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From Field to FEI: The Young-Horse Years

Part 6: The four-year-old year

By Scott Hassler with Emily Covington
Photographs by Richard Malmgren

Last month, I discussed the fundamentals of working with the three-year-old. If everything is on track so far, we should have a horse that has been ridden outside and that is continuing to develop confidence. He's been out in nature, and he's possibly also been taken off the farm to see how he handles other environments. In his training, you've begun to develop his back by introducing some sitting trot.

Now your young horse is four years old. This is the point in your youngster's life that—and I want to be careful with this word—dressage begins.

Accepting and Yielding to the Rider

When I refer to beginning real dressage work, I mean that you are going to start to teach your horse the fundamentals that he will need to eventually become a Grand Prix horse. These fundamentals begin with thinking of the horse's body and mind as belonging to the rider.

Your young horse must learn to yield his body to a rider. He has to begin to accept the concepts of compression, engagement, and changing his balance as requested by the rider's aids. He must also accept alignment, bending his body gently around the rider's leg. To be able to change his balance, he has to start using his hind legs and to "sit" and start to carry himself as he makes the transition from trot to walk. At the same time, he must not feel trapped by the aids or be restricted by them; he should not feel so controlled that he looks for a way out. Ideally, he will begin to understand that it feels better to make his back a little softer or more supple than it would be in nature.

FULL OF PROMISE: *The four-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding Citation ISF (Contango x Jazz), bred by Iron Spring Farm (PA) and owned and ridden by Alex Robertson (FL), placed eleventh in his division at the 2011 Markel/USEF National Dressage Championships. This horse shows the all the requirements needed for success in the national Four-Year-Old tests: good balance, nice self-carriage, and consistent connection. This horse also offers solid lengthenings, thereby meeting all the requirements of a good First Level test.*

Learn Your Horse's Highlights

Every horse is different. You can help your young horse by learning his strengths. For example, which gait does he prefer? You'll want to work in his best gait to develop fitness and confidence and also to help develop the weaker gaits.

In dressage, we frequently speak of developing the three basic gaits: walk, trot, and canter. Of course this is true, but I actually like to think of developing six gaits. Horses have strengths and weaknesses moving in each direction, in each gait. That's six "gaits" total! Let's say that your horse has a problem with the canter rhythm on the right lead but not on the left. If you continue to go along in a right-lead canter that is not quite pure, you actually may inhibit that canter. Evaluate your horse's gaits thoroughly and carefully. Know his strengths and weaknesses, and build from there.

Lengthenings

As I've discussed in previous articles, another area in which riders need to be careful and conservative is in

schooling trot and canter lengthenings. Even if your horse can lengthen easily, don't ride them too often or to show off. It's easy to overtax a horse and cause him to start moving wide behind—a problem that can be difficult to fix because the horse has learned a way to avoid the difficulty of the movement.

Think about the key components of a lengthening: self-carriage; balance; pushing from the hind legs with the forehand elevating; and a longer, fluid, reaching stride. If a horse is truly stepping underneath his center of gravity with his hind legs and lightening his forehand, it's rare that he will move wide behind. As with all training, it is much easier in the long run to take your time than to push too hard and later have to retrain.

Connection: Creating a Conversation

The four-year-old horse has to learn to accept a nice connection with his rider. Connection means much more than simply accepting the bit in his mouth. Connection is a consistency in the weight of the rein in your hands. It also implies that the horse becomes "pliable" or amenable to your finger pressure. You want the feeling that he is "with" your hand, not against it.

Connection happens when impulsion comes through the rider's seat and leg and through the horse's entire topline, without any resistance, all the way to the hand. The horse should feel this connection from your seat and want to work with you. When you ask a question up there, you want to feel a beautiful offer from your horse.

I like to think of connection as a conversation with the horse. The stiffer the horse, or the harder he feels in my hand, the more he seems to be yelling at me. That's not a very pleasant conversation. My goal is a friendly conversation. If I ask a small question, such as "I'd like to have a little flexion to the right, maybe half an inch," I'd like for my horse to respond with "Sure, what's up?", not "Sorry, not hap-

pening!" You can also only have a conversation with someone who is listening and responding to what you say. It's not a whole lot of fun to talk to yourself.

Goals for Your Four-Year-Old

The US Equestrian Federation has a national-level Four-Year-Old test, culminating in the USEF/Markel national-

Tack and Equipment

GOOD FIT: *This horse's bit and bridle fit him well. In order to establish correct connection, the horse must be comfortable in his mouth, so bit and noseband selection and fitting are especially important.*

As you build connection with your four-year-old, keeping him comfortable in his mouth is an integral part of that process.

