



All exercises in walk increase the suppleness of the horse.

WALK: The Queen of Gaits

A classical approach to training the horse

By Colonel Christian Carde with Silke Rottermann
Photos by Silke Rottermann

Within Fance’s rich equestrian tradition, the walk has always deserved to be called the “queen of gaits” because of the benefits that both horse and rider can derive from this gait. The great François de Lubersac, a master from the legendary School of Versailles in the 18th century, recognized that in dressage training, the first gait in which to train is always the walk. Remarkably, de Lubersac, trained his horses *only* at the walk, and when he decided that they were ready, his horses were able to do everything at all gaits.

This means that if a horse is not able to do movements properly in the walk, one should not go on in his training to ask for the same movements in trot or canter (with the possible exception of riders who are very talented and experienced). For those riding in the French tradition, the walk is also essential in what we call “*faire la bouche*,” which means “getting the horse accustomed to the bit.” Once the *FEI Dressage Rules* stated that, “it is at the pace of walk that the imperfections of dressage are most evident.”

One advantage to training the walk is that the rider’s position can be quieter because it is a slower gait. This allows him to give aids as precisely as possible because he is able to get the best coordination of his movements. As a result, the walk is the gait of choice not only when teaching the horse something new but also in confirming and improving already trained movements.

Why then do many of today’s dressage riders reduce the walk to a means of

warming up the horse and allowing him a break from work? Some are apparently even afraid of riding too much walk! It’s possibly because of the riders’ tendency to practice only what is required in competition. That approach reduces the walk to an end instead of using its strong power as a means of improving the horse. This is a pity as chances are thrown away that improve the whole horse. Additionally, transitions within the walk (between collected, medium and extended walk) are required in dressage competition and they mercilessly reveal general training problems.

In this article, I will explain how the quality of the walk and the quality of the equitation are closely related. I will give you suggestions for working in walk to make your horse more available and supple and in the process, also improve his walk.

Goals of Working in the Walk

Exercises done in walk aim to make the horse more mobile, combat the natural lack of straightness and hence improve



Unexciting to watch, the halt is a spectacular touchstone for the correctness of a horse's training.

the balance and frame, leading to a higher degree of suppleness, which, in turn, results in better collection. The advantages one gets from this work will be beneficial later on when working in trot and canter—the gaits that are responsible for building up a horse's musculature. Working in walk is also very suitable to calm tense horses down. In our traditional French equitation we work a lot in walk, not only under saddle but also in-hand, to prepare and relax the horse before we continue with trot and canter work. Working in walk will improve the quality of the relationship between horse and rider, a determinant often underestimated and sacrificed in the quest for technical perfection.

All the lateral movements can first be executed in walk to familiarize the horse with the aids, the movement and the required balance. So walk is the ideal gait for learning. Additionally,

these positive effects are useful when the rider aims to confirm and refine movements he has already learned or to correct the horse.

Sometimes one can hear aversions against working horses in walk, such as that the horse loses impulsion. I want to be clear about what I mean by impulsion. In the German understanding, there's impulsion in trot and canter as there's a suspension phase in both. Not so in the walk. The latter is commonly regarded as impulsionless due to the fact that it lacks suspension. What I mean is the willingness of the horse to go forward any time the rider indicates it. It's something the French authors mention often, but it is not explicitly mentioned in the usual German literature.

General Considerations

All walk exercises either establish or increase the suppleness of the horse, most notably of his shoulders,

haunches and back. This happens through the use of both longitudinal and lateral exercises.

The most important precondition for effectively working in walk is riding with a soft and elastic contact, which is indispensable for obtaining a good collected walk in which most exercises need to be ridden. It is also important to be conscious that working in collected walk is rather exerting for the horse, which has consequences for the way you should structure the training sessions.

As a general rule:

- Do not prolong any exercise in length, but keep the quality high.
- If you have to use force to execute an exercise, the preparation was insufficient. Discontinue the exercise and try again.
- The more collection you ask for, the more you have to stretch the horse forward and downward afterward. Short sequences in collected walk



Working in-hand is also useful to make the horse active, responsive and mentally connected to you.

should alternate with stretching to allow the horse to relax and rest. This is important to maintain the horse's mental and physical integrity.

- Whatever you practice, there needs to be sufficient activity—not only for the sake of the training itself, but also as an indicator that the horse is attentive. A lazy, shuffling horse indicates that he's not listening to his rider, whereas a diligent horse does the opposite.

