TRUE COLLECTION

You won't find it in a "frame" or a head set. No, says Dr. Deb, the perfect posture for ridden performance is shaped by your horse's spine.

Note: This article has an amusing history. Not every piece that appears in *Equus Magazine* under my authorship provokes strong positive – or negative – reactions from readers, but in response to this article I got one letter that was a real "flamer." The reader who wrote it was angry, not because he or she disagreed with anything I had to say, but specifically because "….not being on the United States Olympic Equestrian Team, Dr. Bennett, you have *no right to know* these things."

Interestingly enough, this was not the first time I had encountered this belief. The form in which I usually find it is in the rider to whom I suggest in a clinic that she might like to try performing a new maneuver, such as a shoulder-in or walk pirouette, for the benefit of her horse. The rider looks down at me in blank amazement and says, "But….I can't do that movement."

"Why not?" I will ask. "We went over the concept and the aid sequence before – were you unclear on that?"

"Well, no," she will say. "I think I'm pretty clear on how to do it."

"Well, then, why do you say you can't do it?"

"Because," she will say with an unhappy expression on her face — "pirouettes are 'upper level' movements and I'm only at Training Level!"

And my answer, of course, is: well then honey, how did you ever plan on being able to finish your horse? Or *were* you planning on it – did you have any mental picture of yourself actually completing the work? Were you secretly depending upon somebody else – your 'trainer' perhaps – to do it for you?

This is why I tell people over and over again: *You don't need a trainer.* You may ride with a friend whom you respect, you may ask advice of this friend, you may receive certain lessons from this friend, and you may even have to pay this friend for their time. But you don't need a trainer because you take full responsibility for developing your own horse!

You also don't need "levels" because "levels" are traps. Other than within very broad limits, there is no "set order" in which things must be done. Each horse is different and the wise horseman responds to the needs he perceives each horse to have. When I say "you don't need levels," I mean anybody's levels: the levels promoted by the Parelli system, the levels promoted by the U.S.D.F. or the F.E.I., the levels that are even creeping into reining, hunter-hack, and pleasure classes. Your *horse* never heard of levels – but your girlfriends have. And they, although they may say they love you and care about you, are almost inevitably going to work at pigeonholing you – keeping you in what they consider to be "your proper place." This is human nature. I know this not only from my own experience but by watching what happens to my students who start getting much more skillful: suddenly their girl "friends" begin telling them that *they have no right to know.* Yet the only riders

I have ever seen succeed have been those who have been willing to tell their friends – and "the system" at large — to mind their own business and go ride their own horse.

Those who discover on their own the deep truths and the effective skills are, of course, the *only* ones who have a right to know. They have earned the knowledge. They have not been merely "instructed", but rather, they have a grasp of all the necessary skills and insights right down in their guts. My greatest wish for every student is that they might join that elite cadre whose medal of honor is won through *being willing to experiment and fail.* It's the only way.

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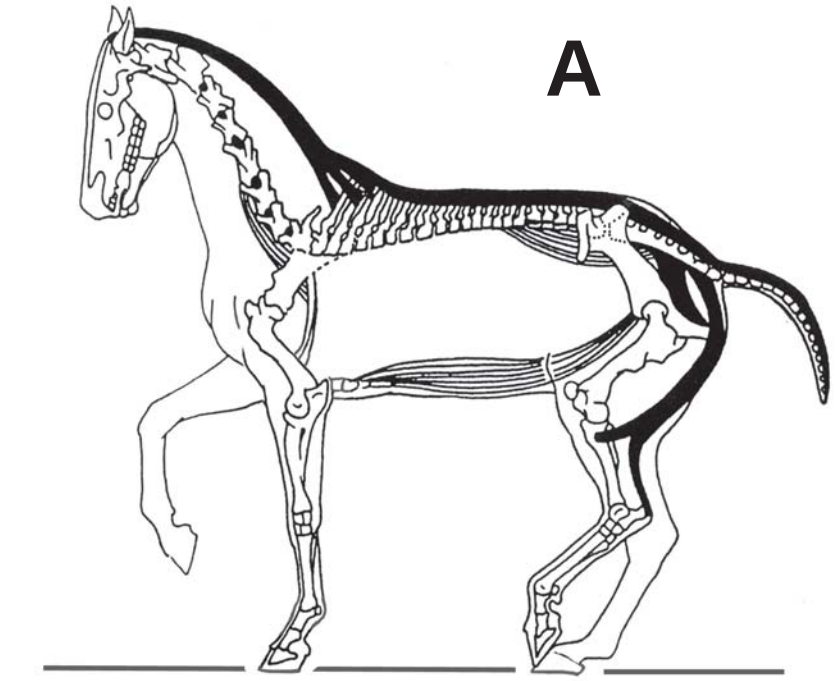
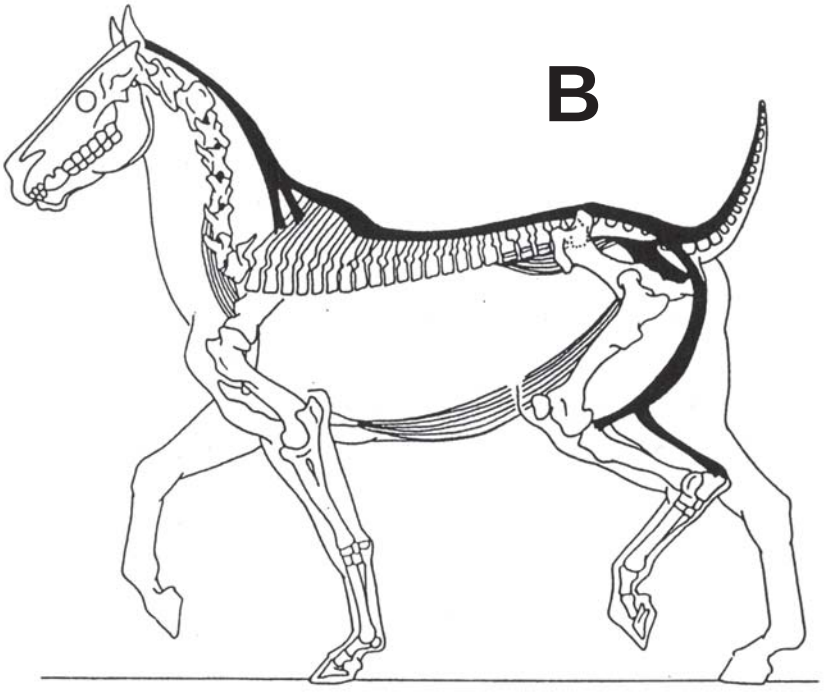
TRUE COLLECTION

