

Develop **POWER**



Felicitas von Neumann-Cosel rides Ranimeer, a Trakehner mare born in 2000 and owned by Cheryl Griffith.

with HILL WORK

Improve collection and self-carriage by venturing outdoors.

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One of the most well-known and often quoted bit of wisdom in classical dressage is: "Ride your horse forward and straighten it" (Gustav Steinbrecht), which means create propulsive power with straightness and allow the horse to carry himself. But a problem often arises when we try to change the propulsive power into carrying power in hopes of achieving collection. Instead of becoming lighter in the connection, a horse often gets short in the neck, loses impulsion and becomes heavier, finding his balance on the rider's hands. The result is often a poorly developed topline.

Luckily, just outside the dressage ring, a world of opportunity exists for your horse's correct development—work on hills. Going uphill makes the horse's hind legs step farther under his body to push against gravity. Thus, he naturally develops propulsive power. Going downhill, correctly ridden, has the opposite effect. As the horse proceeds down the hill, he must shift his weight back so as not to get caught in the momentum of gravity that invites him to get faster instead. When ridden correctly, the horse doesn't let propul-

What You Need to Know Before Beginning Hill Work

Before heading out, there are a few prerequisites to ensure a safe and productive ride. The rider must be able to maintain balance without use of the hands. She should also have the ability to change from the dressage position to a slightly forward seat without loss of balance. The rider must have a strong understanding of basic work, creating a horse that uses his topline and lets the aids through the body in upward and downward transitions.

When to begin. An appropriate time to begin work on hills is when you are introducing collected work. The first elements of the Training Scale need to have been achieved: The horse goes in rhythm without changing the tempo, and he is relaxed and supple in the topline with a steady connection to the bit. The rider should be working on creating impulsion and basic straightening exercises. The horse needs to be secure in basic transitions and accept a half halt. He should also be familiar with working outdoors in the arena and going on trail rides.

Find an appropriate site. When looking for a hilly area, try to find a grass field with at least one gentle incline (which, of course, also serves as your decline). 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.

Rider position. Hill work should be done in the rising trot. For canter, ride in a slight forward seat. If it makes it easier, shorten your stirrups one or two holes. It is important for the rider to stay over her center of gravity and not to fall behind the motion.

Keep your horse relaxed. The first time out, 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.

Be conservative when first introducing hill work to your horse. 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 work in the dressage ring.

A cautionary note: If you have any concern about soundness issues, 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.

sive power take over but converts it into carrying power.

When horses work outside, they often feel more energetic, which is necessary to develop the power they need to stay balanced. Taking part of your training outside to a gentle incline can help them figure this out naturally. The goal is to give the horse a body memory and

the strength to carry himself.

Uphill: Propulsive Power

Begin your workout by riding uphill. To burn off extra energy, allow the horse to trot up the hill once or twice (and walk down), lessening the possible build up of negative tension. Continue in walk as you focus on your horse's pushing

power. In the extended walk allow your horse to stretch as long as possible (photo 1, below).

While riding uphill in all gaits, you should feel the horse begin to push in an even tempo. You should also feel him stretch over his back and reach into your hands. Once your horse has this feeling in walk, continue in trot.

Uphill: Propulsive Power



Walking uphill will show your horse how to stretch in the extended walk. Encourage him to stretch his neck as long as possible.



As you trot uphill, most horses will immediately give you a feeling of a bigger trot without a change of tempo. Make sure to keep the horse soft in the bridle, so he does not start to balance himself on your hands.



Once you have a consistent tempo and soft feeling in your hand, ask for a longer stride.



Cantering uphill will strengthen your horse the same way as the trot work. Remember to keep him soft in the connection, so he does not balance on your hands.

Downhill: Carrying Power



Downhill work is more challenging than riding uphill. Therefore, when first riding downhill, stay in the walk. Ride down a gentle decline and be sure to track truly straight down the hill.



Starting at the walk allows you to check that he is soft between both hands and legs. Walk-halt transitions can be helpful to ensure that he stays soft in the bridle and between both of your legs.



When you proceed in trot, maintain the tempo and balance. If he speeds up, he will not shift his weight onto his hind legs.



When ridden correctly, you will eventually feel the horse pushing himself away from the bit and lightening so he can balance without your hands.



The work can also be done in canter. As he builds muscle and becomes comfortable, you can vary your seat from a forward position to a balance closer to the dressage position.

While riding uphill, most horses will give you the feeling of a bigger trot without change of tempo. You will feel his back moving, and he will stretch toward your hands (photo 2, p. 36). Keep the horse soft in the bridle, so he does not

start to balance himself on your hands. If negative tension builds up, ride a few walk-trot transitions to keep the horse from taking control.

