

Finally...Life Beyond the Classical Pyramid and Scales of Training

The TRAINING SPIRAL



TRADITIONAL METHODS
REIMAGINED
FOR THE 21ST-CENTURY
HORSE AND RIDER



SUE GRICE

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The Training Spiral: The Scales of Training Remodeled

2 _____

Although the traditional pyramid concept of the Scales of Training clearly has a place within equestrianism, it is my contention that it does not provide the most helpful framework for applying the elements of the Scales. In the following pages I would like to propose a different model—a *Training Spiral*.

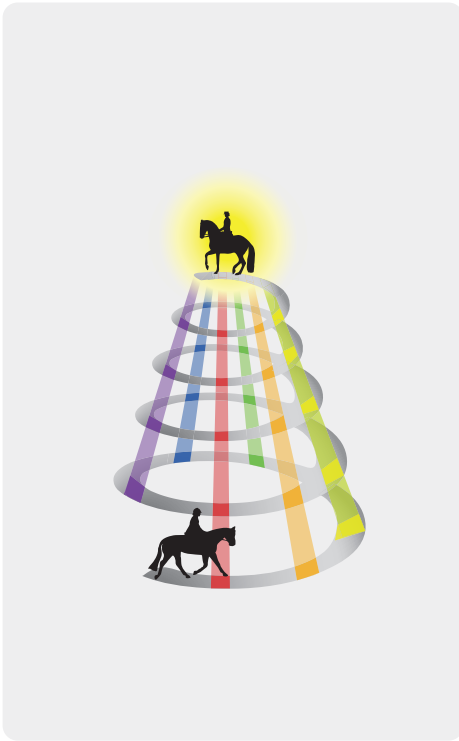
Before going any further, consider for a moment what the word "scale" actually means. It has various meanings in the English language, including:

- A set of marks or numbers used to measure the size or level of something.
- The relation between the real size of something and its size on a map or model.
- The relative level or extent of something.

★ COLOR KEY

RHYTHM
SUPPLENESS
CONTACT
IMPULSION
STRAIGHTNESS
COLLECTION

- A machine or device for weighing people or things.
- A set of musical notes played in ascending or descending order.
- To climb something steep, such as a mountain or ladder.



2.1

The conceptual model of the Training Spiral. Each of the different colors represents a different element of the six Scales of Training. At the bottom, you can see a horse just starting his training and at the top, a horse who has had much training. ▲

While some of these meanings may appear irrelevant to training horses, all are worth a little thought. Most obviously, the idea of “scaling” something steep via a series of steps fits well with the pyramid structure set out in the last chapter. The notion of a scale as a means of measuring something, such as progress or attainment, also seems appropriate. If you open a thesaurus and look up synonyms for the word “scales,” you will find some more interesting terms: *balances, gauges, measures, gradations, hierarchies, tiers*.

In my view, the scales used in training a horse should be more like the gentle gradations or tiers of a spiral than a series of steps leading straight up from the base to the peak of a pyramid. The idea of “scales” of music—often undertaken as a practice exercise—is also very suggestive. The spiral model that I propose is based upon the traditional Scales of Training but enables a more gradual progression from one tier to the next, as the horse’s training proceeds.

The basic idea of the Training Spiral is that you can progress through all the

elements of the Scales in order (Rhythm, Suppleness, Contact, Impulsion, Straightness, Collection), without having to *perfect* each one before attempting the next. Instead, each element is completed to the degree that the horse can manage at his given level of training. As soon as one *cycle* of this training—one tier of the spiral—is completed, the next can begin—only in this new cycle (Tier 2), the degree of difficulty or quality expected is increased. This process will be explained in more detail, beginning on p. 33, but the

basic concept of the spiral shape is shown in Figure 2.2.