Introduction

Have you ever wished your horse would show more of a happy, willing, and keen attitude? Wished, perhaps, that the horse would, for once, offer a movement or part of a pattern without your having to crank it





These skeletal views make it clear why collection is defined as "a particular posture that makes weight-bearing easiest for the horse." In collection, three key points along the vertebral column arch upward: (1) the loins coil (2) the part of the back that would be under the saddle arches upward (3) the base of the neck is raised relative to the loins. Horse A produces an ideal piaffe, a highly collected trot-in-place; horse B trots forward completely "upside-down" -- an example of anti-collection. Both images are taken directly from photos of real horses. Notice how different the placement, weighting, strikedown, and swinging of the legs is in A vs. B. This illustrates a law: *vertebral dynamics govern limb dynamics*, or put more simply, whatever the back, neck, and loins are doing governs what the limbs can do.

Happiness is .... a beautiful, light ride .... your best friend carrying you easily atop a strong, supple back .... rhythmic, even movement flowing from one maneuver to the next. This photo was taken of Painty and me in 1993 at “practice” (or is it more like “at play”?). We’re in a slow, relaxed canter on the left lead. Painty is bent to the left for the left pirouette which we are just about to begin. My horse is collected and the reins are “draping” -- that is to say, Painty and I are totally “in contact” through reins that are filled with life. We are one body.

out of him? Dreamt of the perfect piaffe, sliding stop, spin or flying change of lead? Such maneuvers are offered willingly out of a state of true collection. Along with collection come ideal bit contact, lightness and self-carriage, and from these arise every movement in every division of any sort of competition that anyone has ever thought beautiful. For all sound horses are Grand Prix masters until people climb onto their backs. In order to have the desirable and beautiful things, riders have to learn, literally and conceptually, to get out of their horses’ way. I am here to shout from the housetops that collection, *freely offered by the horse,* is something you can have. Let us begin with the concepts.

Seeing Through to the Core

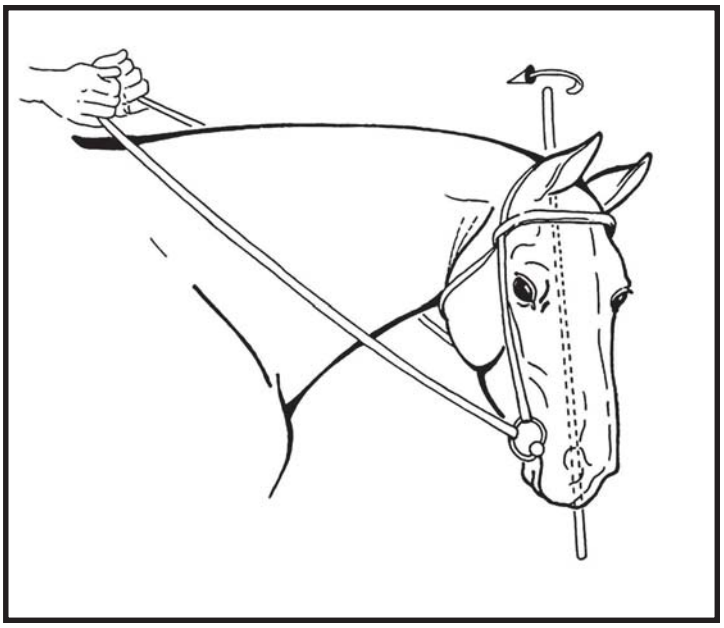
The external appearance of collection – the arched neck, the full back, the back-to-front shortening of the body – is created by changes in the shape of the vertebral column. It is this bony column the rider sits on, this which he directly stimulates with leg and seat, this which provides him feedback not only about the state of the horse’s torso and neck but also about the position and movement of his feet. An onlooker’s ability to accurately judge the degree of collection, self-carriage and lightness in a horse depends on the ability to see (and feel) through to the horse’s core.

A working definition of collection focuses on what happens to the shape of the horse’s vertebral column. Through a process of selective muscular contraction and decontraction the horse changes his posture so he is able to move fluidly while carrying weight on his back. In order to attain this posture of collection, this particular shape of the vertebral column, the horse has to do three things:

First and foremost, he coils his loins (the muscles of the topline need to already be in release for this to occur efficiently and comfortably).

Then, the relaxation of the muscles of the topline, from poll to hock, permits him to raise the center of his back.

Finally, collection is complete when the horse raises the base of his neck.
Discussions of ideal bit contact and its postural prerequisites are found throughout the equestrian literature, which is more than 3,000 years old. The venerable Xenophon, the Greek cavalry general whose equestrian writings have, in many respects, never gone out of style, cut to the heart of the issue in the fourth century B.C.: “If one induces the horse to assume that carriage which it would adopt of its own accord when displaying its beauty, then, one directs the horse to appear joyous and magnificent, proud and remarkable for having been ridden.”



The snaffle bit is an excellent tool for twirling the head. To twirl the head is to cause the skull to swivel as illustrated around an imaginary longitudinal axis. Externally, this makes it appear that the horse’s inside jowl is tucking under its throat. Baucher, in the nineteenth century, and many others after him, have called this maneuver a “jaw flexion.” It is not itself a movement of the jaw, but of the skull at the joint which connects the skull to the neck. The purpose of twirling the head is NOT to show how far around your horse can swivel his head, and it is NOT to stretch muscles in the neck. Rather, we twirl the head in order to provoke or obtain *release* -- the turning “off” -- of unnecessary contractions or bracing of the muscles of the neck. When neck muscles stop bracing, very often the muscles of adjoining body zones, such as the back and the jaws, also “turn loose.” The horse must release the muscles all along the topline, from the jaw joints to the soles of the hind feet, before it will be easy for him to achieve or maintain collection.