Establishing Proper Contact

The vital precondition to work in walk is proper contact, which is only possible if the horse is classically ridden from back to front.

To get such contact, one can at the very beginning ask for it while working in-hand. Then, at halt, teach the horse to yield correctly. But because there is no impulsion to channel in halt, the walk is the ideal gait to reestablish

energy afterward. The rider channels the energy from behind in balance.

In the walk, the risk for resistances is considerably lower and the chances for establishing a light, soft contact are considerably higher.

When you ask for contact, consider three things:

1. Don't push with your legs against a standing or even backward-pulling hand, as it is not logical for the horse and results only in a tight, tense neck.
2. You decide the tension of the reins and never the horse.
3. Never crank the noseband; rather, adjust it so the horse can open his mouth at least slightly, allowing him to remain relaxed.

Take the reins at a length with which you can feel your horse's mouth. Then close your fingers and fix your hand. Wait for your horse to yield with his lower jaw. In the exact moment he yields, you have to give by slightly

opening your fingers before you close them again and ask the horse to keep the contact that you want at that time.

Contact has a lot to do with a rider's tact and feeling and with keeping the horse active enough at all times. If there's more tension in the reins than activity flowing from behind, you start riding backward. Only when you have found the perfect balance between both in walk should you advance to the more-demanding trot and canter.

It's a total misconception of our day to assume that the tension of the reins and the degree of impulsion complement each other. This would mean that with progressive training, when the impulsion increases, the strength of the contact would also increase. But the complete opposite should be the case. Once the horse has accepted the concept of contact and becomes supple and balanced within his training, the impulsion increases.



When working in-hand, the horse learns to follow the rider's hand in any direction.

But the contact becomes lighter as the horse moves with a supple back and topline as well as in self-carriage.

On the other hand, it's a misconception that riding with lightness means riding with no contact. There must always be a "light and soft one" (see *FEI Dressage Rules 2014*, Article 417) between horse and rider.

The essence is that without focusing on a proper and soft contact as one component of proper equitation, work in walk will remain fruitless.

Transitions Within the Walk

Transitions within the walk are ideal to check the quality of your contact with the horse's mouth. In walk, there's a simple rule to avoid breaking the horse's rhythm: The length of the horse's

strides determine that of the neck.

Ideally, the horse has learned to follow the rider's hands. If I give my hand forward and down, the horse begins stretching forward and downward because he has learned to seek the bit. You can start with a collected walk and change to the extended. From there, go back into collection to practice the smoothness of the transitions. It's important that when you make the transition from collected into extended walk, you progressively give the reins and thus allow your horse to follow your hand. You always need to feel the contact because an extended walk is not a free walk.

By practicing these transitions, you'll feel that they become more fluid and the horse will open his strides as

soon as you open his neck. He will also maintain an even rhythm when you gradually pick up the reins to shorten the strides again. This can be accomplished when the rider is aware that, especially in walk, the contact is not reduced to just the horse's mouth but also includes the rider's hips and back. The rider needs to sense the rhythm in which the horse's back moves and bring his own in unison with it. Don't make the mistake of moving quicker than the horse as this will negatively influence the natural rhythm of his strides.

Positive Submission and Suppleness

Submission is a word that indicates something negative and, unfortunately,

it is sometimes interpreted in a bad way by forcing a horse to obey. But if one puts the partnership with a horse in the center of his equitation, the kind of submission we are talking about is a positive one gained by suppling the horse to an extent that he is moving in balance and, as a result, willingly executes what we ask him to do.

The following exercises give useful ways to improve this kind of positive submission and continuously work on increasing the horse's suppleness at the same time.

At first glance, the halt, the rein-back and the *Schaukel* (also known as the double rein-back) seem to be comparatively easy exercises. The first two are still part of our Grand Prix programs, whereas the *Schaukel* has long disappeared from it. The reality is that halt and rein-back are, more than some prefer, often sticking points for riders of the highest levels up to Grand Prix. The reason is that these movements pitilessly reveal the quality of training—that is, if a horse has faith in the rider's hands or not.

The Halt

This is a nonmovement I call “the beginning of collection” because a good halt is one in which the horse comes under with his hind legs. The consequence is that the horse reduces his support base, thereby evenly distributing his weight on all four legs, which should be placed parallel to each other. Sometimes you see a horse put his hindquarters out or one leg to the side, which in either case is significant proof of insufficient balance.

The halt is also the checkup to see if the horse is in a good contact, yielding in the moment he halts and not resisting the bit in any way: not curling or throwing his head slightly up.

