

DEVELOP YOUR YOUNG DRESSAGE HORSE

Strategies and tips from the USEF
national young-horse coach

BY SCOTT HASSLER
WITH EMILY COVINGTON

*RISING STAR: Susanne Hassler riding
the 2002 Oldenburg stallion Harmony's
Davidoff Hit (Don Davidoff x Sandro Hit),
owned by Harmony Sporthorses (CO).*

Your young dressage horse has been backed and is ready to begin his under-saddle training. You may already be dreaming about his future competitive success. First, however, you've reached a critical time in your youngster's life. The training and management decisions you make now will affect his entire future. It is essential for you to understand not only your role as rider, but also how you can best understand and manage your young horse to ultimate success.

At this time, you must begin an exploration to understand your horse as an individual. Keep in mind that every experience he's had to date has shaped him. If he's gotten loose from a handler during turnout or had a bad trailering experience, for instance, these memories have stayed with him. Ask yourself: Is this horse interested? Lazy? Aloof? Is he sensitive? Alert? Insecure? Confident? The training plan that you create will be tailored to his experiences and to his mental and physical needs.

Training: Not Just Riding

As you evaluate your young horse, you have many options to train and exercise him other than riding in a ring. Lungeing, lungeing over cavalletti, and riding outside in a big field for exposure and environment are great options. Working over varied terrain helps with strengthening. If available, an arena with perimeter walls for free-lungeing or free-jumping is also excellent.

Lungeing is one of the most frequently used tools with young horses, and it can be used throughout the phases of training. The technique of lungeing itself can be an art form. There are many ways to attach the lunge line, and different positions and options for effectiveness. The *USDF Lungeing Manual* contains detailed instructions and illustrations.

In general, I'm not a fan of a lot of lungeing for young horses. Lungeing should be incorporated into a strategic plan or done in order to achieve a specific result. For example, if your horse is headed into an overstimulating environment, such as a show ring, lungeing him beforehand for a few minutes might help clear his mind. If he is behind the leg because his back is tight from under-saddle work, lungeing can help loosen his back and topline and prepare him for the rider. This preparatory lungeing time might take as little as five or fifteen minutes.

In future issues, I'll be bringing you more on lungeing ideas and techniques.

Cavalletti work is another great tool, both on the lunge and under saddle. They offer so much variety and can be adjusted easily to suit the horse's level of development and current ability. Cavalletti work is a great strength-building

tool. It's especially valuable in helping a horse to develop rhythm and suspension in the trot—something that can be greatly enhanced over time. Besides, most horses find them fun!

While we're looking at tools that help the horse in work, we should also look at some other ways to manage a young horse to show-ring success. Nutrition, for one, is an essential part of the management program. Athletes have special nutritional needs for top performance. A good equine nutritionist can help you to develop an appropriate feeding program. If your horse isn't starting out with a nicely muscled topline; a healthy, shining coat; and good feet, he will be at a disadvantage coming into a solid work program.

As you work with your young horse, within half a year or so you should see the shape of an athlete emerge. If he lives out in a field, he should stand out from his buddies who are not in work.

Choose the Right Path for Your Youngster

There are several opportunities to learn about the training of young horses. Likewise, there are various competitive paths for introducing youngsters to dressage competition and preparing them for the higher levels. Which route is right for your horse depends on various factors, including his talent and movement for dressage, his maturity level, and his physical development.

Hassler Dressage's own Young Dressage Horse Trainers Symposia (see "Training the Trainers: The Young Dressage Horse Trainers Symposium" on page 31) bring together top trainers with a focus on developing young dressage horses for show-ring success.

The Markel/US Equestrian Federation Young Horse program is proving a very successful venue for talented athletes. Through the classes for four-, five-, and six-year-olds, we have the opportunity to identify and help develop exceptional in-

Scott's Tip: Young-Horse Competition

If your desire is to participate in the Markel/US Equestrian Federation Young Horse program, or even the World Championships for Young Dressage Horses, go watch one of these events. You will get a picture of what the top horses and riders look like—the frame, the feeling, and the overall presentation of what you are working toward. Seeing the top horses and riders firsthand could be one of your most educational tools. You can only prepare for it if you know what you are preparing for—so go experience it!