The horse at liberty is undeniably beautiful and “when displaying its beauty” is the living definition of collection. In the ridden horse, the function of the bit cannot be to stop or slow the horse, “frame” him, set his neck, make his face vertical or rock him back on his hindquarters. “Going onto the bit,” as the old saw says, is something the horse does to the bit, not something the bit does to the horse.

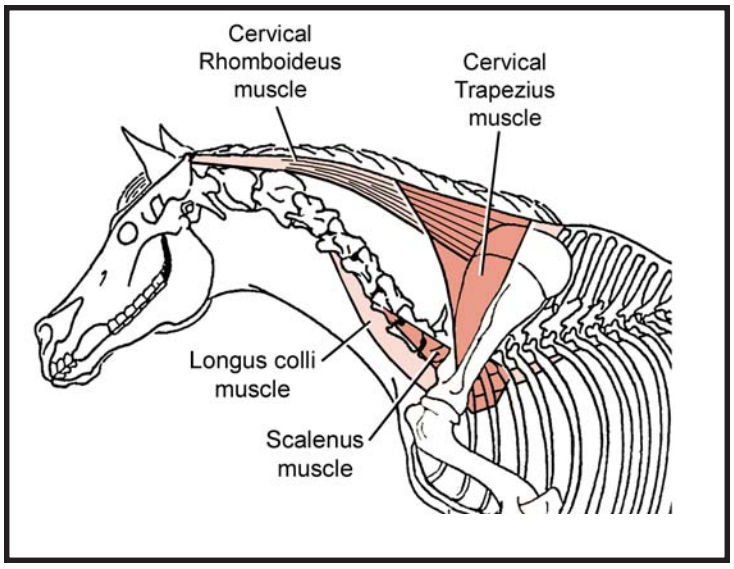
The Bit as Enabler

The snaffle bit (or the ancient Perso-Hispanic bitless version, the haquima or bosal) has three functions, two of which relate to opening gateways of flexibility, thereby enabling energy transfer from back to front within the mounted horse’s neck. These gateways are specific joints, which, in the normal unmounted horse, are unjammed, flexible, and “open” to energy transference. To touch a muscle, however, is to stimulate it to contract, so the very act of sitting down on a horse induces the most undesirable contractions that impede energetic movement.

The first of the gateways lies at the poll joint. The snaffle bit is a well-designed tool for inducing the horse to flex his head side-to-side at that joint. As long ago as 1833, François Baucher, a French master of High School equitation, began exploring the beneficial effects of this so-called “jaw flexion.” I prefer the term “head twirling,” as it describes what actually occurs: the skull and jaws as a unit rotate around an imaginary axis that runs the length of the head from poll to incisors. When the horse twirls his head correctly, his ears remain on one level while the jowl tucks under the neck on the side toward which the head is turned. The twirling motion triggers reflexive decontraction of the deep musculature of the neck and the whole topline.

The snaffle's second function is to act as a crutch for the base of the neck. For the horse to go correctly "on the bit" or to "look through the bridle," *he must raise the base of his neck*. The scalenus and longus colli muscles, underslinging the base of the neck like a hammock, lift upward from below, raising the neck bones above. In a horse whose topline muscles are sufficiently relaxed, the uplifting action of the scalenus-longus colli complex comes to be aided by the coordinated contractions of the front part of the longissimus dorsi muscle, which pull the base of the neck upward (if you are following this discussion with an anatomy text at your elbow, some books differentiate the anterior part of the longissimus dorsi as the spinalis et semispinalis complex).

The raising of the base of the neck unjams the vertebral joints in this body zone, permitting energy transference by widening and making shallower the U-shaped curve formed by the bones there. This also makes the neck lengthen, arching it and shooting the head forward and down in a "neck-telescoping gesture." Hands fixed with reference to the saddle bows, however, will, at the very least, block this action of the neck and, with any backward or downward movement, will press the vertebrae together here, forcing the base of the neck downward.



Every joint in the body has one set of muscles which move it one way and another set which move it the opposite way. Such groups of muscles are called antagonists. The antagonists which operate the base of the neck are the longus colli and scalenus muscles, which act to raise the base of the neck, and the cervical rhomboideus and trapezius muscles, which act to make it sink. The vertebrae of the lower neck and anterior thorax form a chain that describes a "U" shape. The longus colli underslings this chain. When the longus colli contracts (gets shorter from end to end), the base of the neck is raised as a child is raised by four adults pulling on the corners of a blanket in the Eskimo game of "blanket-tossing." Since the vertebral chain is a connected whole, raising the base of the neck is much easier and the horse can raise it farther if the loins coil and all the muscles of the topline are in release (un-braced or decontracted).

Of course, the other factor which forces the base of a horse's neck down is contraction of the rhomboideus and trapezius muscles which root above the lower vertebral curve and which are the antagonists to the scaleni and longus colli. When the rider "fixes" her hands continuously or exerts continuous backward traction on the reins – even if this traction is of small magnitude – she imitates a chronically tight rhomboideus and produces the same effect: her horse will be high-headed, stiff in the back, hard to turn and impossible to collect.