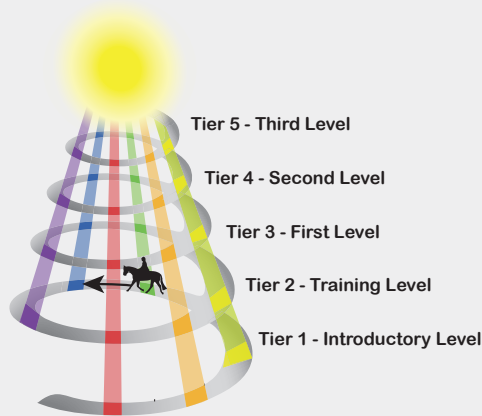
Riders of all levels and with different aims and ambitions can utilize the Training Spiral as it is applicable to anyone seeking to improve their horse's way of going, even if they are not aiming as high as Grand Prix and even if they focus on a horse sport other than dressage. The Training Spiral can be applied over many different time frames—for example, over a five-minute section of a single training session, or over the period of a week's



2.2

A Training Spiral showing how a horse at Introductory Level may start at Tier 1, working on Rhythm (indicated as the red band), and progress up the tiers of the Spiral as he works toward Third Level. At Third Level, he may have completed five tiers on this Spiral, which would have likely taken him several years to complete. ▲

A



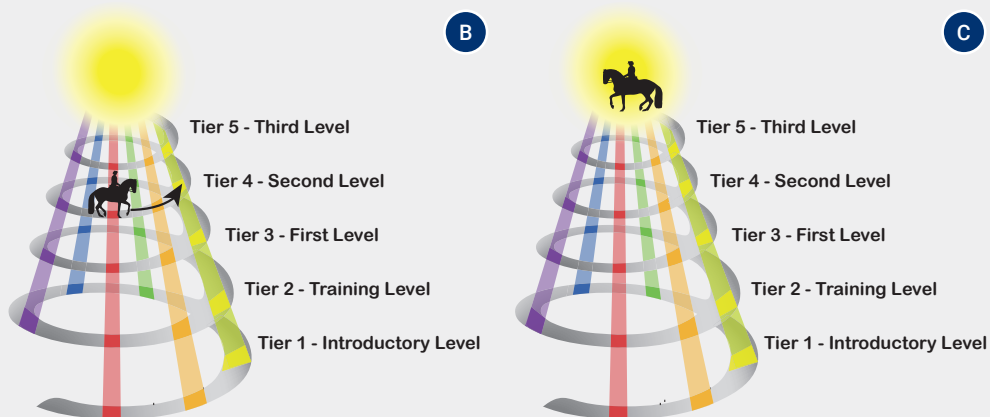
2.3 A-C

In Figure (A) you can see how our Introductory Level horse from Figure 2.2 is still on the first tier of the Spiral but has moved on to working on Impulsion (indicated as the green band). Even further on in his education (B), the horse is at Second Level in his training and the fourth tier of the spiral. The horse is now working on Rhythm again (indicated by the red band), but at a much higher level than when on previous tiers. At this level it is expected that the Rhythm is maintained while performing more challenging exercises. Finally, the horse reaches Tier 5 of the Spiral, and Third Level! ▲

training, or over the course of months of training. The application of the Spiral over these different time scales is explained in chapter 3 (p. 34), but for now, I will demonstrate how it may be applied over a time scale of several years, assuming a horse is starting at Introductory Level and progressing to Third Level (fig. 2.2).

In the Spiral, each tier represents the progression of the horse to his next level of training. In our current example, the first tier represents the horse's journey through Introductory Level, the second tier his journey through Training Level, the third tier his journey through First Level, and so on until he is at the "top" of the Spiral, which in this case is Third Level.

Here we can see how the horse begins at the bottom of the Spiral at Introductory Level (see fig. 2.2) and, as his training progresses, he moves up the tiers of the



spiral (figs. 2.3 A–C), improving each of the six elements of the scales of training in the following order (Rhythm, Suppleness, Contact, Impulsion, Straightness, Collection) to an *acceptable degree for the stage the horse is training at*, before progressing to the next tier. There he will *again* work to improve each of the six elements (in order), but this time to a higher degree of quality than he did in the previous tier. This process is repeated again and again as the horse gradually improves and progresses by focusing on each of the elements of the Scales of Training, one at a time, and at an appropriate degree of difficulty for his level. In the case of the Introductory Level horse, each tier might take perhaps a year or so to establish to a satisfactory standard before progressing on to the next tier as horse and rider progress to Third Level.

