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## Week Three

This week the horses seem comfortable enough in the side reins that I can begin to try to shape their neck a little. With a little more contact, the stiff side becomes apparent—the fights against yielding to the rein pressure in that direction, often pulling against the rein so hard he bends in the opposite direction. We are beginning to address that lateral asymmetry I mentioned on p. 33. With a little more contact we also see where the horse wants to carry his neck naturally: is the profile too low, too high, too short, too long? Of course in the beginning, since we are starting with very little rein pressure, the neck will usually be too long.

Many journeyman horsemen realize that controlling the neck of the horses is a key to controlling the horse, and so there is a myriad of systems and equipment designed to prevent the neck from doing one thing or another—for example, draw reins can prevent the neck from elevating. The problem with many of these systems is that they isolate the neck and forget about its important connections with the body of the horse. Training methodologies that keep the neck low, as I have already said, overburden the forehand, putting even more weight on the front legs, which are already disproportionately loaded. They tend to stretch the back and leave the

hindquarters “unweighted” and trailing out behind the body. A stretched muscle is not necessarily a strong muscle. Often though, in spite of what a lot of trainers will tell you, the greatest objective of systems and devices like these is not physical, but psychological—it is more about getting the horse to be submissive than about improving balance and movement.

### ADVANTAGES OF THE CLASSICAL SYSTEM

I think there are two great advantages in the classical system of breaking in young horses with a longeing program before ever mounting them. The first is that the horses are worked in a controlled environment, which is specifically designed to be safe and confidence-building. Our round pen is well constructed, in a quiet part of the farm, close to the barn. Although I prefer natural footing in all the other riding arenas, in the round pen we have rubber. It is slightly cambered so there is a mild slope up toward the fence boards, but the footing is level and consistent. If a young horse makes a mistake during one of his early “airs above the ground,” and even if he falls down, the surface is forgiving. In the first weeks of training we won’t be hacking across an uneven field where one of my neighbors’ dogs can come chasing us, nipping at our heels. I won’t get caught in a herd of stampeding deer on one of the bri-

dle paths or trails around the farm. When the young horse is not distracted, when he is comfortable and not concerned about his safety, it is amazing how he can focus on you and how quickly he can learn.

The second great advantage is that longeing the horse in early training reduces injury risk and promotes overall soundness. This system is based on proven biomechanical principles and emphasizes proper fundamentals. You don't teach one type of body response, and then a year later, go after a whole different use of the horse's muscles. The classic system we abide by in our program is carefully layered.

We know from biomechanical experiments that at the highest levels of collection, the horse needs to demonstrate *bascule*—his body rounded in an arc. He must lift his forehand with the muscles of his hindquarters and back. The neck has to be strong and positioned in an extending arch that connects to the back so the horse's topline becomes one continuous lever. (I discuss this at great length in my book *A Search for Collection*.) The hind legs need to become strong and develop elements of carrying power, not only propulsion as required by a racehorse.

The classical system applies centuries of scientific information to the development of the horse's movement. We know what muscles are involved in collection, so we start to

activate them early and correct for defects in form that could limit a dressage athlete or artist's career later on. When attention is paid in the beginning, it is so much easier as time goes on.

### FIRST BATHS

This week, aside from continuing to adjust the side reins during longe work, the horses are introduced to baths. As they finish work, in the middle of the week, instead of going back to the grooming stall to be untacked, we take them directly into the wash stall. One of us stands at the head of the horse—we don't use the cross-ties at first. The feeling of water running from the hose will frighten some of them, and they might charge out of the wash stall, so we give ourselves a little room to maneuver.

We take the horse's tack off and bring the hose over. At this stage in my career I think I could open a museum dedicated to hose nozzles. I must have gone through as large and varied a collection as anyone in America. Some spray too softly to remove caked-on mud; some have a spray that is too fine and prickly and irritates the horse around his face. We now use simple brass ones that wear out too quickly, but when opened all the way have good power and yet can be gradually closed to a trickle for the horse's face.

So on Wednesday, the four young horses receive the first of countless baths in their life. We have the luxury of warm water, and it makes a difference. I turn it on slowly, make sure it is warm, and patting the horse, let him feel the lightest spray around his feet and slowly work my way up the body, deflecting the direct spray against the back of my hand. During the first bath I just stroke the horse's head with the nozzle shut off, and then follow that with the smallest of trickles. After a few sessions, all our horses stand still and keep their head down so we can wash it with a pretty good stream of water. You may think ensuring this detail is bordering on minutiae, but when horses learn to throw their head up every time you wash them, you are in for a lifetime of secondary showers, water running down your arm, soaked clothing, broken cross-ties, and dirt under the crownpiece of halters and bridles (since you won't manage to properly clean your horse).

Wednesday is a busy day, and when I finish Escarpa's lesson, Andrea is riding another horse, and Coral, our intern, is busy. So I take Escarpa into the wash stall myself. I am surprised how quiet he is, and continue the process—he lets me give him an entire bath, even his head, standing quietly like an old show horse. Escarpa is impressing me more each day, not only with his scope and movement, but with his mind.

