

Sue's Snippet No. 16: Help! How Do I get My Horse to First Level?????

Here you are with your partner competing successfully – or sort of OK -at Training Level. He is active behind, reaching over his topline for the contact with your hands. You receive and appreciate that and talk back to him with your fingers, hands, wrists and elbows. You are happy together.

But now you want to move up to First Level. Happiness is challenged! Even though your horse works actively with his hindquarters, and is comfortably balanced and through with that energy at “real” working gaits, how do you ever get the front end to match the progress of the back end?? That sounds odd, but it is where riders often get stuck.

So, the guidance is on the front of each test. It's called The Purpose. Here it is with my opinionated explanations in parentheses.

“To confirm that the horse demonstrates correct basics” ... (Forward from behind with clear rhythm and steady tempo. The back to front balance is level along the top line. That means the poll, withers, and croup are level with the earth. The horse is reaching for the contact, the rider perceives and returns that effort. The horse can bend its entire spine smoothly to follow the line of travel chosen by the rider. (Bend – ribs. Lateral flexion of head – poll joint. Round – face nearly vertical to the ground aka as direct flexion)).

Back to quoting the Purpose :...”and in addition to the requirements of Training Level, has developed the THRUST (my emphasis) to achieve improved BALANCE (aka frame) and throughness and maintains a more consistent contact with the bit”, (your reins Can be shorter).

Sounds complicated and it is, and it isn't. The uncomplicated part is what you and your horse already can do. He uses his hindquarters actively. His muscles and joints in that area contract and expand easily and with a free range of motion. The result is, starting with his lumbosacral joint behind the saddle, he slightly coils all those muscles and joints under his body mass. This starts towards collection.

Note: Collection, again in my opinion, is Not black and white. It is “shades of” whatever color you want to choose. Intro and Training Levels establish a consistent back to front balance. That lays the basis for the “collection” part of which is the coiling under of the hindquarter. The lift of the belly and front end come next.

So, do you see why the First Level operative words above are THRUST and BALANCE?

You do NOT get to First Level by shortening the reins, holding on for dear life, and kicking until the horse gives it up and improves his own back to front balance. Poor horse.

Then what does come next? Ah, the Complicated part. Based on anatomy, again my opinion, the next muscle groups that need to work are all of those on the underline. The middle abs and the lower abs need to be more firm/stronger to lift the back. You can do the same thing while

reading this. Round your back. You had to push back with your front-line muscles, yes? Since the horse is a horizontal creature, he lifts those same muscles to round his back. These muscles even have the same names as yours.

So, you **cannot** get under him and poke him with a stick – lol – Instead you imagine that your ankle bones are connected under him by a rod or a broad strap. As you use your legs/ankle bones you add that lift to show him what you mean. **ALSO, you are the leader here, so you use your body (low back, pelvis and front-line muscles) to be the role model.** Your body says, “Horse, coil your hind quarters and now lift all of your underline muscles to round your back”. Oh, sounds like the body part of a half halt, eh?

Moving forward (pun intended) along the horse’s body, the next part is to get him to lift his thoracic sling, shoulders, withers, and develop that pretty upward arch in his neck.

As the hindquarter coil, the bottom-line firms and lifts, your seat bones will be drawing under you on the saddle from back to front. That is the time to use the fingers hands, arms and elbows as your seat comes to them. This is the culmination of your half halts. This will teach him to lift his thoracic sling. Ah, a completed half halt.

Extra theory. Our bodies control the hindquarters of the horse, and our fingers, hands, wrists, and elbows control the front end.

Voila, you have improved your horse’s BALANCE (from back to front around his center of gravity) and THRUST (through the coiling under of the hinds quarters and lift from the belly) and you now have a First level “Frame”.