To repeat, at each level of the Spiral, the horse should be able to achieve a degree of Rhythm, Suppleness, Contact, Impulsion, Straightness, and Collection *appropriate for the horse's stage of training*. Obviously, the degree of difficulty or quality expected is different at each level. For example, the degree of Collection shown by a horse at the Introductory Level may simply be that he is no longer “diving” onto his forehead, whereas when a horse is trained to a more advanced level, such as Grand Prix, you expect to see a much higher degree of Collection—for example, the ability to perform passage and piaffe (fig. 2.4). The sequences of photographs on these pages demonstrate how this process of becoming more collected is an incremental development *throughout* the horse's training and not just something that is only relevant to horses at an advanced stage of

Using Transitions

6

There are many individual exercises that we can perform in training, and these can be used in several different ways, depending on the type of horse and the stage of training. Suffice it to say that the combinations of exercises are limitless. The aim of this book is not to provide lots of examples of such exercises, but rather to provide a concept that explains how any one exercise may be used in different ways for the different elements and levels of training.

In order to get a better understanding of this idea, let's look at how it applies to one type of exercise in particular: those involving the transitions between gaits and paces. Apart from anything else, I want to show how a rider can use these transitions to identify where she and her horse are in their training—and how to help develop the horse further.



★ *Analyzing the Elements in Transitions*

To start, let's look at a simple trot-to-walk transition. This is something that almost all riders and horses can manage—the only exceptions being the most novice of riders and perhaps horses at the very start of their training career.

How can we judge the quality of a trot-to-walk transition using the elements of the Scales of Training? What are the questions to ask and the most common problems to arise?

Rhythm

Does the horse maintain a good clear Rhythm before and after the transition?

A good Rhythm makes the transition look and feel smooth and fluid, with the horse traveling forward in a relaxed way. The rhythm change (in this case, from the

6.1 A & B

During this trot-to-walk transition, the horse in Photo (A) has tensed up and lost his relaxation, causing him to shorten his stride and jog from the trot to the walk. The young horse in Photo (B) has dropped from trot directly to halt when being asked to walk, which also causes a loss of the desired Rhythm in the walk. ▲

two beats of trot to the four beats of walk) should appear seamless.

Common Problems

The horse often goes from a trot to a walk, but then jogs a step or two before finally finding a clear walk beat (fig. 6.1 A). This can indicate a lack of relaxation. On the other hand, sometimes the horse will go from trot to halt before moving off into

walk (fig. 6.1 B). This lack of relaxation and forwardness will result in a lack of Rhythm directly before or after the transition.

Suppleness

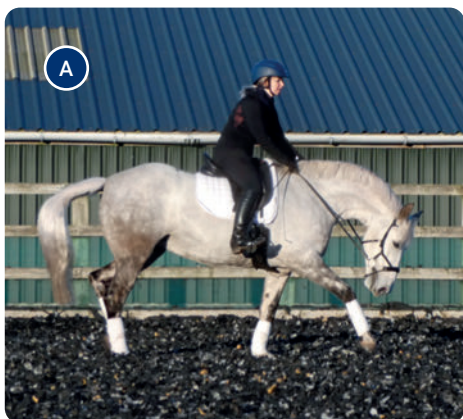
Does the Suppleness in the horse remain the same through the transition?

Ideally, the horse will be able to maintain the Suppleness in his muscles through the transition from one pace to the next.



6.2

As this horse is performing a trot-to-canter transition, you see how he loses his suppleness and becomes stiff over his back and his neck is raised up. ▲



Common Problems

The horse may tighten in his body as he performs the transition, which will present in his neck becoming stiff and raised up (fig. 6.2). Any kind of bracing from the horse is likely to cause the transition to become jerky or abrupt, although the Rhythm before and after may remain true.

Contact

Does the horse maintain a nice feel on the rein, taking the rider's hand gently forward? Does he respond to signals through the rein and body that prepare him for the transition? Does he stay forward, soft, and accepting throughout the transition?

