" with our own values and personal preferences. The culture of a stable might be fun or intellectual, driven toward competition, strict, laid back, or a combination of some of these qualities and others too. But the healthy culture always includes a measure of encouragement.

Think about the culture of your barn, and think about how you contribute to that culture. Is there a *team spirit*? Are you all cheering for one another? When that's the case, riders don't shrink in self-consciousness. They can ride honestly, thoughtfully, from the heart and in the moment. A culture of "well-wishing" is tremendously powerful, and some farms reflect this principle strongly. Riders should never experience the debilitating ill-will that results when someone is critiquing negatively from the corner of the arena.

At shows, the power of that "well-wishing" grows exponentially, allowing each rider and horse to do as well as possible. When the power of well-wishing is there, riders are free to concentrate and communicate confidently with the horse. Then the horse, in turn, can concentrate and communicate confidently with his rider. This maximizes the chances for success. Remember that horses should bring out our very best selves.

The owner of a famous dressage and jumping stable in Germany was once asked to tell the secret of the success at his farm. He said he thought it was because his riders and stable workers had lunch together every day. They sat down together in a relaxed atmosphere and could talk freely and comfortably about whatever was on their minds. That simple tradition developed strong camaraderie.

The success of the United States bronze-medal-winning dressage team at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio was at least partially because of the team camaraderie. The riders and the individuals who supported these riders maximized their chances of success by being mutually supportive team players.

Social Learning TIPS

- ✓ *Imitation is the most effective form of learning, and although riding is often considered an individual sport, it's difficult to do alone.*
- ✓ *Make constant efforts to be your own ideal rider by consciously searching for role models.*
- ✓ *Be aware of the culture in your barn and encourage "well-wishing" within it.*
- ✓ *Horses love to be in groups, so look for opportunities to ride together with others.*



Social Learning for Horses



Horses don't admire the elevation and swing of another horse and try to imitate it, but they do puff up and show off when another horse walks in the arena. Riders can use that to find another layer of expression in the horse's work. Is the shoulder-in inclined to be a little flat? Try it when a new horse walks in the arena, and your horse might be inclined to give you a little more power and lift. Then maybe you can reproduce that on your own later.

As you know, horses are very social creatures, and as herd animals, they're meant to be in a group. It would behoove us to put them in groups more often. Horses love drill teams and quadrilles. When on a hack, horses love being with a group or riding in tandem. Horses with exposure to other horses on their hack days are almost always more enthusiastic and willing to work on the following day. Riding in groups is sometimes easy to implement, but some of us should just think of it more often (fig. 11.1). ●

- **{11.1}** Horses are herd animals and do well in groups. Hacking, riding tandem or working in quadrilles is exhilarating for them, and they're almost always more willing to work on the following day.

● **2. The Principle of Readiness**

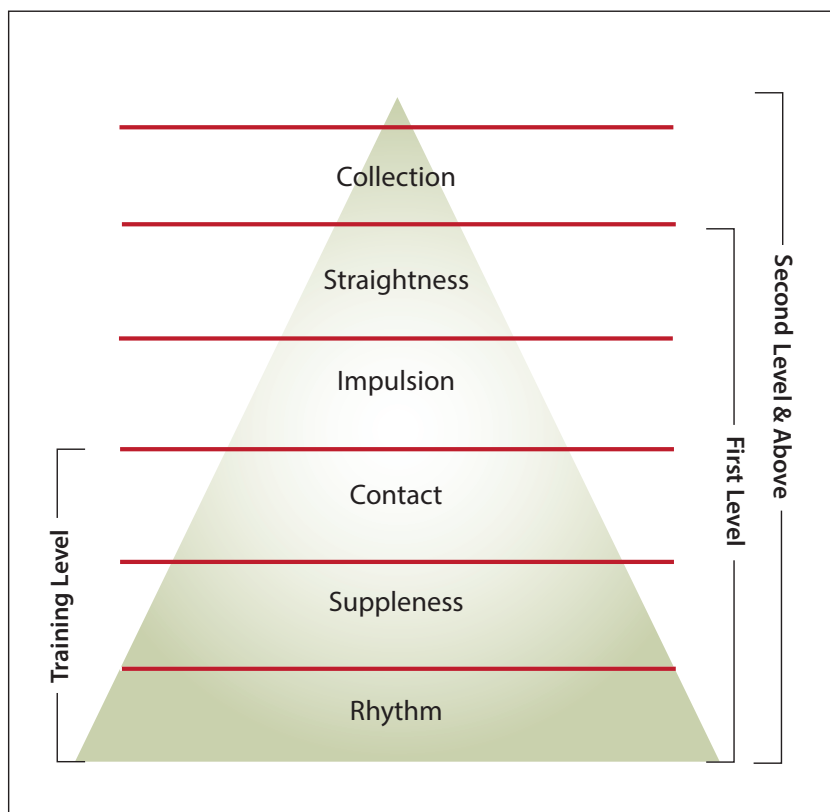
The Principle of Readiness is all about “sequence,” and it applies to all learning. Barring extenuating circumstances, no one was ever a star in First Grade and just couldn’t handle Second Grade. And the same can be said of First Level and Second Level in dressage. The fact of the matter is, if you do First Level poorly, you won’t do Second Level well, and Third Level will be ugly. Conversely, if you concentrate on the most basic level, the next levels are manageable and relatively easy. In most European countries, riders aren’t allowed to progress to a higher-level test in competition until they’ve achieved an acceptable standard at their current level.

The skills required in the standard dressage tests are presented sequentially. These tests represent the collective genius of decades of great horsemen, and in the early days of dressage in this country, before we had ever heard of the Training Scale, competitors like Lendon Gray used the tests as a guide in the training of horses. The tests told her, *First your horse should be able to do this, and now this—and now that your horse can do that, you can try this*. Lendon was obviously on the right track, and as she continued on down that path to the Olympic Games and beyond, she developed a deep understanding of the reasons *why* the sequence worked so well. That’s one reason why she’s such a good teacher. She learned this sport from the bottom up, step by step.

Do you know some people who are very talented riders but aren’t very good teachers? Talented riders don’t always make good teachers because they didn’t necessarily learn step by step by step—the slow way. They didn’t necessarily need to realize what they were doing sequentially. They may never have had to hammer out the details in an intellectual way. The best teachers have gone through the process themselves. They have made mistakes, and they understand the process, the sequence, and the pitfalls.

In addition to the dressage tests, the Training Scale, also known as the Pyramid of Training, guides us in the sequential training of horses (fig. 11.2). This Training Scale describes the *qualities* that should be present as the horse does the exercises through the levels. For example,

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the horse at Training Level should maintain good *rhythm*, he should be *supple* and *relaxed*, and he should accept *contact* with the bit. When you combine the qualities of the Training Scale with the exercises in each of the dressage levels, you have a pretty accurate guide for how your horse should be trained sequentially.

Going back to those dressage tests, each level has a “Purpose,” which is printed on the front of the test. And the purposes show how the qualities of the Training Scale should evolve ideally within each level. In the Appendix, you can read about the purposes of each level (see p. 197). Always keep the purpose in mind when you’re competing. It’s good to know what you’re supposed to be proving—not only to the judge but to your horse, too.

- **{11.2}** The Training Scale, also known as the Pyramid of Training sequentially describes the qualities that trainers should work on when developing their horses. It is every trainer’s bible. (See also the official USDF rendition of the illustration on p. 198.)