Once you consistently have the correct feeling, take advantage of his

propulsive power to ask for a longer stride (photo 3, p. 36). Apply a little more leg or tap the horse gently with the whip, but don't let the feeling in your hands change. The horse should associate the tap with the longer stride.

How to Half Halt Downhill

The half halt shifts the horse's weight back onto his hind legs, which is especially important when riding downhill. "To perform a half halt, the rider places more weight on his seat bones by tightening his back muscles, pushes his horse forward with his legs, and uses carefully measured asking or non-yielding rein aid followed by a minimum delay by a yielding rein." (*The Principles of Riding*, the handbook of the German National Equestrian Federation)

The half halt rebalances the horse by using the forward-driving aids into a supple and soft connection that tells the horse not to push forward but to carry. As in a downward transition, the horse has to let the action of the rein through his body to shift his weight. Should the horse push through the hands, you might have to resist a little stronger with your hands, but do not pull back. It is important to recognize that this resistance can only last for a stride or two, then you must release and ask again, if necessary.

TROT



To balance downhill, first ride a half halt.



Finish the half halt by releasing and going forward.

CANTER



All Romario's weight is on his right front leg. In this moment, he must be properly set up with a half halt or risk losing balance.



Demonstrating the proper reaction, he rocks back onto his hind legs, which helps him develop his carrying power.



Having rebalanced himself onto his hind end, he is now carrying himself nicely and able to perform the next canter stride.

This is an excellent exercise to introduce the feel of a medium trot while avoiding the problem of running onto the forehand. If possible, try to create that trot uphill and, if close enough, take that trot right into the dressage arena to see if the horse will maintain a medium trot on level ground. Often, the horse can make that connection and develop the body memory for the lengthened stride.

Cantering uphill (photo 4, p. 36) will strengthen your horse the same way as the trot work. Remember to keep the horse soft in the connection so he does not balance on your hands.

You can increase the steepness of the hill, and you can go uphill in all three gaits. But return to walk when riding down a steep incline until your horse has learned to balance. Be aware of the added stress on a steeper hill, as each horse's ability to balance is different. Start with only a few repetitions and see how he feels the next day.

Downhill: Carrying Power

Because downhill work is more challenging than uphill work, stay in walk, at first. Start on a gentle decline and track straight down the hill. Starting at the walk (photos 5 and 6, p. 37) allows you to make sure he is soft between both hands and legs. If he gets heavy in the connection, you may feel him fishtail in the hind end or continuously avoid straightening by tracking to one side. Walk-halt transitions can be helpful to ensure that he stays between both of your legs and remains soft in the bridle.

When you proceed to the trot (photo 7, p. 37), be sure to keep the tempo. If the horse speeds up, he will not shift his weight onto the hind legs. You will feel a change of balance onto the hind legs when the horse stays light in the connection and does not speed up (photo 8, p. 37). Riding transitions within the trot or to walk will further challenge him to bend his hind legs.

When ridden correctly, you will even-

Uphill and Downhill Exercises

After you have achieved the feeling of riding up and down hills, you can incorporate simple exercises.



1. Give forward with the hand for a moment (left photo) to make sure the horse is carrying himself properly. Then continue to ride forward on the circle (right).

2. Ride a circle on the side of a hill, instead of riding straight lines. Use one hillside and a flat surface or, if available, two hills with a flat surface in between. By altering the uphill propulsive power and the downhill carrying power, the horse learns to sit behind while maintaining the positive forward energy. You can also perform figure eights in the same way.

3. Ride just a few strides downhill, then ride uphill. This builds balance in a horse that finds downhill work awkward. He is not given the opportunity to gain too much downhill momentum before pushing again.

tually feel the horse pushing himself away from the bit and lightening so he can balance without your hands. Sometimes, you can start to lay the whip on the horse's croup in the downward transitions, so he associates that aid with lowering his croup in order to take more weight and collect. This body memory should be helpful for transitions in the dressage arena. In a canter, vary from a forward seat to a balance closer to the dressage position (photo 9, p. 37),

depending on which helps the horse. For some horses, this is a challenge, and you might not be able to canter downhill right away. Cantering downhill only makes sense if your horse is truly balanced, otherwise you just might create more tension in the connection, which is detrimental to self-carriage.

By venturing out of the ring, you can feel the horse's natural ability to carry himself. Now go out there and build on it! 🐾

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Horses featured in this article: **Where's Waldo**, a 2001 Hanoverian approved stallion owned by Bonnie Watrous (photos 1, 3, 6 and 8); **Graf Montekalino**, a 1998 Oldenburg gelding bred and owned by Jurgen Strauss (photos 4 and 9, top p. 38, p. 39); **Romario**, a 1998 Dutch Warmblood gelding owned by Denice Kludt (photos 2, 5 and 7 and bottom of p. 38)