I'm not a fan of trying a million different bits; I'm simple and old-fashioned that way. Certainly the old masters did a great job training horses. We don't need a miracle in a tool box with hundreds of different bits and gadgets.

In general, I think different horses prefer different amounts of tongue pressure, whether from a double- or a single-jointed bit. Some have sensitive bars, so you may need to experiment to find the mouthpiece thickness and weight that he prefers.

Bit designs vary with their intended use and purpose. For example, let's say you have a stiffer horse that needs help learning how to flex and bend. With such a horse, you wouldn't want use a bit that's so "nice" that the ring pulls through the mouth and the opposing ring presses into the horse's cheekbone. In this case, I would rather use a bit that is more fully faced on the sides of the horse's head, such as a full-cheek snaffle, so that it helps to bring the horse's head around. This type of bit doesn't pull through the mouth and therefore won't make the mouth sore.

Be careful with your horse's mouth. If you hurry or use rough or strong hands, he may learn at a young age to play with his tongue because the bit is a scary thing. This is a very hard habit to fix later!

Another important factor in the horse's comfort is the noseband. Once again, every horse is different, so you'll need to find the type he likes the best. (However, what a horse likes isn't always about "freedom." The horse has to accept a little bit of compression; so have some boundaries in mind.) I couldn't care less about bridle or noseband trends; I'm an advocate for the horse. If a horse goes best in a drop noseband, then I will put him in one, even if some might consider it old-fashioned. Keep in mind that a horse may go best in different nosebands at different stages of his training and development, so be willing to adapt to his needs.

Especially now that you're beginning to sit the trot more and asking your young horse to use his back and yield his body to the rider, ensure that your saddle fits correctly. Have a qualified saddle fitter check the fit periodically, as horses can change in size and shape significantly as they grow and develop.

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championships program. To be able to handle the demands of the test, a horse must be consistent in his balance and self-carriage, understand connection, have very nice trot lengthenings, and show the ability to do First Level movements, all with solid basics.

Many four-year-olds are not ready for this level of competition. If your youngster is insecure and needs more time, or if he's gone through some growing stages that you didn't want to push through, relax. There's no hurry. There is not a set repertoire of movements that you must be schooling right now. Even a very talented young horse does not need to do the national championships. The most important thing is to build your horse up as he feels ready.

I always recommend getting some outside advice if you feel your horse is not ready to advance, or if you've hit a training snag. Perhaps the horse really is not ready, or perhaps there's an issue you ought to ride through. Talk it through with a respected and trusted expert instead of immediately backing off.

Along the way, make sure that your young horse is receiving the proper nutrition and that his fitness level is adequate. In general, the Europeans do a better job of developing their young horses. I don't mean this negatively. Although the US is doing a great job and has developed much more of a national focus, the Europeans have much more experience in this area. As a rule, young horses in Europe have a much greater degree of fitness than horses in this country. This is a very real advantage. I think a four-year-old is a horse that is ready to really start to work. We can't have a big hay belly or no muscles. We want to have an athlete to develop. The horse must accept the work at this stage, and he will only be helped through a higher degree of fitness.

At the same time, the four-year-old's mind is generally still immature. Young horses are like young children. A four-year-old is roughly equivalent to a middle-schooler. He should learn how to focus and concentrate, but he also needs breaks and variety. The young horse needs plenty of walk breaks, hacks, and time to relax and "be a horse." As a rider and trainer, you must learn how your horse thinks and works. How long does he like to work? How does he start up after a walk break?

Our job as riders is not to make our horses suitable to our program. You are starting the focus toward dressage, and you must find ways to do it together. The relationship between horse and rider is important. The four-year-old should know rules and boundaries yet be allowed to be a bit playful and to make some honest—not resistant—mistakes. ▲

Next month: The five-year-old year.

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Emily Covington works for Hassler Dressage in the fields of media and design. She is an active rider and trainer and has started many young dressage horses.

Correction

The USDF "Rider-Awards Roundup" (July/August) incorrectly stated that only one USDF member, Janne Rumbough, has earned all six Master's Challenge Awards. In fact, a second member, Mary Grace Davidson, of Walnut Creek, CA, has equaled Janne's achievement. Congratulations to Mary Grace and our apologies for the oversight.