Although the halt is a rather unexciting dressage movement to watch,

PROBLEMS IN WALK

During a dressage clinic I once gave in Canada, I met a rider whose horse was ridden with a strong contact and constraint. The horse was pacing (losing the four-beat rhythm of the steps) in the walk.

To improve the situation, I asked him to ride his horse in a shoulder-in at the walk. The thought alarmed him. The rider refused the exercise, with the explanation that his horse would then start to amble (do a totally lateral walk). Finally, I convinced him to loosen the noseband and try walking with a softer contact. To his surprise, the horse relaxed and the walk got better.

This example is a very useful one as it shows us two things: First, there's a direct correlation between a strong hand, a blocked back and finally, the quality of the walk.

Second, riders are often not aware of these correlations and do not act accordingly. Many riders are afraid of getting to the root of the trouble.

One of the common mistakes we face in dressage competitions up to the Olympic level are horses with a tendency to amble or amble completely. Of course, there are horses that have a natural predisposition to amble, but these are not suitable for dressage competitions because of the negative scores they would automatically receive.

What is the cause of the ruined walk and where does the evil have its roots? Undoubtedly, in a hard, backward-operating hand that leads to an equitation where forced submission dominates and the horse is ridden from front to back.

When, for example, in the extended walk, the hand is not following the natural head-neck movement of the horse, but instead constrains it, the horse's neck cannot be used effectively, with the consequence of the walk getting irregular. When the walk's four-beat rhythm is disturbed, the horse cannot swing over the back, so he stiffens it. Moreover, horses ridden that way have no faith in the rider's hand and do not stretch out, but sometimes curl away from the bit or get behind it.

As a principle, one can claim that if the mouth of the horse is not relaxed, the rest of his body isn't. So when riders ask me how to fix such problems, there's no other recipe than going back to the basics.

To solve problems in walk, the rider first needs to focus on getting a proper contact through working the horse from the back to the front and relaxing the horse's mouth through gymnastic exercises. This is neither easy nor done in a short time as it means changing a whole concept of equitation, which might be the reason why some riders would rather live with bad marks in the walk than get to the root of the trouble. I should mention that a few riders do know how to use the walk as a tool to improve the whole horse, but working him in walk has regrettably gone out of fashion.

For those who are willing to improve the walk and, above all, the whole horse, it's invaluable to use this slow gait to make the horse supple and flexible and, at the same time, work to get a soft, permanent contact.



LEFT: Pirouettes favor the lightness of the forehand.

RIGHT: Shoulder-in and travers are usually ridden along straight lines.

it is a spectacular touchstone of throughness and the correct training of a horse.

The Rein-Back

The rein-back, even more than the halt, is a dressage movement in which the degree of a horse's balance will be shown. A horse in balance will move straight backward with diagonal steps of

the same length of stride as he shows when moving forward. Hasty, irregular steps reveal a serious lack of balance in the horse.

The value of the rein-back is to achieve a balanced horse with faith in the rider's hand. It also creates a light horse in proper self-carriage. There are different ways to prepare a rein-back. I do it from a square halt as described earlier. Then I ask the horse to yield and then I resist on soft reins, without using my legs.

In the rein-back, when correctly executed, each joint of the hind legs flexes due to the additional weight resting for the fraction of a second on it, causing a compression of the joints. This creates a suppling of the horse's hindquarters and loin region. The good rein-back is slow and without dragging legs.

The *Schaukel* (Double Rein-Back)

The *Schaukel* is a series of movements starting with the horse in halt. He then performs a rein-back for a designated number of steps before advancing a few steps forward. Immediately following, the horse executes a second rein-back from which he departs in one of the three basic gaits.

This movement is a true demonstration of a horse's throughness. It is also very useful in improving the horse's overall suppleness, especially in his back because he has to alternate constantly between forward and backward movements, flexing the joints of his haunches. It is essential that you alternate as often as possible to get the desired effect.

To practice only what is required

in dressage competition is a trap that seriously endangers the quality of training and leads to a "pauperism" of equitation in general.

Working the horse in walk offers various opportunities to increase his suppleness and throughness, which are indispensable ingredients of true collection. By realizing these coherences, a rider should be able to recognize the virtues of this often-neglected gait and, as a consequence, should feel obliged to allow the "queen of gaits" to take up more room in the daily training.

The higher the quality of this training, the more joyfully and easily your horse will work and the longer you both will be happy working toward the highest goal in dressage: harmony and lightness. 

