



Felicitas von Neumann-Cosel rides Graf Montekalino, a 1998 Oldenburg gelding owned and bred by Juergen Strauss.



Where's Waldo is a 2001 Approved Hanoverian stallion owned by Bonnie Watrous.

# HILLSIDE EXERCISES FOR THE ADVANCED HORSE

From shoulder-in to pirouettes, learn how riding on a slight slope benefits your horse.

By Felicitas von Neumann-Cosel with Jessica L. McTaggart  
Photos by Mary McKenna

**W**hile riding an extended trot, have you ever thought, *I wish my horse had more power and suspension?* Or while schooling a canter pirouette thought, *I wish my horse would finally be able to collect more and lower his croup.* If you answered “yes” to either of these statements, working your horse on hills may be beneficial.

Last February, I gave simple exercises and transitions to do outside the ring (“Develop Power with Hill Work”). The next step as you move up the levels is to address hill work for the more advanced horse. There are many benefits to working on a slope.

1. When going uphill, the horse has to push from behind to propel himself forward. This encourages him to step more forward and closer to his center of gravity.

2. When going downhill, the horse must shift his weight back to avoid the downward momentum that gravity promotes. As the horse shifts back, he is again encouraged to step under his center of gravity. When ridden correctly, the horse does not let propulsive power take over but, instead, converts it into carrying power.

3. With work on a hillside, the horse develops the correct muscle memory for more advanced movements from extensions to piaffe. This way you can help younger horses understand these movements better or improve older horses’ performances, keeping them enthusiastic and joyful in their daily work.

Upper-level exercises on hills are intended only for advanced trainers and riders who have a clear understanding of the Training Scale. The horse should have a correct, basic foundation and understanding of the aids. The movements should have already been introduced in the dressage arena, so the horse is prepared for the exercises. Also, pay attention to the amount of incline and decline on which you are riding, as it should be extremely gradual. Because this is difficult to see in a photo, the

## What You Need to Know First

**A**dvanced hill work should be done in a dressage seat, but the rider should be able to move into a half seat if, for example, it helps the horse to lift his back and stay with the movement in a canter extension. Trot extensions are easier for the horse if you rise to the trot. For the very collected canter, make sure you do not sit too far back, which would drive the horse more forward.

When looking for a hill area, try to find a grass field with at least one gentle incline, which, of course, serves as your decline, as well. Be careful early in the morning, as the grass may be slippery. Also, pay attention to the firmness of the ground. If it hasn’t rained for several weeks, for example, the field may be extremely hard. Avoid these situations. Also, be sure that the ground is even and without holes.

The first time out, it is helpful to warm up in your traditional schooling ring before starting outdoor exercises. When riding in a new area, take the time to get the horse comfortable with his surroundings. Remember, the second element of the Training Pyramid is relaxation. Even though we look for the extra spark and energy that creates positive tension in the horse (required for collection and self-carriage), negative tension can get in the way.

When first introducing hill work to your horse, be conservative. A few correct rides up and down the hill are enough. This work can be varied but, when the weather allows, I might use it two to four times a week or even while I am on a trail ride, until I feel the work has carried over to the dressage ring.

A cautionary note: If you have any concern about soundness, especially in the stifle area or in the front feet, consult your veterinarian before starting this work because you will increase the workload on the hind legs and the impact on the front feet.

## Uphill Extensions



**While working extensions uphill, Tonico (left) and Where's Waldo compress their hindquarters like springs to propel themselves forward. Tonico is a 1999 Revised Lusitano stallion owned by Linda and Joe Denniston.**

hills featured in these photos are often steeper than those you should typically school on at home. See "What You Need to Know First" on page 33, before starting this work.

### Uphill Extensions

In a traditional ring setting, especially in the beginning of training, a horse's common reaction when asked to extend is to fall on his forehead and make quicker strides instead of lengthening. This lengthening should be produced through more suspension, which is created by the combination of propulsive and carrying power. That's why extensions are not required before collection is introduced.

This is where hill work comes in handy. By riding extensions up an incline, the horse pushes against gravity and is therefore encouraged to take a longer stride instead of rushing.

Begin by riding uphill in a working trot. As you ask the horse to go forward up the hill, he will, most likely, offer a lengthening naturally. When this happens, support it with gentle forward-driving aids and a possible touch of the whip, as encouragement. The whip, a training aid, also tells the

horse to lengthen.

Maintain the rhythm and tempo by continuously using little half halts. If you let the horse rush, he will avoid taking longer strides. The horse must stay soft in the connection to allow the power to go through his body without stiffening and losing relaxation.

An indicator that your half halt has gone through occurs when you lighten your aids and the tempo and self-carriage remain the same. If your half halts are not going through, ride a few downward transitions, such as trot-walk. The action of the rein aid to come back should go through the body, while the horse maintains a forward tendency. This keeps the horse forward but connected.

To test if the horse is on the aids, release the rein for a couple of strides (*überstreichen*). If your horse does not accept the half halt, he will get faster, overly excited or strung out. Hold the lengthening for as many strides as the horse feels powerful and soft.