The "natural" longus colli and scalenus muscles, which is what a green horse comes equipped with, do not have the strength to overcome the contractions a rider's presence – and poor technique – will induce in his back and neck muscles, let alone to resist hands that are fixed with the intention of forcing the horse's head into a frame. The snaffle bit and reins are needed to crutch the muscles that lift the base of a horse's neck – not to help those that make him go hollow! To re-create in the mounted horse the same quality and fluidity of movement he had before he was mounted, the rider needs to:

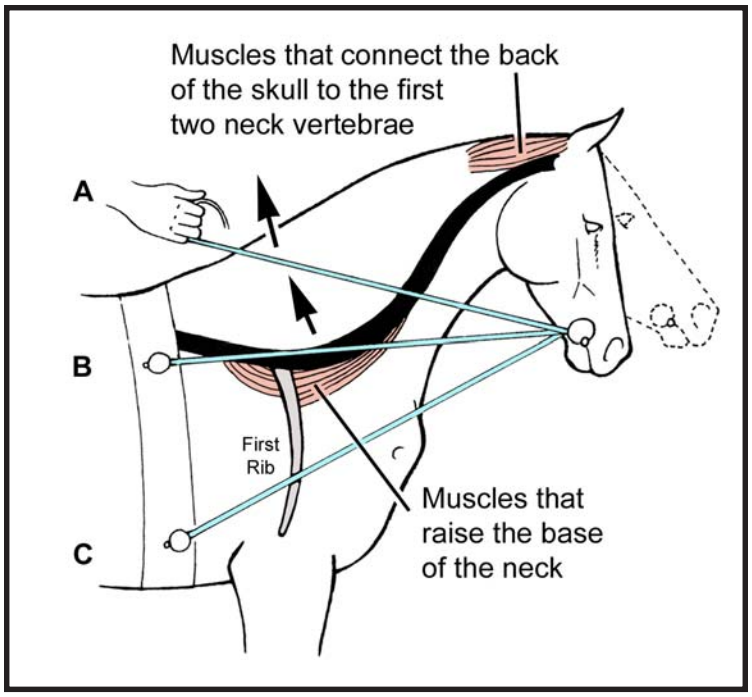
■ Open all the gateways in the horse's back and neck. To "open a gateway" means to cause muscles which jam the neck bones together to relax or "release". The muscles of the topline at the poll and along the crest of the neck must be released before the muscles which raise the base of the neck can "win".

■ Strengthen all the muscles lying below the vertebral column, of which the scaleni and longus colli, that raise the base of the neck, are two of the most important.

■ When the geometry of bit and reins relates correctly to that of the neck, the effect of the scalenus and longus colli are magnified, and the muscles are also given the opportunity to strengthen beyond natural bounds.

Riding Light and Straight

The "frame" rider offers his horse a "square feel", that is, hands fixed with reference to the saddle bows. Yet, an unremitting square feel is an excellent way of causing the muscles of the topline of the neck to contract. When they do, the horse will pry his nose up and try to raise his poll, while the base of the neck sinks and bulges forward. The rider then feels a "hard mouth." But there is no such thing as a hard mouth. What the rider perceives as the mouth is really the horse's stiff (braced) neck, plus any heaviness created by teaching him to stiffen his whole topline and rush forward. Twirling the head, by contrast, necessarily means *never using the two hands in the same way at the same time*. If the head is twirled, the muscles of the topline of the neck soon relax. Gravity will then automatically grant a vertical face. Rather than ambitiously "taking" contact, the rider who knows how to twirl the head permits the horse to offer the vertical face that's part of true collection.



If the rider hopes to help his horse to "round up" and achieve collection, he must understand the implications of this diagram, which shows various possible relationships of the line of the rein (blue) to the S-shaped vertebral chain within the horse's neck (black). In the normal position for riding (A), the line of the rein cuts far above the dipping curve which forms the base of the neck. Anytime the rider pulls on the reins, he will therefore oppose the muscles that raise the base of the neck. The leverage advantage lies with the reins and they will "win" -- in other words, pulling back on the reins makes the base of the neck sag and sink. The only way that the horse can raise the base of its neck when ridden in the normal manner is for the rider to be sure that if his hands move, it is either one rein at a time or both of them *toward the horse*. Even when neither of the rider's hands moves, the *energy within the reins* should always be moving forward toward the horse's head. Since side reins cannot "give", to do any good they must be preadjusted so that when the horse trots, they will cut through or below the curve at the base of the neck (B). Very low reins -- i.e. any kind of "tiedown" or draw rein (C) -- will cause the horse to pry up against the restriction, bracing the muscles that connect the skull to the neck and those along the crest of the neck. To help you understand this picture, a complete series of comparison photos follows on the next several pages.

What happens to horses that are longed or ridden in draw reins, running martingales, or tiedowns: the muscles along the crest of the neck become tight, shortened. Photo A shows a classic example in action; the draw reins have been removed for the show, but one cannot remove the ugly development and wrong functioning that they have produced! Photo B is a blowup with the lumpy "false crest" formed by the over-developed rhomboideus muscle outlined in white.

