



To enhance your horse's paces, reaction and control are two of the foundations you must have in place

Speedy reactions, complete control

You can ride a transition and use a half-halt, but if you haven't got the foundations of reaction and control nailed first, your aids won't be as effective as you'd like, says world-class dressage judge **Stephen Clarke**

IF YOU BUILD A house on weak foundations, eventually it will crumble. The same goes for training a horse to do dressage. Dressage judge and trainer Stephen Clarke, whose down to earth and common sense approach to training means he's always in high demand, states that it's important to truly understand what dressage is and have the correct foundations in place in order to help your training progress.

"For me, dressage is about starting a horse as a three-year-old with the clear aim

that one day this horse will compete at grand prix level," says Stephen, talking at a Centaur Biomechanics rider workshop. "In order for that to happen, the basis of his training has to be thorough and correct."

He adds that dressage is simply enhancing a horse's natural paces. Our job as the rider, in order to develop the paces, is about:

- Reaction to the aids
- Acceptance of the aids
- Suppleness
- Throughness



MEET THE EXPERT

STEPHEN CLARKE is a world-renowned dressage judge. He's judged at all the major dressage competitions including the World Equestrian Games (WEG), Europeans and the Olympics. He's competed internationally and holds regular training clinics around the world.

When you combine these four things together – and this will take time – your horse will develop strength and carrying power.

This means he can move his centre of gravity further back towards the hindlegs, becoming light and mobile in his shoulders, enabling him to work with elastic and expressive paces.

Your horse has to understand that he must move forwards from your leg into a quiet contact



Control and reaction

The first thing that all horses should learn is to go forward from your leg into a quiet and accepting rein contact. This needs to be established before you can begin to influence him in any way.

"You can train a horse to go forwards, but it's difficult to train a horse to want to go forwards," explains Stephen.

You also need control, but you won't have control unless your horse is in front of the leg. When your horse understands these two foundations, you can think about what to do to make engagement, self-carriage and suppleness actually happen.

Creating reactions

Riding transitions will help you establish the two basic principles of reaction and control.

"Transitions help to create the reactions we want," explains Stephen, "but you can ride 1,000 transitions and they'll have no beneficial effect on your horse's way of

going if you ride them in the wrong way."

Stephen explains that riding good transitions is about training yourself to sit still and create reactions, rather than helping your horse too much.

His advice is to focus on your position, so you sit quietly, sit tall and make a soft fist out of each hand that maintains an elastic, non-backward contact.

Whizz, bang, pop

In an upward transition, for example from walk to trot, Stephen wants to see the horse react after just one aid. He should spring forwards to a soft, quiet hand and then the rider should sit quietly with legs relaxed.

"If your horse doesn't go forwards when asked, then remind him the stride afterwards that you expected a little bit more whizz, bang, pop. When he gives you that, you sit quietly like a mouse," he says.

Stephen explains that a downward

"As riders we're very good at training horses to be dull to our aids. I want riders to feel like they just sit there and the horse does the work"

transition is about the rider's position influencing the engagement of the hindlegs, followed by the rider's hand closing around the rein against the forward movement.

From this, the horse has to find a way to shift his weight backwards and come down a gear. Once your horse has made the transition, your job is to reward him by relaxing through your body and opening your hand slightly.

UNDERSTANDING THE AIDS

Stephen simplifies what each aid mean.

"Your horse should go forwards from your inside leg and accept the contact on the outside rein, which controls the outside shoulder," he says.

"Your outside leg controls the quarters, and the inside rein looks after the flexion

and gives the horse his direction."

Your horse needs to understand that he'll be controlled by the outside aids and activated and supplied by the inside, to the point where you feel it's possible to release the inside rein and your horse will still hold his own bend.

Changing the frame

Finally, Stephen discusses how riders should be able to fully influence where their horse's head and neck is. "When I'm judging, I see lots of horses going in what I'd call half-way house mode," he says. "They're almost up to the bridle but not quite. They're half an inch behind the vertical rather than genuinely taking the contact forwards into a natural position. In that frame, a horse won't be able to benefit from the use of a real half-halt."

If your horse is behind the vertical and a little low at the poll when you make a half-halt, that connection doesn't take the weight momentarily to the hindlegs – all it really does is shorten the neck even more.