Corsana and Elsa are also good, although Elsa, being Delirio's baby, nips me on my arm to register her displeasure—I'll have to keep an eye on that. Kara has more opinions than any of the other three. She is not the least bit afraid, but I think she is beginning to see that "school" is different than her former life, and now people seem to give a lot of orders.

During a lot of this early training we use treats as rewards. Some horses take treats and remain polite, but others become obsessed and the treats do more harm than good. The horse gets distracted, leans on the cross-ties, tries to paw—it really depends on the horse. In a busy commercial training stable it may well be best to save the giving of treats for when you take the horse back to his stall.



## Weeks Four and Five

The fall weather has been mild—we haven't had a major frost, and we are still way up on rainfall. The wet weather seems to come in waves but holds off while we are working the young horses, and so far, the footing is doing well. It won't be long before we are forced to work in the indoor riding school, but every day outside gets us a little further along before we ask for the next layer of concentration from the group.

## BLANKETS

This week we blanket the horses for the first time. We keep them warm to limit hair growth; when they grow too much hair, it takes too long to cool them out as winter comes on. We don't want to clip them yet; first they need to learn how to wear "clothes."

Midweek, one by one as they finish their work session, we fit them with light sheets. These four young horses must know I am writing about them because each one let us put the sheet on and returned to his or her stall without fuss.

At the end of the week, no one has ripped his or her sheet to shreds, or become tangled by stepping through the straps, or been found in the morning wearing the sheet like a bib, completely off the body and just hanging round the neck. These four wear their clothes like seasoned performance horses. This is not normal—we deliberately keep a bunch of older sheets for this purpose because usually the young horses destroy a few until they get used to wearing them. We often have to spray the buckles with those foul-tasting commercial sprays that discourage chewing. Sooner or later, the horses get over it and wearing clothes becomes one more step toward civilization.

Blanketing is a necessary art form, depending on the climate your horse lives in.

The health of the horse depends on being kept clean and drying quickly and thoroughly after workouts. In addition, it is important to have the right combination of sheets for travel, so the horse doesn't get stiff from drafts or overheat. If you feel that blanketing in the cold weather is unnecessary because your horse doesn't sweat, neither you nor your horse is working hard enough.

It is clear horses learn by observing other horses. It may be we're having less trouble with blanketing because, as I have said, we bring the young horses in for a month prior to beginning breaking in. Although there is no formal training going on, they still learn things by observing the routine. Andrea mentioned to me that when she first dragged one of the older horse's blankets past the stall of the one of the young horses, the youngster flew to the back of the stall, but as it was seen that all the other horses calmly accept blankets and drying sheets and coolers, it became a nonissue. This year, with Kara, Escarpa, Elsa, and Corsana, it is uneventful—and not expensive.

## CORSANA

Corsana is a model student so far. If I only write about Corsana, my readers would likely get angry. There is nothing more frustrating than to look to a riding book for help with a

*Corsana in Week Four, when we adjust the side reins, here a little low, but she has the correct bend and has been easy to train thus far (A).*

*Even more so the model student—comfortable in the side reins, nice flexion, accepting the bit (B).*

*And cantering after a month of training (C).*

*The shape she shows here is almost finished—there won't be much adjusting of the side reins. From now on work will center on "cementing" the head carriage and practicing transitions to build the proper musculature for riding.*





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problem you are having, only to find a perfect example: “Ah, the flying change. No problem. Put your horse in counter-canter, collect up as you approach the corner, and ask for the flying change near the corner. The horse will want to change back onto the true lead, and there you go, a perfect change” (and no doubt with perfect photographs to illustrate). “Regular” horses don’t seem to go like that. I have enough experience to relish the calm waters in training, but when the weather changes, you have to keep coming back—calm, resolute, but creative.

In any case, Corsana seems relatively even in the reins, she is a little stiffer to the left but I shortened up the left side rein to encourage a little more bend, and she seemed to find it easy. It will take a long time to perfect her balance, but it isn’t a source of frustration. Her neck shape already is very close to where I would like it. So most of the work now is to “cement” that shape and make her stronger as we get her ready to carry the weight of the rider.

We practice trot-to-canter and canter-to-trot transitions, ending—when the young horses are less keen—with some trot-to-walk transitions. The walk, oddly enough, is the most difficult gait for the young horses when in the side reins. You will often see them lock up against the side reins and start to move in a stiff kind of Spanish walk. They can get claustrophobic, so we keep the walk segments short

and have the whip ready to make them go forward when they start to look like they are freezing up. Each day we increase a few more steps of the walk and try to keep the horses out on the circle along the rail until we ask them to stop or to come in in preparation to change rein. It is important to avoid becoming “trapped” against the wall of the round pen when switching direction.

#### KARA

Kara is unflappable but also the most willful of the group. She doesn’t want to surrender to the flexion at the poll, and she doesn’t want to bend to the left. My feeling is that she is quite athletic and this work is not physically difficult, but she is used to being the boss around the other horses, and her comfort and allegiance with humans have long led to perks—like praise and extra stroking. She is now probably confused because humans have never really made her work before or caused her much discomfort. So, this week she is above the bit a lot, twisting her neck, always looking for a way out instead of yielding. By the end of the week I think I can see moments where she comes into the correct shape.

It is really important that the trainer knows how to both set boundaries and uphold them. This is pretty basic psychology, but even