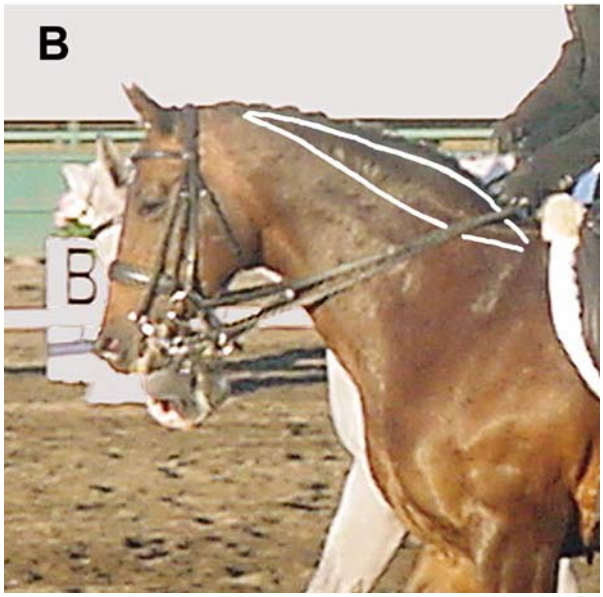
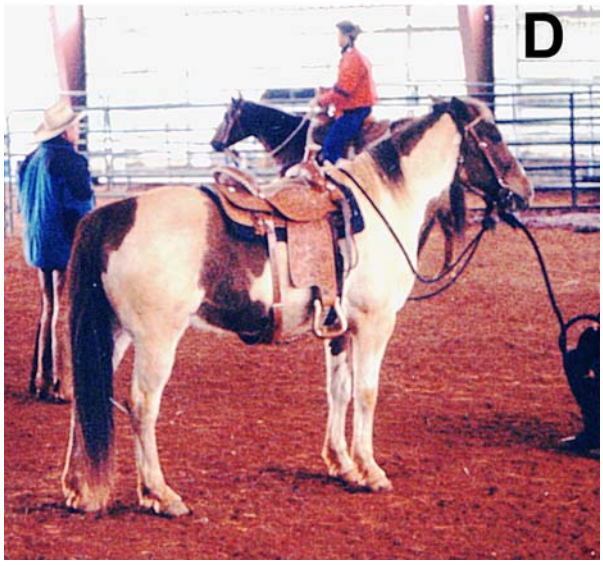
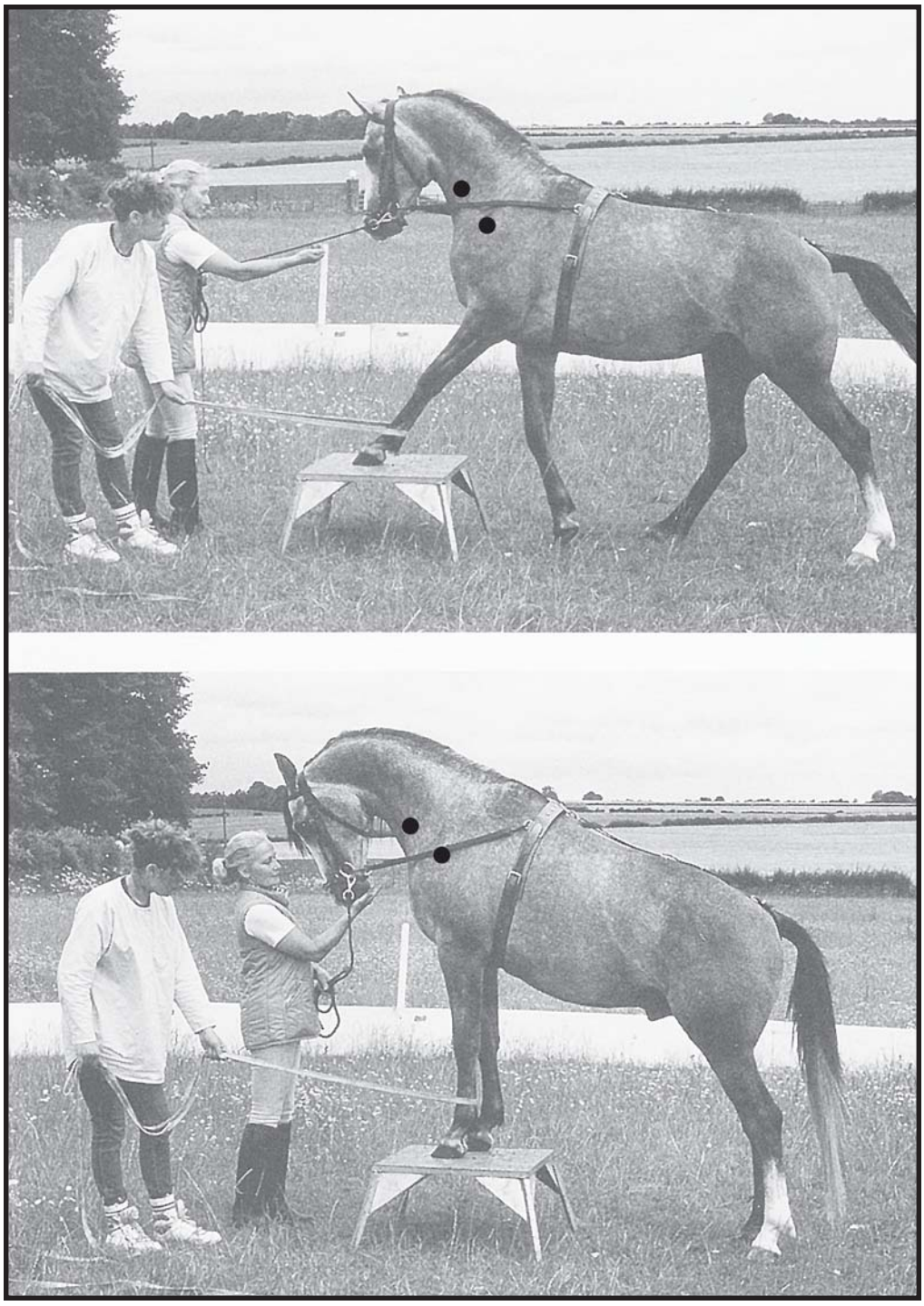


Photo C shows a fellow who does a lot of competitive roping; he always rides his horses in tiedowns. The animal is beautifully conformed and workmanlike in his attitude and understanding, but like the horse in A, he tends to be high-headed. The cowboy in C has not been willing to admit to himself the obvious fact that the photo reveals:



so long as the tiedown is on the animal, the animal will continually be "testing" it by prying his nose up or raising his head. Even tiny efforts add up; and what they soon add up to is that you feel that you can't take the tiedown off. It always amuses me when riders try to justify the use of these devices, because they are kidding themselves. All that tiedowns do, or can do, is to strengthen the very muscles that raise the horse's head, help him poke his nose out, and drop the base of his neck. When you take the tiedown off, the horse is not only higher-headed than before, but more restive, since you've also caused the muscles of the back and loins to get that much tighter. Photo D shows a horse that appears to have a rather short neck. It isn't short due to structure but rather to the tightening of the muscles running along the crest. It will take many weeks or months of skillful riding to help him learn to move properly under a rider -- in an "envelope of release." (Deb Bennett photos).



What teaching the horse to mount the drum does for him: it is a superb way to give the horse the experience of assuming the posture of collection -- with one-tenth the work and ten times the fun, enjoyment, and learning. The upper dot marks the position of the **palpable base** of the neck -- the joint between C5 and C6, which is the lowest neck joint you can feel above the horse's shoulders. The lower dot marks the position of the **true base** of the neck -- the joint between C7 and the first thoracic vertebra. I have chosen to use these photos, of Sylvia Stanier and one of her horses, because the side reins are correctly placed (they are as high as they dare be). Comparing the position of the side reins to the dots will help you learn how to adjust them on your own horse, should you choose to use them as a temporary "crutch" as your horse learns to release his topline muscles and raise the base of his neck when he moves.