Be aware that horses with a strong and expressive front leg and a slower hind leg might, at first, try to trot even bigger in front without bigger engagement behind and lose the rhythm

behind, while horses without a natural extension might try to rush up the hill.

After the trot work has been established and the horse feels responsive, you can move on to the canter. Extensions uphill in canter require that the rider have a lot of feel for the horse. Some horses will get too excited in the canter extension, so a few strides is sufficient. You may also need to experiment with the angle of the hill. A steeper angle for the trot might encourage some horses to really use their bodies. But, the same angle at the canter might make them too excited, since they have to push so strongly against gravity created by the steep incline.

Start as you did in the trot, riding a working or collected canter uphill. Check your rhythm, relaxation and connection as you did in the trot and, if it is satisfactory, ask for a lengthening. As in trot, use half halts to maintain the balance and connection. If the horse rushes or falls forward, half halt so he sits back and slows down. If the horse continues to be strong or off balance, ride a few canter-walk transitions.

Over time, you can increase the stride. Keep in mind that the quality of the basic elements of the Training Scale

is more important than the size of the horse's stride.

### Uphill Lateral Work

Developing and maintaining quality lateral work can be difficult because, with the addition of sideways movement, the horse often loses the straightness through his body and no longer steps toward his center of gravity. This results in the horse losing the lift and cadence of the collection and, therefore, the quality of the basic gait. By riding lateral work uphill, the horse is encouraged to continuously step under the rider's weight and lift. The horse lifts his back continuously, which, in turn, also makes bending easier. These exercises help a horse with a slower hind leg and, in combination with extensions, improve the action of the hind legs.

To begin, ride uphill in shoulder-fore position. Increase the angle if your horse is able to maintain the quality of the gait. The next time you go uphill, ask for a shoulder-in and, if the horse maintains rhythm, tempo and a soft connection, move on to the travers or renvers. How many steps you perform in the lateral work and the sequence depends on the horse's level of training and his strengths and weaknesses. A younger horse might just do a line of shoulder-in right to shoulder-in left, for example.

When the shoulder-in, travers and renvers are established, you can challenge the horse with two or more lateral movements together, such as shoulder-in to travers. For the more advanced horse that is comfortable with this lateral work, half passes are a possible next step.

Hill work can also be particularly beneficial for the half pass counter changes of hand, such as the changes in direction from half pass right to half pass left. This is first introduced at Fourth Level with one change in the trot and canter. At Grand Prix, you have to perform five canter half passes on the centerline and a change of hand in the trot and canter

## Uphill Lateral Work



**Graf Montekalino shows cadence and joint bending in shoulder-in (left) and maintains a steady rhythm and cadenced trot in half pass (right).**

out of a steep angle.

It is often difficult to keep the horse engaged enough and maintain the proper alignment while going sideways. The horse should not lead or trail with the haunches or lose the cadence of the collected trot. Without impulsion, it is hard to change direction with a quality trot. Practicing half passes while going uphill helps the horse to stay straight and engaged. As he learns the body memory for the movement, you will find that changing directions becomes much easier.

To begin, ride a few strides uphill in a trot half pass to the right. Give yourself time to straighten and then transition into half pass to the left. The horse should stay forward but in a steady rhythm and a cadenced trot.

When you feel that your horse is comfortable enough to advance to the canter half passes, there are a few things you must remember: It becomes more important to straighten the horse between half passes in order to prepare for the flying change. Going uphill

makes this transition that much easier, because the hill forces the horse to maintain the forward, uphill movement and to step straight under his center of gravity. When moving in the new direction, be careful not to overflex the horse, as he must maintain the alignment of his spine. With all these factors working for you, doing the flying change and the next half pass will be that much easier.

### Uphill Flying Changes

I like flying change work on hills particularly for a horse that gets nervous and strong when working on multiple changes. Normally, this added tension makes it hard to keep your leg on or to maintain the feeling from back to front. The relaxation suffers, and the tension results in a short neck, which blocks the hind legs from coming through in the change. The tempi changes are then unreliable, as the horse often falls on the forehead and is either unable to change again or changes too frequently. While riding a correct canter uphill, you can push the horse forward without him

## Uphill Flying Changes



**When riding flying changes uphill (1), the added challenge of continuously pushing against gravity (2) helps the horse jump through with height and expression (3). Roulette is a 1996 Oldenburg owned by Gene Freeze.**

running away from your leg. The added challenge of continuously pushing against gravity breaks the cycle of heaviness in the connection.

To practice changes uphill, first ride a single change in both directions. Your goal is to have the feeling that you can truly ride the horse forward into the change with a consistent leg aid. Your leg should be in soft contact with the horse's side.

You are ready to ride a sequence when you have established a clean flying change in both directions that is truly from back to front with an appropriate canter in rhythm and tempo. You will need a longer hillside for this. At this stage, you do not count the strides, but instead, focus on the feeling of the canter. Ride one change and make sure you regain the same canter quality before you ask for the second one. If the horse is able to change twice without getting nervous, you can try asking for a third one. If you ask for multiple changes too quickly, the horse might fall back into the old pattern of tension. The horse's relaxation and sensitivity in the exercise will dictate how soon you can start to count between the changes.

