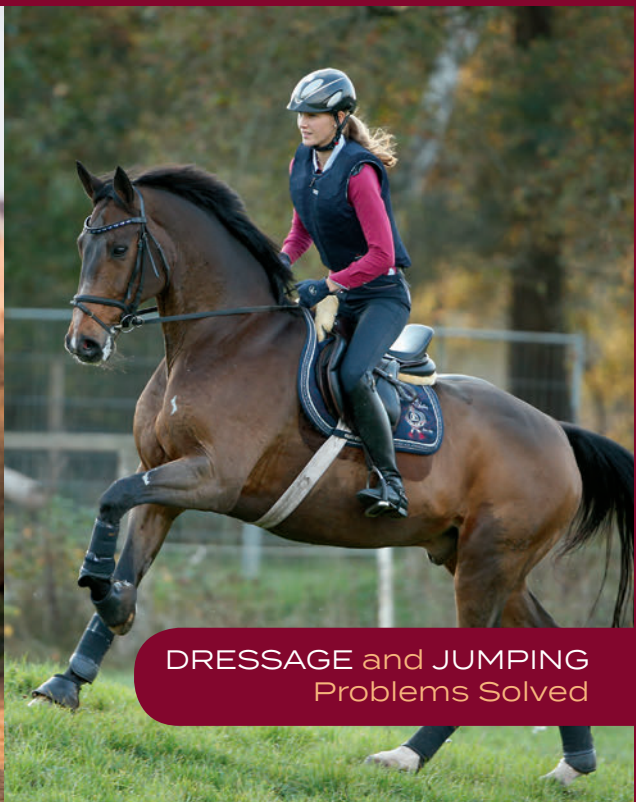




DOZENS
of Rider Questions
— Answered —

RIDE BETTER WITH CHRISTOPH HESS



DRESSAGE and JUMPING
Problems Solved

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Light in the Poll—A Challenge

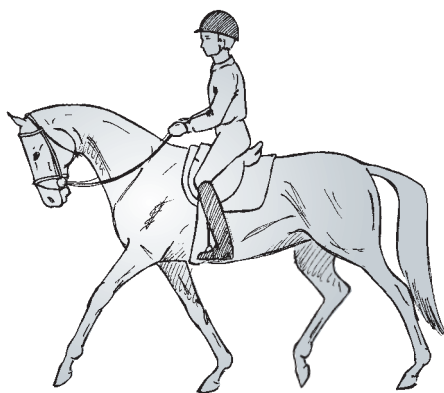
My Thoroughbred-type seven-year-old gelding has been very light in the poll from the beginning. It took a long time before he would consistently accept contact. It was most difficult at the walk. Today, I continue to have this problem during transitions from trot to walk and walk to halt. When I close my hand, he sometimes does not respond with a downward transition, but instead just makes his neck shorter, coming behind the vertical as he does so, and continues without changing his tempo. When this happens, it feels as if my hands are made of rubber. What can I do so that he better accepts the transitions?

This is a challenge that many riders have with their “modern bred” horses. Today, the horses are often so light in the poll that it is difficult for the rider to influence the horse to maintain a good stretch—through his whole body! Certainly, there’s a great danger of the horse whose head is set “lightly” on his neck getting tight in his neck during transitions, especially when the rider’s rein aids are not as refined as they need to be.

Was the Past Really Better?

I come from a generation of riders who often had problems getting our horses to travel with correct contact. Most of the horses available to us had real problems achieving supple movement through their whole bodies, from back to front.

I. General Challenges in Dressage Work



The horse is traveling behind the bit, not stepping up from back to front or seeking the bit.

Therefore, they also had difficulties “truly yielding” through the poll. I have to admit that before I knew better, I once spent months trying to get a Hanoverian mare to yield through her poll when ridden. At the time I trained alone at my own stables and only received instruction once or twice a week. So, I tried to bring the horse to the correct contact through the application of non-yielding (no, in my case, backward-oriented) rein aids. Of course, this had only the opposite effect of what I wanted. The horse got stronger and stronger (especially in the muscles along the bottom of her neck) and just worked against me more and more. In this phase of my riding life, I wished for a horse that was as light in the contact as your six-year-old gelding. At the time, this type of horse was definitely the exception—today, they are the rule.

So, not everything was better in the past and the riding was certainly not always better. At the time, I made so many mistakes in the training of this horse because I was primarily a “hand-oriented” rider and tried to solve the problem in the only way I knew how. Clearly, it was the wrong approach.

“Light in the Poll”—A Riding Challenge

For you as a rider, the challenge posed by your gelding is a special one. You must learn to sit on your horse in a very supple and balanced manner. Your seat must be completely independent from your hand. As soon as you use the reins to balance in the saddle—maybe even without realizing it—you will cause the horse to get tight and short in his neck and drop behind the contact. In turn, this prevents him from using his neck in the way he needs to in order to balance. Therefore, it’s important your gelding is consistently seeking the contact—and that goes for all three gaits as well as transitions on both straight and bending lines.

