

Snippet 13: The Importance of Counting

Probably you are asking “What needs to be counted”? If you remember that the first of the basics of training as described earlier is, “Forward from behind with clear rhythm and steady tempo”. Rhythm comes from the feet and gives us the beat. So, walk is 4, trot is 2 and canter is 3.



However, canter needs a 4th and silent beat to cover the moment of suspension. Clarity of the rhythm is the goal. Enhanced clarity –Really Clear Beats – often is referred to as “cadence”. Cadence can be seen as well as heard because the horse lifts its hooves that little extra bit from the ground.

The second need to count is for the Tempo. Tempo is the rate of repetition of the rhythm or Beats Per Minute. Consistency of Tempo wins in competitions. It also sets up transitions to be “seamless”. Seamless means that the rhythm of one gait is

perfectly clear into the perfectly clear rhythm of the next gait. This happens when the horse is so consistently well balanced and, on the aids, it can produce seamless transitions. The rider’s mind needs to be equally clear. Feeling and hearing the current rhythm and visualizing, hearing and feeling the newly required rhythm needs as much practice as does the skill and strength and understanding of the horse.

A third thing that can be counted is the number of strides ridden for each quarter of a circle. In Introductory and Training levels, the circles are 20 meters around.

It is my observation that almost all riders post 7 times per quarter of a 20-meter circle no matter what size horse they are riding. So, if you count your posting for each quarter of a 20-meter circle, and the count is the same per quarter, you are guaranteed to have produced a round circle. If not, you can make the too small segment larger with a bit of leg yield. You also can prevent the diving-in quarter by apply a longer or a stronger use of the outside rein. Think of the outside rein in this moment as the one that “steers” and tells the horse not to dive in.

On the other hand, a quarter of a circle that is too large will need more guarding of the outside shoulder of the horse. Learning to turn the horse’s shoulders with the outside upper leg and rein are the skills needed here.

One of the early masters in the US, Chuck Grant, taught riders to count the strides across the diagonal at working and collected trot and canter. Then when they rode medium and extended gaits, he told them that there should be one less stride because the horse spent more time in the air and covered a longer distance during that “airtime”. An amplification of the gait like that is correct. Not Faster. Thus, this is a fourth place to count to check your skill levels.

In Second Level one needs to be able to count steps in the rein back. The fifth time to be able to count! Since horses step backwards in diagonal pairs, one diagonal pair moving back is the count of one, and the second diagonal pair is 2, etc. The rider needs to count the number of steps required by the test. That sometimes is 3 or 4 and sometimes an exact number. For the best score, the horse should halt square and step back with the diagonal pair of legs coming off the ground all the same height and the same length. The last hind leg to go back should be the first to step forward. Of course, the horse needs to stay on the aids and show no resistance for a higher score, but the essence is the even backward stepping.

For the advanced horse, the rider needs to be able to count the Tempi changes of lead. Ones, twos, threes and fours are required, and rider needs to learn the coordination apply the aids to the horse for each grouping. Also, for the advanced horse and rider, the canter zig zag in the Grand Prix needs to be counted.

In general, counting either consciously or intuitively is forced upon us by our horses. It is the nature of most of them to slow down. Some speed up. Whatever your horse chooses, it is up to you to keep track. OFTEN. Many are so very subtle in their expression that they fool us. Additionally, when horses collect, even a little, they tell us that then they cannot possibly go forward. And when they go forward, then they tell us they cannot possibly collect. Counting is essential so you can ride proactively and adjust the tempo before it becomes a disaster which you need to “fix”.