THE GREAT OUTDOORS: *Getting out of the arena is an excellent way of developing the young horse's body and mind. FEI-level trainer and competitor Lauren Sprieser practices a field piaffe with her 1998 Hanoverian mare, Clairvoya (by Certus).*

dividuals and to prepare them for international competition at the highest levels. Top five- and six-year-olds from participating nations receive invitations to compete at the World Championships for Young Dressage Horses, held each August in Verden, Germany.

Even if the Markel/USEF Young Horse program isn't right for your youngster, there are other, equally valid paths to success. The USEF national-level dressage tests (Training through Fourth Levels) are an excellent route for some horses. These classes can reward a correctly trained horse in a well-ridden test, even if he is not the flashiest mover.

If your horse is a super mover but needs show miles, the USDF Materiale or USEF Suitability classes could be an option. These group classes are great for horses that may not have the strength or focus for the transitions that are required in the dressage tests, and they are also an excellent opportunity to get the new-to-showing horse out in an environment with other young horses.

Scott's Tip: Encouraging Forward

If you have a young horse that isn't forward-thinking and you've ruled out a physical reason, why not try a canter behind a safe, calm horse? Give him a friend to catch up to! The herd instinct will naturally motivate him to go forward. He will learn in a relaxed, pleasurable manner that he can go forward instead of being forced to go forward by a rider.

Whichever path you choose, it's important that your horse is well prepared for his outing. This means that you have taken plenty of time to prepare him physically as well as mentally for the show experience.

Developing Strength and Stamina

One of the first things I notice about a top horse is how prepared he is for the job. When a horse is physically and mentally ready for what's being asked of him, his performance looks effortless and beautiful.

Of course, even the most naturally talented horse can't do the job on his own. A top equine athlete needs careful management, proper nutrition, correct training, and appropriate support for his emotional requirements. We must look at our young horses as developing athletes, just as we do with promising young human athletes. Gymnasts and ballet dancers get an early start to lay a proper foundation for ultimate performing brilliance; it's the same with our horses.

Strength and stamina are two often overlooked but very important elements in a dressage horse's training regimen. If you watch the horses in the Markel/USEF National Young Horse Championships, you will see some very fit animals. In Verden, at the World Championships, you will see even a notch up from there. They are well-muscled with strong, beautiful topline and a real presence. Europeans take fitness seriously in their dressage horses. They train according to a long-term plan, and it shows. Their horses are well trained, superbly conditioned, and prepared for the demands of the tests. We must realize that even a Materiale class is highly demanding, and the best horses are able to show brilliance going around and around the arena.

"Forward" is a key concept in all dressage training. Riding outside—in open fields, in the woods, on a track, or whatever you have access to—is great for the young horse's mind and also encourages him to "think forward." Keep in mind that forward is not the same as fast! A forward horse is relaxed and comfortable in his body and in a good rhythm.

Some horses don't mind daily arena work, but others get bored and sour. I encourage young-horse trainers to ride outside frequently. You can mix arena work with outdoor time: For example, if your horse has done a short period of super work in the arena, you could then go outside to build fitness. Keep the work as interesting as possible. As trainers, we need to literally look outside the box for ways to bring along our young dressage horses.

There are many ways of building strength in the young horse. As I mentioned previously, cavalletti are a super tool, especially in building rhythm and suspension. Riding out-

Training the Trainers: The Young Dressage Horse Trainers Symposium

It takes a special skill set to excel in the training of young dressage horses. To help develop the trainers who are responsible for starting tomorrow's stars, partners Harmony Sporthorses (CO) and Hassler Dressage (MD) co-sponsor the annual Young Dressage Horse Trainers Symposium.

Now in its sixth year, the program, led by Scott Hassler, covers all aspects of young-horse training and also explores more advanced work, such as collection, sequence changes, pirouettes, and half-steps, with the goal of giving trainers the skills they need to prepare young horses for the Grand Prix work.

To date, YDHTS participants Susanne Hassler, Jessica Jo Tate, Teresa Butta, David Blake, and Lars Holmberg have competed at the World Championships for Young Dressage Horses in Verden, Germany. Over the past three years, 38 YDHTS participants have ridden at the Markel/USEF Young Horse and Developing Horse National Championships. A total of 120 trainers from 33 states and Canada have taken part in the YDHTS, with many returning each year.

For more on the YDHTS program, visit hasslerdressage.com.



