

The Dressage Training Scale: Prerequisites

If you've studied dressage in the past, you may have learned the training scale, a six-level pyramid of increasingly advanced concepts. The first three levels are the building blocks to connection, or getting your horse on the bit.

RHYTHM: The first requirement is rhythm, referring to the pattern of your horse's footfalls. The set pattern in the walk, trot and canter should always sound the same, although the tempo can be changed by speeding up or slowing down the footfalls.

"Part of being in a working gait—where your horse most easily balances himself—is a regular rhythm and a comfortable tempo; not too fast and not too slow," says dressage clinician and author Jane Savoie.

SUPPLENESS: Once a horse has developed a steady rhythm, the next goal in training is suppleness. "This refers to your horse's ability to smoothly change his balance forward and back and side to side," says Savoie. "This requires both lateral suppleness through his side and longitudinal suppleness over his topline." Your horse's muscles need to be loose and elastic through the poll, neck, shoulders, back and hips to accomplish this (See "Keys to Suppleness," pg. 42).

CONTACT/CONNECTION: "You should have 'inviting' or 'sympathetic' contact before you try to put your horse on the bit," says Savoie. "When you give the connecting aids to put your horse on the bit, you're asking him to go forward into your hand, so your hand must be inviting and sympathetic."

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