

## From Field to FEI: The Young-Horse Years

*Conclusion: The six-year-old year*

By Scott Hassler with Emily Covington  
Photographs by Richard Malmgren

**I**n our previous article in this series (December 2011/January 2012), we discussed the training of the five-year-old horse. As you now know, the five-year-old year is a transition year, during which the horse evolves from a young horse to a mature horse.

As trainers and riders, we want to know that our six-year-olds are mature and on track in their training and development: able to remain focused

should allow you to bend him through his back; and you should be able to collect him as well as to ride him forward. In a nutshell, you should have complete control of his body.

The ideal at this stage is that you are shaping your horse toward the Grand Prix work. Of course he's not a Grand Prix horse yet, but you want to be doing all the work now that is necessary leading to Grand Prix: collec-

pirouettes and some half-steps toward piaffe. It may be a bit early for passage, but this might be explored with a gifted horse. In terms of lateral work, half-passes, shoulder-in, and renvers in trot and canter should all be there. You should feel that your horse can offer tempo work that is very easy on your aids. You continue to refine your aids so that you can get a beautiful reaction from your horse.

Having said all that, very often horses are not on track. A horse can be "behind schedule" for any number of reasons. Perhaps your six-year-old is a mare who had a foal when she was younger, for instance. It's also really important to look at and consider your horse's concentration level. What is his mindset? His body strength? You have to customize the training for every situation and every horse.

### Is It Time for the Double Bridle?

A lot of people have strong beliefs about the use of the double bridle on a six-year-old. In my experience, some talented horses that are really on track in their training and schooling higher levels of collection may be ready for the double bridle. Keep in mind that we are now teaching this horse to really be able to load the hind legs for the canter pirouettes, for example, and for beautiful collection and half-step work. There are some horses that simply respond better and are lighter in the contact with the double bridle there to help them.

I know that my opinion may be contradictory to some approaches, but I'm a fan of using what works for the individual horse, not of rigidly following a program. There are some horses, for example, that in a snaffle tend to lean on the bit and lean on the forehead. The rider tries to keep the horse light and carrying himself, but she has to keep fixing the horse with strong or sharp aids. As a result, she isn't really getting to the hind legs, which she needs to do in order to develop the collected work. In some cases with such



**BRIGHT FUTURE:** At age six, the horse begins his dressage career in earnest. DG Bar Ranch (CA) head trainer Willy Arts rides the Dutch Warmblood gelding Adje (Rousseau x Jazz) in the 2011 Markel/USEF National Young Horse Dressage Championship, where he placed fifth.

in their work and giving us access to their bodies. By "access" I mean that you should be able to flex your horse easily in the positions you want; he

tion, lateral work, extension, carrying power, pushing power. A six-year-old that is on a good track should be doing all this work, including schooling



**ON TRACK:** *The Dutch Warmblood stallion Harmony's Davidoff Hit (Don Davidoff x Sandro Hit), pictured late in his six-year-old year, shows his talent for collection and piaffe while practicing half-steps with rider Susanne Hassler*

horses, they become much lighter and offer the work easily in a double bridle. When that occurs, I think the fairest thing for the horse is to use the double. (Of course, always introduce equipment correctly, and know that the double bridle, like all equipment, is only good in the correct hands.)

### Support His Strengths and Keep It Positive

It is very important during this stage for the trainer to try to assess the horse's strength level accurately. When you start this very strenuous work, keep in mind that this much collection at this age can exhaust a horse. Don't try to get it all at once; strength takes time to develop. I'm a fan of doing more of the collected work in canter than in trot, because canter is generally a better way to build fitness and develop proper use of the back. As always, that's a general rule. Some horses have a really big canter, and with these you might have better access to collection in the trot work. As I've stated many times, you have to train each horse as an individual.

During any schooling session, walk breaks are beneficial for most horses. Horses need to let their concentration down and let their muscles re-

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lax. In addition, I try not to work in any one gait for too long, and I like to leave something that you are working on when it's really good. Let's say you have been focusing on the canter work. Your horse feels super—the collection and impulsion, the half-passes and changes. You keep working, and then you start to feel him getting flat in the changes or heavy in the hand. That is rider error. You should have said, "You know, this is going really super, so let's take a walk break." End things on a high note.

Listen to your horse. Get to know what he's gifted at and what his weaknesses are. No single horse is perfect at everything. The better we understand this, the better and more effectively we can train our horses. Let's use the hind legs to build their confidence and to make them feel good about themselves. Build these pieces week by week and month by month to make them better. I believe that we must take as much time as needed to develop our horses' security and con-

fidence. Sometimes, in this way, you can turn a weakness into a strength.

## Outside the Arena

Variety in training is a bit more important in the horse's younger years, but of course we can still use variety in the six-year-old year. If you have access to hills and varied terrain, use them. Going up and down hills builds strength in a natural way. I don't think we can ever talk about nature too much. You can take your horse outside, maybe have a lighter day where he doesn't have to concentrate as hard.

Cavalletti work is always great, especially for a horse that is really quick in his tempo. I have jumping and eventing in my background, and I have used jumping and measured distances to help horses with huge canters understand how to come back and use their hind legs more underneath themselves. All of these options are useful and can help to keep your six-year-old fresh in his mind.

## Final Thoughts

We have finished our series with a picture of an ideally "on track" six-year-old. He is now a mature and confident athlete, able to explore the work that leads toward Grand Prix. This is a really fun stage of his life and training. You have given your young horse a solid foundation through the years. As a result, you can be confident in the education that you have given him, from the first bridle and saddle, to introducing half-halts and the show environment, to half-steps and collection in a correct, confidence-building, and progressive way.

Always remember to look at each horse as an individual. Continually assess and evaluate your training, tailoring and making adjustments as needed to make sure all is in your horse's best interests. ▲

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