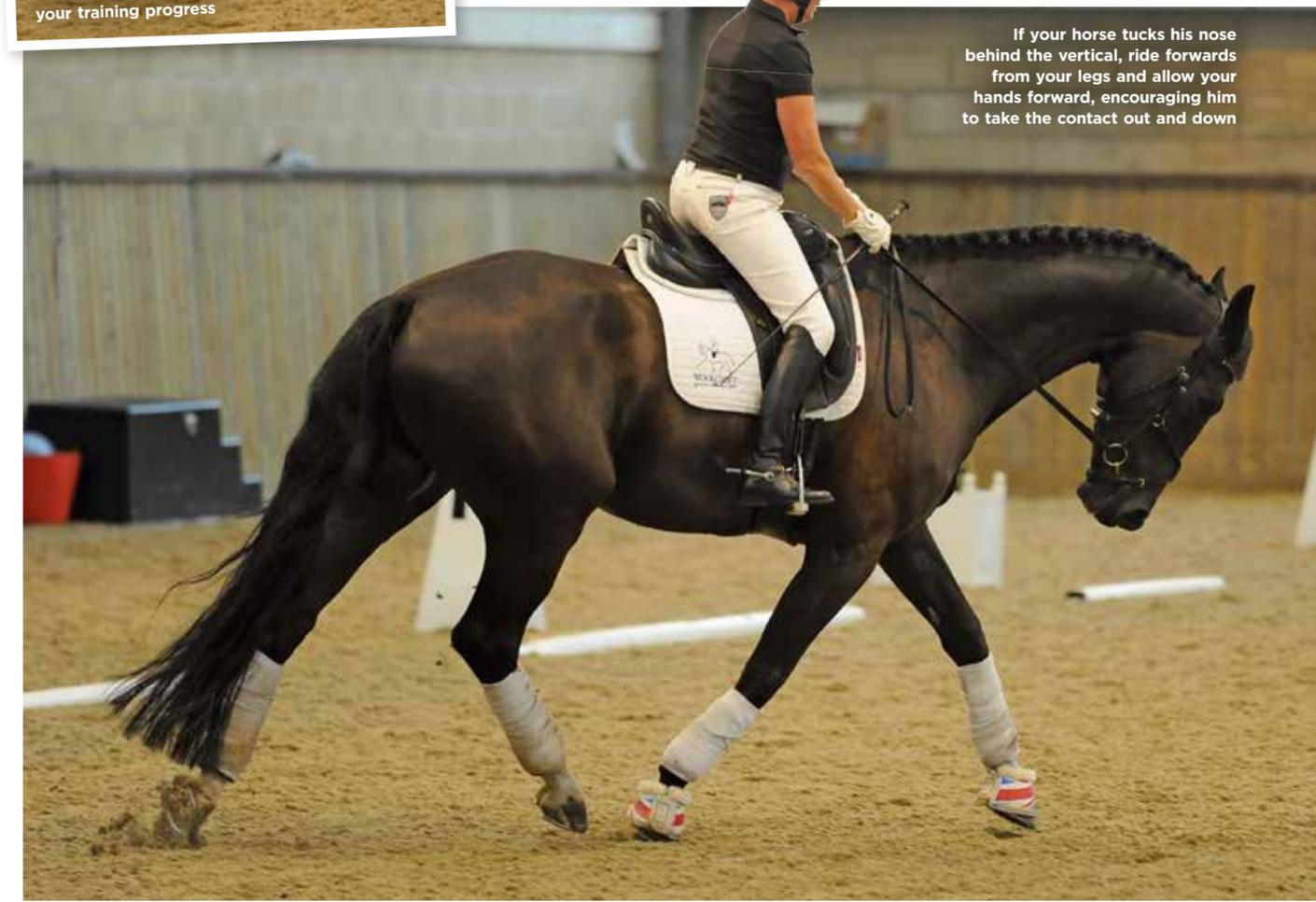
"When I'm training, I try to make it clear that you either have the horse stretched – through and loose in a low, long frame – or you have him properly up to the bridle, with his poll at the highest point of his neck and his nose line slightly in front of the vertical. The horse is working into a genuine contact point. Until that's made clear, or if it's never made clear, there will always be a limit on how well you can train the horse."

Stretching matters

Stephen advises varying the frame you ask your horse to work in while schooling. You shouldn't keep him in the same frame for any length of time. It's all about elasticity and suppleness and not about



Having a thorough understanding of what all the aids mean will help your training progress



If your horse tucks his nose behind the vertical, ride forwards from your legs and allow your hands forward, encouraging him to take the contact out and down

keeping the muscles under pressure for too long. When you feel you have your horse in front of your leg and in balance, see if you can influence where he puts his head and neck.

"You're going to suggest that he puts his neck lower and then, as he does, allow the rein to go a bit longer, but don't lose contact," says Stephen.

"I want him to feel that he's allowed to step forwards and take that contact point forwards and down. It's about establishing that connection from your leg to your hand and then, as a reward, allowing that contact point to be taken forward."

Stephen explains that you'll find this easiest to ride on a circle to start. Beware that, at first, your horse may not understand what you're asking. Try not to overreact and over-ride, just wait, keep riding forwards and suggest with your hand that you want him to follow the contact point down and out.

Stephen stresses that throughout this work you need to check that you're working from your leg to your hand, before you try to influence him with the rein contact to encourage him to stretch lower and allowing him to take the contact point forwards.

■ With thanks to Russell Guire and the team at Centaur Biomechanics for their help with this feature. Find out more at centaurbiomechanics.co.uk.

“An upward transition creates and produces energy and forwardness. A downward transition is about shifting weight onto the hindlegs”

AN EVEN CONTACT

Riding with your reins in one hand is an exercise Stephen uses a lot, especially with younger horses. It offers a perfectly equal, stable contact point that your horse can't avoid and the rider can't fiddle with the reins to compensate.

What you're trying to establish is that he's in front of you and there at the end of both reins — accepting the bridle, working forwards from behind into it. Now, just wait for him to step forwards into it and take that contact point forwards and down. You want to feel your horse is pulling a little more into the contact. Once you have that feeling, take your reins back into two hands and try to keep the same feeling and frame. 🐾

Riding one handed helps establish a stable and consistent contact



NEXT MONTH:
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and engagement