With horses that tend to “get light in the poll,” riders must pay special attention to training their own seat. With “old German-type horses,” I could “hold onto” the reins, without the negative effect of the horse getting too tight through his neck, but in your case, it’s a true riding challenge that will cause further difficulties. For you, the ability to follow your gelding’s movement requires special attention.

Transitions—the Elixir of Good Riding

Lighter-bred Warmblood horses and Thoroughbred types that are light in the poll can be compared to a sports car with lots of power. Drivers of this type of car must be well trained in order to handle it safely. The same applies to you: your gelding requires you to apply sensitive, well-coordinated aids.

As in many similar situations, your horse’s problem will only improve when

you are able to truly ride the transitions, meaning to be able to use your all-important driving aids. If you ride the transitions from your hand, your horse will continue to get tight, provided that you are not utilizing your driving aids during the transitions. During transitions from trot to walk and from walk to halt, you need to have the feeling that you are riding into the transition, so that you are actually “beginning” the walk or the halt. At no point should you have the feeling that you are “ending” the trot or the walk. In this case, you have a false picture of the movement in mind, which you are unconsciously executing, riding more with your hands “doing the work.” Via your reins, you’ll operate the bit incorrectly in the horse’s mouth. Because of this, your horse’s natural flight instinct will be triggered.

This leads to a different reaction in every horse—in your case, the horse is getting tight and short in his neck, coming behind the vertical. The vicious circle—too much hand in the transitions and, as a result, too little application of the driving aids—will only be broken when you execute your driving aids more effectively through the transition.

The more supple your horse is in the transitions, the more he will “wait” for your driving aids and the more he will seek the contact with your hand. As a result, the less he will get tight in the neck. An even stretch into your hands must be your clear goal. Here, you cannot allow any compromise—even when this process takes a lot of time. This is time well spent! Once your horse is willing to stretch into your hand, it will be a pleasure to ride your lighter-bred gelding as he comes with lots of forward impulsion and has the “juice” that is so desirable in sport horses.

This manner of riding transitions can be optimized even further. Hence, the next tip.

Ride the Transition from Shoulder-In

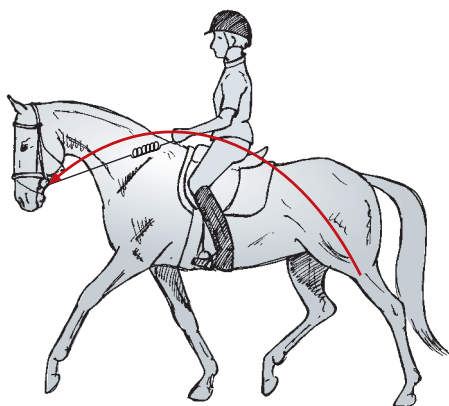
Before you attempt whatever transition you are aiming for, you should first leg-yield your horse on bending and straight lines in order to make certain that your horse is accepting and responding with sensitivity to your sideways-driving leg aid in both directions.

Over time, you can increase the degree of positioning and develop shoulder-in on the bending lines. (Note: this means bringing the forehand to the inside track, not allowing the hindquarters to drift to the outside.) This exercise is also helpful with the intermediary step of shoulder-fore, in order to allow you to “reach” your horse. Your gelding must accept your inside leg aid without reservation and you should have the feeling that you are driving him from your inside leg to your outside rein. In this instance, the horse’s inside hind will step up more toward his center of gravity and generate a “positive pressure” on the outside rein. Here, it’s important that your outside leg is positioned slightly behind the girth (in a guarding position) and that you weight your inside seat bone; meaning, you place more weight on this side of your seat and also drive your inside seat bone toward the front of your saddle.

You must practice the shoulder-fore, or shoulder-in respectively, in both directions. During this exercise, you’ll develop the feeling that you have more influence over the horse and that you’re now able to lengthen and shorten the strides.

The more you “control” your horse through this exercise, the easier it will

I. General Challenges in Dressage Work



Through appropriate driving and a good following seat, the rider encourages the horse to step up actively from behind and move into the feather-light contact.

become to ride harmonious transitions, where you are able to drive the horse more into the transitions. When you achieve the feeling of having the horse in front of you during the shoulder-fore or shoulder-in, you can already ride the transition while in shoulder-fore/in and remain in shoulder-fore/in after the transition is completed. As you are having problems in the transition between trot and walk and walk and halt, I recommend you first ride this exercise between canter and trot, as you can also bring the shoulder of the horse slightly to the inside at the canter. In this case, you'll be giving approximately the same aids as in the transition from walk to halt.

Over time, your horse will continue to improve in the downward transitions at the slower gaits, so long as you practice this exercise with consistency. As you do so, it must be your goal that you give in the transition, yes, even getting to the point of momentary release of contact. Over time, the horse will stretch to the contact more and more and seek the bit, no longer getting tight in the neck. Of course, it goes

without saying, that you “guide” this process from your hands and have the feeling that you are merely “listening in closely” to the horse’s mouth with your rein aids. Eventually, this kind of riding will generate a kind of “feeling of well-being” for your horse because his neck muscles will stretch, and as a result, his back will lift. Therefore, over time, the horse will come to always seek this position, which allows him to better balance due to the improved stretch through neck and body. The transitions in shoulder-fore must be consistently repeated, hundreds of times, without you ever one single time taking up the reins. This consistent approach is important in order for your horse to truly understand, to trust you, and for him not to become insecure because of your inconsistent application of rein aids.