Ideally, the horse should not get heavier or tighter, or block against the rein contact, when performing a transition. This applies likewise to the seat and leg aids that the rider applies.

6.3 A & B

The horse in Photo (A) is clearly taking hold of the reins and diving through the contact to the extent that the reins have even pulled the rider forward out of the saddle. In contrast, the horse in Photo (B) has dropped the rein contact and is not taking the rider's hand forward at all. ▲

Exercise Development —The Progressive Vision

7

IN this chapter, we will look at how individual exercises can be developed from a very basic foundation up to the Grand Prix Level.

The emphasis here is not on showing you 101 exercises that can be used in your training sessions, nor is it about providing a detailed explanation of how to train or ride each of these exercises. Rather, the aim is to show how you can gradually increase the difficulty of any given exercise in order to advance your horse's training in a progressive way.

There are, of course, many different exercises and combinations of exercises that can be used for this purpose, and which of these are most appropriate will depend upon the horse's strengths and weaknesses as well as his level of training. More specifically, it will also depend on what qualities the rider is aiming to develop in the horse at any particular time.

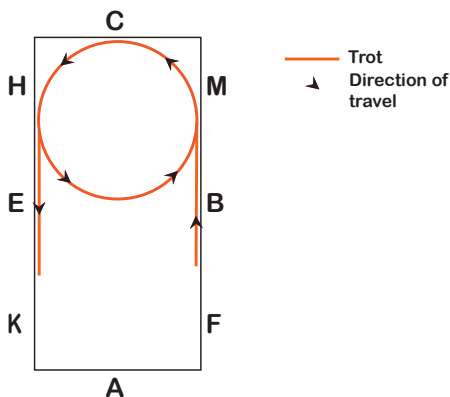
To benefit from the Training Spiral, riders should always be looking beyond their current level and toward the next steps in their own and their horse's training. Only by doing so, will they come to a full understanding of the level at which they are currently working and how it provides a foundation for future progress. Without a clear vision of how to proceed up the Spiral, there is a danger of stagnation at any point.

In my work, I often meet riders who have put “limits” on themselves and their horses, believing that they are only capable of progress up to a certain level. Ironically, this self-limiting is the one thing that prevents them from progressing further. What they need is a good coach who does not reinforce these supposed limits, but instead provides a clear, concrete vision of how to progress. Each progression, no matter how small, will take the rider and her horse further up the Training Spiral and prepare the way for the next advance. With time and effort, there really are no limits.

That said, nothing is more important than the welfare of the horse and we should always bear in mind the physical and mental strain we put on him when asking for a higher level of performance. This does not mean that a “non-conventional” dressage horse—such as a Traditional Gypsy Cob or a Quarter Horse, for example—is incapable of performing high-level dressage movements, such as canter pirouettes or piaffe. Far from it! But if his conformation is not conducive to these types of movement, you should take care not to over-ask the horse. It may be a much harder exercise for him than for a horse bred specifically for the job. Likewise, if you are considering a show jumper, there may well be limits as to how high a particular horse can jump, even with the very best training.

★ ***Progressive Exercise 1 – From Circle to Serpentine***

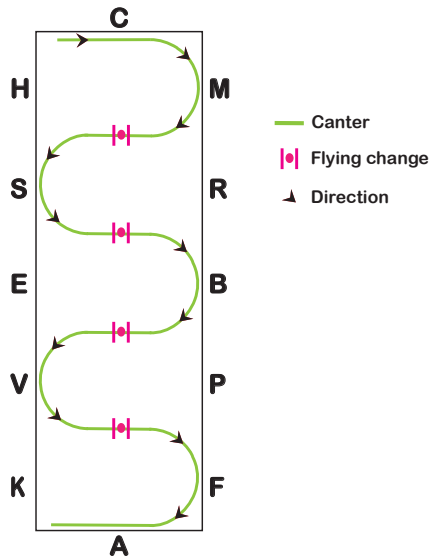
For our first example, let's look at how you can develop a very simple movement, the 20-meter circle, into a very advanced movement—the five-looped serpentine in canter with a flying change each time the horse crosses the centerline (figs. 7.1 and 7.2).