### Uphill Piaffe and Passage

If your horse has been previously introduced to piaffe and passage, you can also include them in your uphill workout. As you walk uphill, ask the horse for a few half steps. Allow him to go forward with as much carrying power as possible but enough propulsive power to allow him to work against the incline. Bit by bit, let him go more forward without losing the lift until you feel a few strides of passage. From there, let him slowly develop an extended trot. The ability to do that will prepare the horse to execute the most difficult transitions without losing cadence or rhythm.

### Downhill Transitions

Going downhill in balance makes the horse rock his weight back on his hind legs and carry himself. This is a great tool in teaching horses to transfer weight during transitions. In my 2007 article, I taught you how to ride walk-halt and trot-walk transitions. For the upper-level horse, the canter is added. Before attempting any canter work downhill, you must be completely confident that your horse is rocking his weight back and is soft in the connection.

Start with a walk-canter transition near the bottom of the slope. This will give the horse the feel of the more difficult transition without overfacing him. The upward transitions should be ridden very collected and on the lightest aids, so the horse can stay balanced in the strike-off. The first few downward transitions might require a little stronger aid, but the horse often learns quickly that he has to engage his hind legs to come down rather than stop on his front legs. Your hand might have to resist a little stronger, but try not to pull back. Lighten as soon as the horse has changed his weight to his hind legs.

### Downhill Pirouettes

Even for the most advanced horse, canter pirouettes can be improved with a slight slope. It is hard for many horses to collect enough for the preparation of the pirouette. For a highly collected canter, it is important that the rider sit in perfect balance and allow the horse to work on his own. A well-trained horse will start to collect and balance himself as the rider stills her pelvis and follows the canter motion only slightly. This is only possible if the horse learns to carry himself and stay light in the

## Downhill Pirouettes



**At the bottom of a slight incline, Roulette collects for a canter pirouette (1). As he moves through a quarter of the turn (2), he begins to go uphill (3), and physics forces him to step toward his center of gravity (4) to maintain his balance (5). His upward, forward cadence remains. Going forward uphill out of the pirouette (6) helps to rebalance him.**

rider's hands. Collect as much as possible within the horse's ability to carry himself and maintain canter quality.

Another issue that can be overcome with hill work is the tendency to get stuck and lose the forward momentum, which results in the horse falling out with one hind leg and spinning. Once the horse is capable of collecting properly in the canter downhill, start to ride a pirouette out of this collected canter. As you ride through a quarter of the turn, you begin to go uphill, and physics forces the horse to step toward his center of gravity to maintain his balance. His upward, forward cadence also remains.

This is highly intense work and should not be done for long periods of time.

### Downhill Piaffe and Passage

Downhill work can be helpful when first introducing the piaffe or for the well-schooled Grand Prix horse. Here is a common scenario: In the piaffe, a horse may not have enough expression or correct engagement to use his front legs properly while shifting his weight onto the engaged hind leg. The more the rider tries to engage the hind legs, the more the horse reacts by working behind and sometimes coming too far under (pedestal position). He ultimately just

gets heavier on the forehead. Or, the horse lifts his hind legs too much and gets croup high instead of lowering his haunches and taking weight. Going downhill helps this tremendously, because the horse has to rock his weight back and lift his forearm to stay balanced. The benefit is the same for the passage and transitions.

Before introducing the piaffe, ride numerous transitions, such as trot-walk or canter-walk, over a period of weeks to ensure that the horse is properly carrying himself. When beginning piaffe work with the young horse, I ride walk-trot transitions but, as the horse trots off, I

## Downhill Piaffe & Passage



**Riding half steps downhill helps Where's Waldo shift his weight, because he has to rock back and lift his forearms to stay balanced.**



**Roulette shows a new and improved balance in the piaffe.**

make him wait on my seat as long as possible—not letting him go forward but letting him advance in the smallest trot strides. This develops a few steps of more extreme collection. This is called mobilizing the hindquarters and is one of the most important tools for training an upper-level horse.

If your horse is trained in piaffe and passage, start working downhill either for a few steps or until you feel your horse changes his balance. Do not try to keep the piaffe on the spot; just try to get a new improved feeling. It is helpful to have someone give you feedback from the ground or be videotaped. This way, you can make sure you don't push the horse at the wrong moment. A big word of warning: Do not overwork the horse! The easier it feels for you, the harder the horse is working. Only when piaffe and passage have been firmly established can you work on the transitions between them. In the transition, allow many steps, as it takes time for the horse to change his balance from piaffe to passage and vice versa.

Ultimately, the muscle memory and added enthusiasm your horse has gained from hill work will lead to vast improvement in the ring. 🐾

*Felicitas von Neumann-Cosel is head trainer at Gene Freeze's First Choice Farm in Woodbine, Maryland, and a former examiner for the U.S. Dressage Federation Instructor Certification Program. She is a German native who earned her Reitlehrer (federally certified instructor) certification with the highest score attained by anyone at that time. Many thanks go to Eileen McKenna, Olivia Frost and K.C. Barnes for an early morning photo shoot.*