Last Word

Horses that get too light in the poll are a riding challenge of the new millennium. For us as riders, it means that we need to make our own education as riders the highest priority. A horse too light in the poll can only be ridden correctly when we are able to follow his movement with suppleness and balance—and when our seat is independent from our hands. As soon as we (unconsciously) “hold on” with the reins, even the slightest bit in order to find our balance in the saddle, this horse will get tight in the neck and not seek the bit with an open angle at the throatlatch (see p. 28 for an illustration).

Backward—Never with Pressure

My four-and-a-half-year-old gelding all-around refuses to back up. I have already tried to work on this from the ground and with the help of a whip, as well as in the saddle with a helper on the ground. My gelding plants his feet and won't take one step backward.

Backing up is an exercise that the rider must make “palatable” for the horse. Horses learn to back up most easily when it's developed from forward.

At four-and-a-half, your gelding is still a true youngster, a green horse, and as the rider you should not yet expect too much. We have seen, over and over again, the same problem at competitions that you are describing with your gelding. Therefore, this exercise has been removed from the lower levels and from tests for young horses. Regardless, you should practice backing up. It will still be required at higher levels.

Reason and Purpose for Backing Up

With the rein-back, we are checking the horse's obedience. When training more advanced horses, it lends itself to checking and improving their *durchlässigkeit* and collection. Thereby, rein-back is an exercise for and of collection. In this respect, it has a high gymnastic value for older, more highly trained horses and, therefore, cannot be absent from

training. Horses that have problems with the rein-back are demonstrating that there are fundamental training issues at hand. When there is ongoing resistance to backing up, it is important to eliminate soundness problems through an examination by your veterinarian, osteopath, and/or physiotherapist!

Prerequisite Obedience

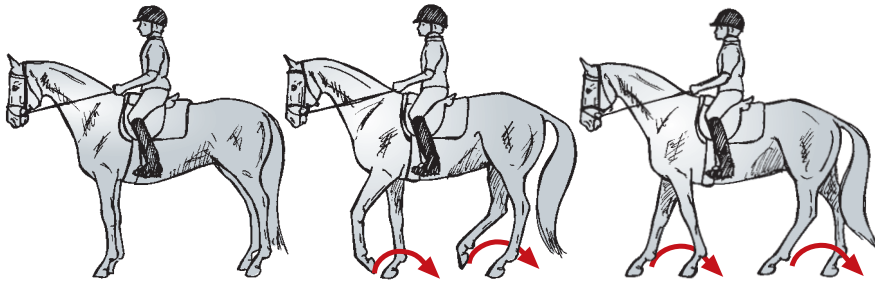
You should introduce backing up to a young horse only after his basic obedience is established. Here's a general rule: practicing the rein-back cannot begin too late, but can begin too soon. Therefore, your guiding principle should be to begin carefully and to make backing up “palatable”—in the most literal sense of the word—for the horse. Resistance must be avoided. In fact, backing up must be “fun for the horse;” he must like “stepping backward.”

The horse can be prepared during groundwork without a rider. From my experience, I can highly recommend this approach to you.

Backing Up in Practice

During the backward steps, the rider should have the feeling of “riding the horse back”—not “pulling the horse back” (which we see all too often). Therefore, a motto for practice is as follows: ride every transition “with feel,” and if possible, without influence of the hand.

Make supple transitions to the halt, first from the walk and later from the trot.



The rein-back.

During the transitions, you must be able to drive the horse forward and have the feeling of “riding into” the halt.

When the halt is working well, it makes sense to ask for a turn-on-the-forehand. (Pay attention: the horse must halt on the second arena track here.) The prerequisite for this is confirmed feel and response to the inside leg. This can be confirmed through previous leg-yielding.

If the turn-on-the-forehand works, you should ask for a single step backward out of the turn-on-the-forehand. For the horse, it is often easier to step backward out of a turn (which is the case with turn-on-the-forehand).

If the single step works out well, praise the horse and when applicable, reward him with a sugar cube or similar treat.

I also recommend using a helper on the ground. If any problems do occur, it's imperative that you never get rough with any of your aids. Most of the time, the horse has simply not understood what you are asking and, therefore, resists this exercise!

If, during this procedure, the horse leans against the back up—meaning he “plants his feet”—then, the exercise must be ended immediately. In the end, this condition just can't be allowed to take place as the rider is powerless when the horse leans against the back up. The horse

is always stronger than the rider, and with the rein-back, the horse can prove this to his rider over the long term. Eventually, the rider will realize her physical and mental powerlessness; yes, her inferiority to the horse.

Last Word

A rider who believes she can convince her horse to back up against his will is 100 percent wrong in her approach to his training. Once a horse has been ruined in this way, it will require time and incremental steps to correct. Therefore, when training a horse to back up, proceeding with caution is the “mother of all wisdom.” If this principle is violated, the rider will have a major problem, which requires reintroducing this exercise in such a way as to make it “palatable.”