7.1

The 20-meter circle at C ridden in a 20-meter by 40-meter arena. ▲

Here the more advanced horse may well start his session with the basic 20-meter circle as part of his warm-up, then go through each of the stages described in the pages that follow before performing the five-looped serpentine. The younger or less experienced horse, however, may only achieve the first two or three movements I explain within one session, and it may take years of training before he is able to complete the most advanced stage. The key is applying the concept of the progressive nature of the Training Spiral,



7.2

A five-looped serpentine in canter with a flying change each time the horse crosses the centerline, ridden in a 20-meter by 60-meter arena. ▲



7.3

A horse on a 20-meter circle with a visualization of the circle superimposed to demonstrate the path the horse will take. ▲

but over an appropriate timescale that suits the horse's stage of training—and the rider's stage of training too.

Whatever the level, start by riding the simple 20-meter circle and checking that the horse is able to maintain all the elements of Rhythm, Suppleness, and Contact (and so on) while doing so (fig. 7.3). For a very novice horse, this, in itself, might be enough of a challenge.

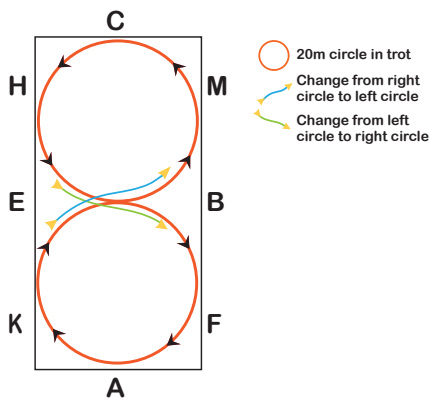
Once the horse is confident and able to complete the 20-meter circle in each direction, you could link two circles together to form a figure-eight exercise (figs. 7.4 A & B). Now the horse has the added difficulty of having to change the bend and the direction of travel. Various things can go wrong—for example, the horse can lose his balance if he changes direction before



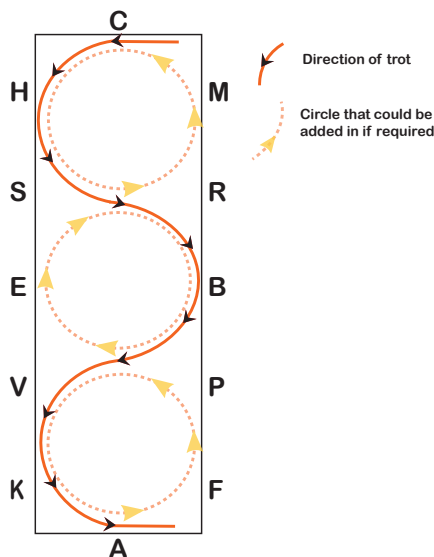
A

7.4 A & B

A figure eight (A) and how it can be ridden in the context of an arena (B). ▲



reshaping his body onto the new bend. In other words, he loses his Straightness or alignment with the direction of bend required. So, as with the 20-meter circle, this can be challenging enough for a very inexperienced horse or can be a very good warm-up or suppling exercise for a more advanced horse.



7.5

Three-looped serpentine ridden in a 20-meter by 60-meter arena showing how 20-meter circles can be added into the serpentine if needed. ▲

As the horse's training progresses and he shows that he can maintain a good quality throughout the movements, the difficulty can be increased by developing the exercise as follows:

Three-Looped Serpentine

These can include a circle within each loop, to allow the horse more time to establish the quality before moving on to the next change of direction (fig. 7.5). A higher degree of Suppleness is required from the horse in this exercise as the loops are smaller (when ridden in a short arena) and there are more changes of bend.

Figure Eight with Transitions Over the Centerline (X)

Once the horse is confident at performing a figure eight, the rider can also consider including transitions within the figure eight.

At the lower levels of training the transitions could be simply trot – walk – trot (fig. 7.6). For horses at Second Level and above, a simple change canter – walk – canter would be suitable (fig. 7.7). And for the more advanced horses, such as those training at Fourth Level and above, this could become a flying change. Of course, the transitions should only be incorporated into these exercises once they are well established.