The author normally uses just a halter and lead to get a horse started on learning to mount the drum. Once he is "hooked on" and I know that he will follow my gestures, I dispense with tack altogether and work the animal wholly at liberty. Here Oliver shows how drum work helps a horse to raise the base of the neck and soften and round its back. And there's no harm in performing a few maneuvers while up there too! "Wave goodbye" and "walk around the drum" are two bonus choices.

It is the "allowing" rider whose horse will show him what lightness is. Lightness depends on decontraction of the muscles of the vertebral column and topline. A horse becomes light and achieves self-carriage when the base of his neck and the core of his loins come to lie on the same level. This occurs when the horse simultaneously raises the base of his neck and coils his loins. The gateways in his him limbs open, permitting the animal to "sit" or lower his haunches on bent joints. When the horse "looks through the bridle" he contracts his underline and stretches his topline.

The number of pounds of pressure on the bitted horse's bars – and in the rider's hands – is a side effect of this stretching and can properly be no greater than the effort being made by the horse's scalenus-longus colli. The question, "How much pressure should I have in my hands?" cannot be answered quantitatively. How much does your living arm weigh when it is attached to your body? Not even medical science can answer that. If you think I am implying that the rider's body and the horse's body become a single entity, in other words a centaur, when the horse achieves self-carriage, you're right. The secret is that the reins are part of this unified body, partaking of its life, less describable as having weight than as having a definite feeling of connectedness, filled with the same flow of "life" energy that animates the person's "inner body".

If the number of pounds of tension in the reins must remain below the ability of the scalenus-longus colli to stretch them, tight contact is a mistake. How low can the tension go and still represent effective contact? How relaxed can you become, yet remain aware that the energy of life is still flowing from your chest into your arm – and from your arm and hand through the rein to the horse? These are questions you answer in partnership with your horse.

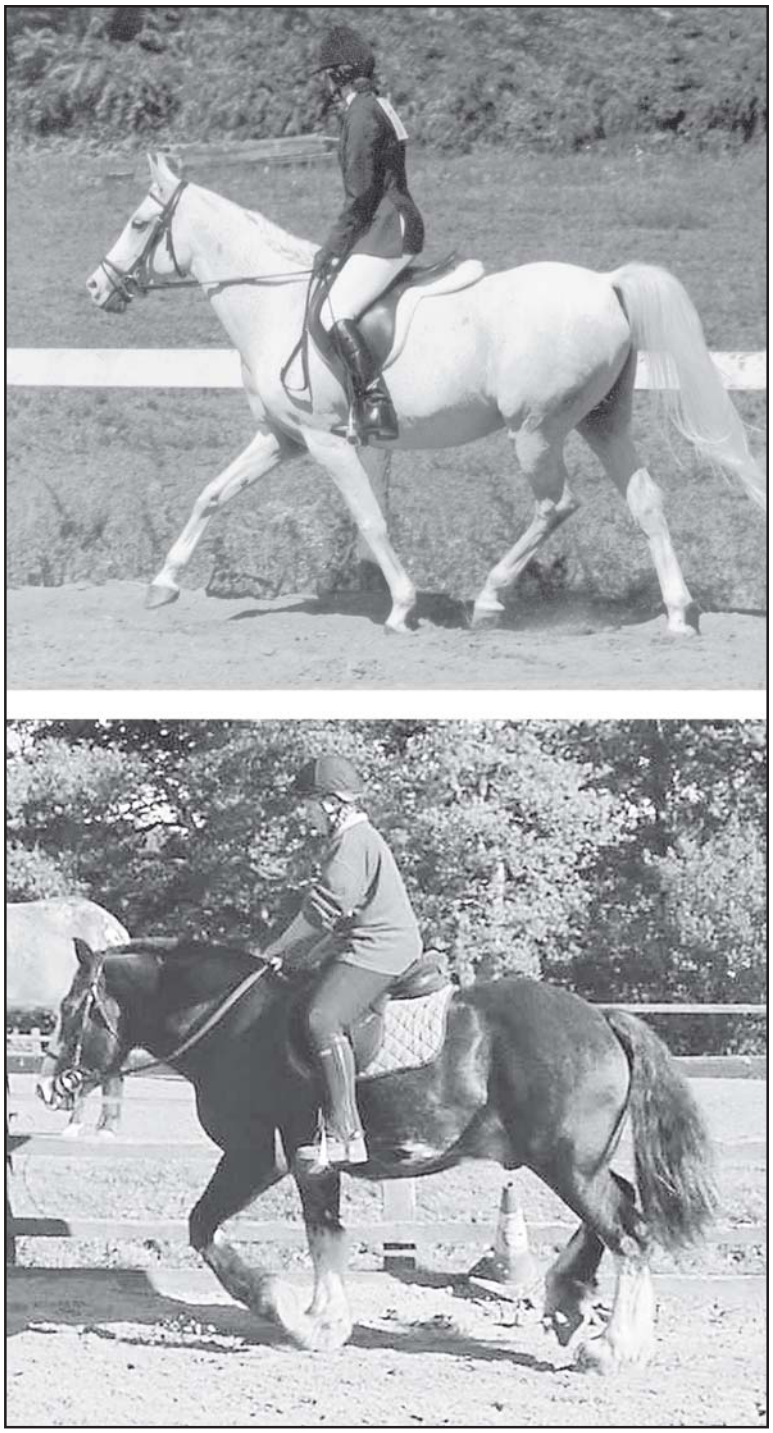
Two of the functions of the snaffle bit relate to opening gateways of flexibility in the horse's neck; its third function is to "talk" to the horse's feet. The process begins when the rider strictly insists that the horse evenly weight his feet, that is, that he move straight and in balance. Straightening, like head twirling, also decontracts the

topline, especially at the key gateways in the poll, base of neck, and loins. As a result he rider achieves a major training goal: to be able to raise the horse's energy output without a proportionate increase in "tension," braceyness, contraction, or stiffness.