YOUNG-HORSE EXPERT: *Jessica Jo "JJ" Tate, a Young Dressage Horse Trainers Symposium participant, has competed at the World Championships for Young Dressage Horses. She's pictured riding the 2004 Oldenburg mare Rosentanz (Rosenthal – Wiesentanz), owned by Wild Oaks Ranch (TX).*



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HAPPY PAIR: Good preparation helps ensure a relaxed, confident performance at the show. Jessica Jo "JJ" Tate rides the 2003 Oldenburg stallion Rosall (Rosario – SPS Liberty), owned by Kent Island Sporthorses (MD).

side and doing hill work help to strengthen stifles. Riding outside also develops a horse's wind (aerobic capacity) and stamina and is wonderful for his mind. Used judiciously, proper lungeing is excellent.

The most important thing to keep in mind when conditioning a young horse is that fitness cannot be accomplished overnight. It takes time to build strength. Each horse has his own needs and timetable. It takes time and a long-term plan to prepare for the show ring.

Scott's Tip: The Warm-Up

If your horse is very fresh or excited, don't try to "ride the emotions out of him." Many riders overwork their horses, believing they are settling their nerves, but doing so can be counterproductive. An overly long warm-up can make a horse sore in the back, fatigued, and cranky.

Stick with a routine with which you and your horse are familiar. Your best chance for success is to have a plan, to learn to read your horse's mood, and to prepare him for the show experience well in advance.

Road Trips

You've prepared patiently and well, and your young horse is fit and his training is solid. However, it might not be time to enter that first big class just yet. One of the more overlooked aspects of competition is how your horse will adapt mentally to the show atmosphere. Every horse is different, and these early years are critical in setting your horse up for future success. Horses remember these experiences for life, so you want to make them as positive as possible.

One thing you can do to prepare your horse is to get him off property as often as you can. Take him to another farm, or perhaps to a small schooling show with a laid-back atmosphere. You must learn to read your horse's emotions and to anticipate his behavior when he's away from home. Does he get nervous around other horses? Explosive and excitable? Flat or dead to the leg? Outings can be stressful. Some horses will not sleep in unfamiliar surroundings and may come out of their stalls flat and tired. The performance of horses whose condition and stamina are marginal may fall off significantly as the show wears on.

If you and your horse are accustomed to working with few or no other horses around at home, trailer him some-

where where he will work among other horses prior to your first show experience. You will get a sense of how he reacts to other horses around him in a busy atmosphere. He'll get valuable exposure to a show-like environment, which will ensure the best experience possible at the actual show grounds.

At the Show

The much-anticipated event has finally arrived, and you and your young horse are safely at the show grounds. Even if you have prepared him well, you may still expect a few surprises here and there. He is, after all, a young horse! However, you can take confidence in remembering that you've done your homework. The only unknown at this point might be the all-important warm-up.

A good warm-up is a secret that top riders learn about early on. This is the time when knowing your horse is invaluable. For example, your horse may have a very narrow window of time where he remains "up" with positive energy. You don't want him to "peak" in the warm-up and have no horse left when it's time to go in the arena; nor do you want to under-school him if he is the type that needs more time. Too often, I see riders overschooling their horse in the warm-up. They wear their horses out and lose the optimal window of time for entering the ring. It all depends

on knowing how your horse's physical and emotional needs come together, and doing your best to see that he is ready at the right moment. It's not easy to do!

Shows and horses being what they are, you can also expect the unexpected. Scheduling delays, weather conditions, or an unexpectedly fresh horse can all pose challenges. Whatever happens, learn from the experience so you can use it to your advantage next time.

Physical and mental preparedness are key to your success as you head down center line with your young horse. If you make plans early and prepare thoroughly, you will help to ensure a positive experience for yourself and your youngster.

Scott Hassler is the USEF national young-dressage-horse coach. He is a member of the USEF Dressage and Breeders Committees and chair of the USDF Sport Horse Committee. As the sole representative for the sport of dressage, he serves on the USEF and USDF Strategic Planning Committees. At home, he is the director of training at Hassler Dressage at Riveredge, Chesapeake City, MD. He and his wife, Susanne, train students ranging from amateurs and junior/young riders to top professionals.

Emily Covington works at Hassler Dressage and is also the young-horse trainer at Blue Waters Farm in Chesapeake City, MD.

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