When the horse is straight and relaxed, the slightest action of the rider's hand will be communicated through the body to the horse's feet. The bit or bosal is necessary only during the period when the scalenus-longus colli are developing strength and the topline is learning to relax, decontract, and stretch under saddle. Eventually, all that's needed for the rider to turn or stop his horse is to turn his own head or slightly coil his own loins. The centaur has supplanted the master.

Collection in Practice

Anyone who has ever had to rate a horse down a slope to a solid cross-country fence knows how uncomfortable and dangerous this is on a hard-mouthed horse, one who can't coil his loins, round his back and raise the base of his neck. Personally, I hope never to have to ride a stiff, weak, uncollectable puller to any fence again. And I probably won't have to, since I have the tools at my disposal to create in sound horses the particular pattern of suppleness and strength required in under-saddle collection.

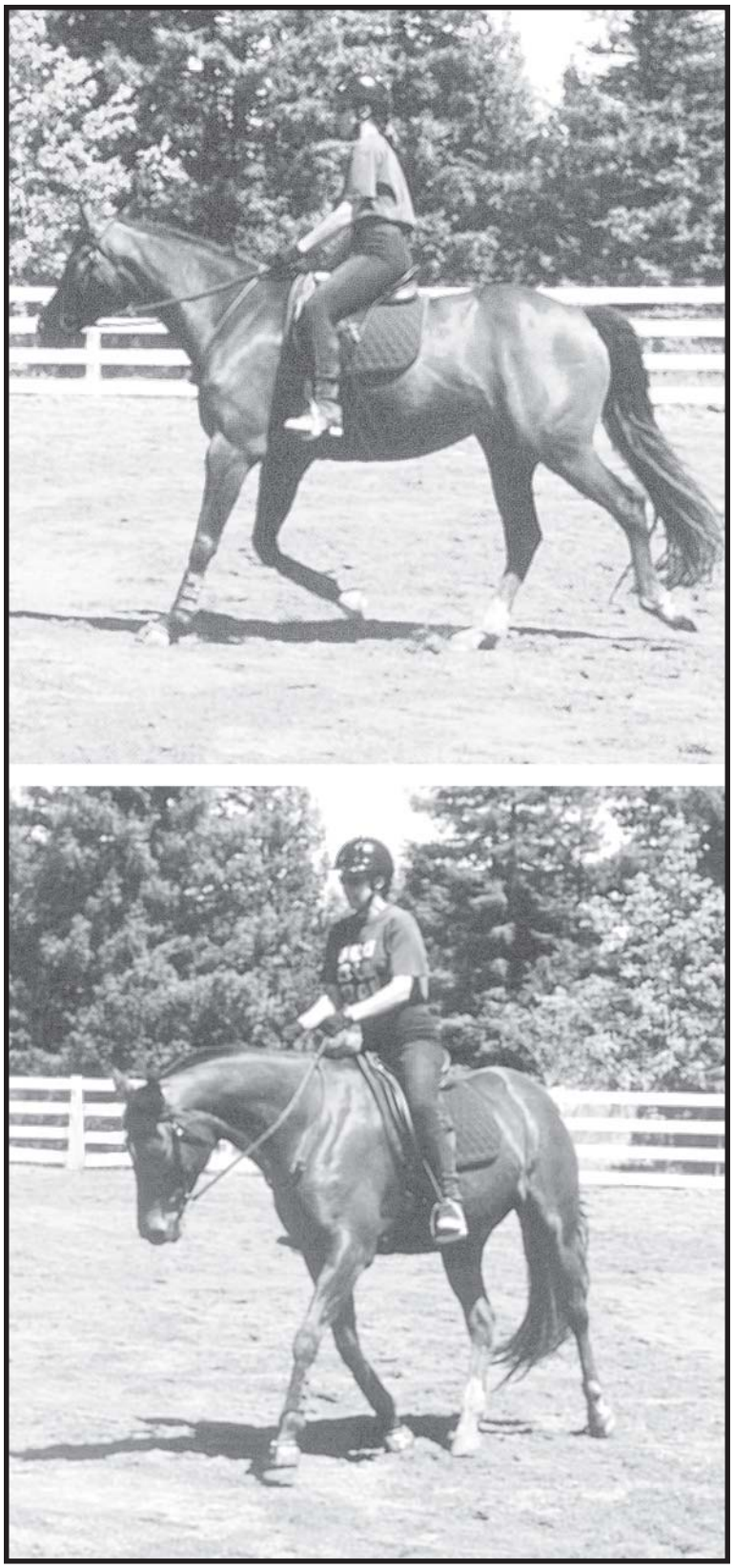


This is the first of a series of horses and riders compared at a trot. These two girls are both on relatively "green" horses and are posting. Both would like their horses to raise the base of the neck and lower the head. The girl above tries a common tactic -- she thinks that she will get her horse's head down by prying downward with her hands. Wrong! Horses react to prying-down hands just like they do to a tiedown: they brace their neck, poke their nose out, and try to raise their heads. The rider below, participating in one of my riding clinics, *raises her hands and pushes the reins toward the horse*. Coordinating this with little, light taps by the calf of the leg helps the horse to raise the base of his neck -- and lower his head. If the horse loses its balance and starts to rush forward, she will use the inside rein to turn him in a circle until he regains his balance -- instead of pulling back or offering him a "square feel". (Deb Bennett photos).

All domestic horses belong to one species and have one skeletal design operated by one set of physiological reflexes. Therefore, there are really only two ways to ride – "with" the horse, or against him. The horse does not care what style of hat you prefer. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to note some considerations peculiar to different riding styles, after the manner of "variations on a theme":

Cutting: Unique among competitive specialists, the cutting horse is valued primarily for offering all movements once he's "hooked on" to a calf. But a horse cannot turn back faster than a calf unless the horse has the ability to achieve collection and lighten his forehand. The cutting horse's entire performance must be in self-carriage, or he will lose in this intense game of "zone defence." The breeding of easily collectable phenotypes is very important in this as in all working-stock divisions, but even horses with tons of "cow" must undergo extensive initial work in bowel or snaffle to supple, straighten and strengthen. During this work, contact is closer. The finished horse can then be shown on an absolutely loose rein.

Dressage: Never will a horse offer "movement" without two things: thorough setup, which puts the horse into a position from which he can easily make the desired movement, and freedom to execute the movement. The surest way to scrub the bloom off any horse's eagerness is to hang on the inside rein all the time. Yet many worry what will happen to their scores if the judge should catch sight of a loose rein. The best wisdom on this subject comes

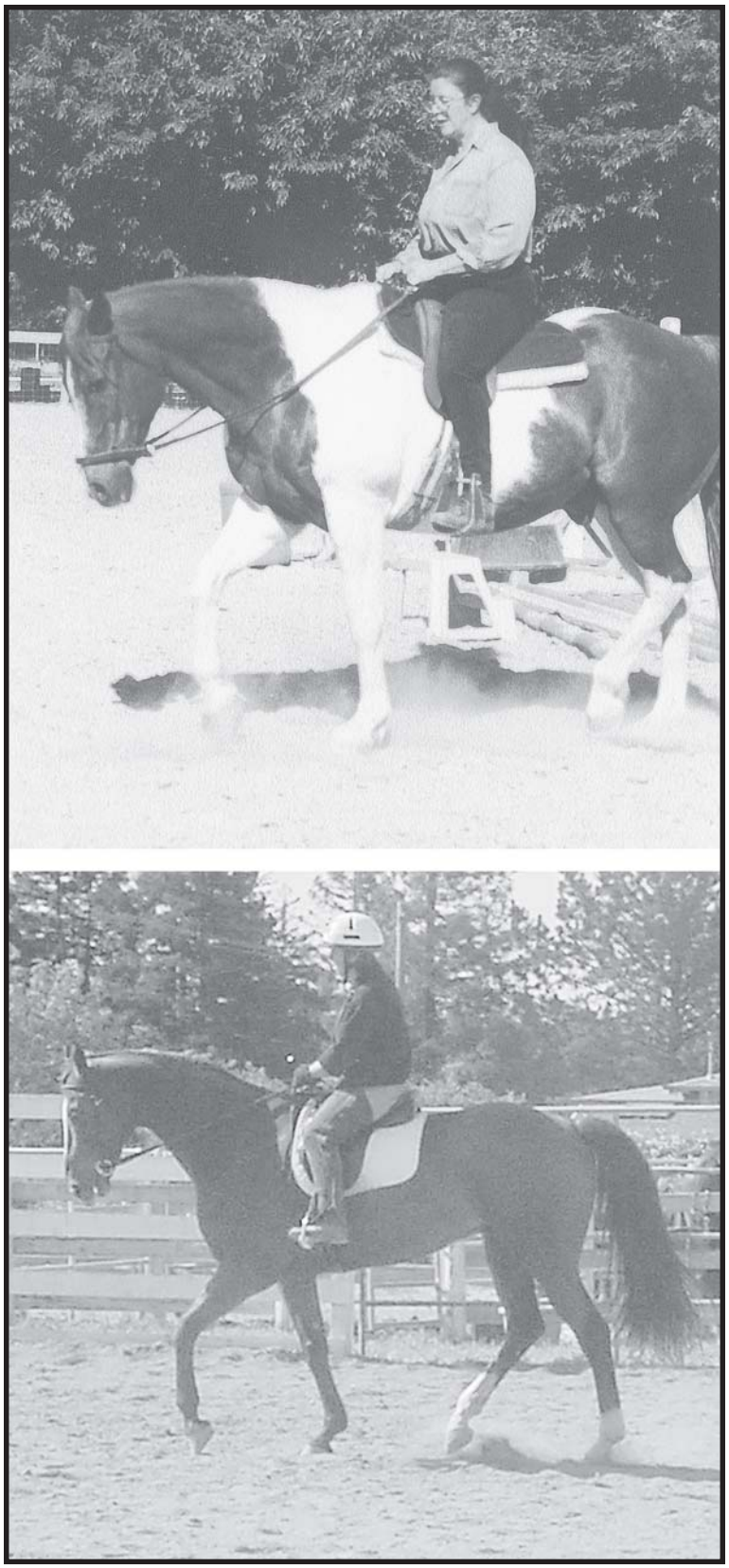


What happens when the rider learns to carry her hands at the level of her navel, wait at the same pressure for the horse to release, and coordinate this with light touches from the calf of the leg: the horse "spills over" as if his neck were a waterfall flowing over a brink formed by a line connecting the rider's left and right hands. It is the raising of the base of the neck that arches it and pushes the poll down. This will happen for only a few steps running at first, then more and more until continuously.

from Grand Prix trainer Robert Mayer of Pennsylvania: "How much actual, as opposed to apparent, contact there may be is a private affair between you and your horse. You can make it appear on the outside any way you want to."

Gaited Horses: The fact that a horse is gaited, rather than a trotter, makes no difference at all in collection. A horse can gait "round", whether his particular specialty is the paso llano, the fox-trot or the rack. The horse's neck is arched from the base as opposed to an "elk shape, and, as a result, the reins are draping.

Hunter: Federico Caprilli, who at the turn of the last century invented what is called the "forward" seat, never talked about getting the body forward in the saddle. Instead, he talked about getting the rider's weight off the horse's loins – in short, getting out of the horse's way so that he can coil his loins for efficient and comfortable jumping. Dressage riders, park-style show competitors and reiners, who think that the rider ought to lean well back to stop the horse, would benefit from considering what Caprilli had to say. The leg in all seats is the same; its primary purpose is to stimulate the muscles of the underline to round the horse up. Because the leg is the same and the horse is the same, the contact is the same, too; in hunt-seat equitation it's called a "following hand", that is, the hand that is based on a seat and leg so steady that it can follow the horse's tongue wherever it may go, including being carried forward and down

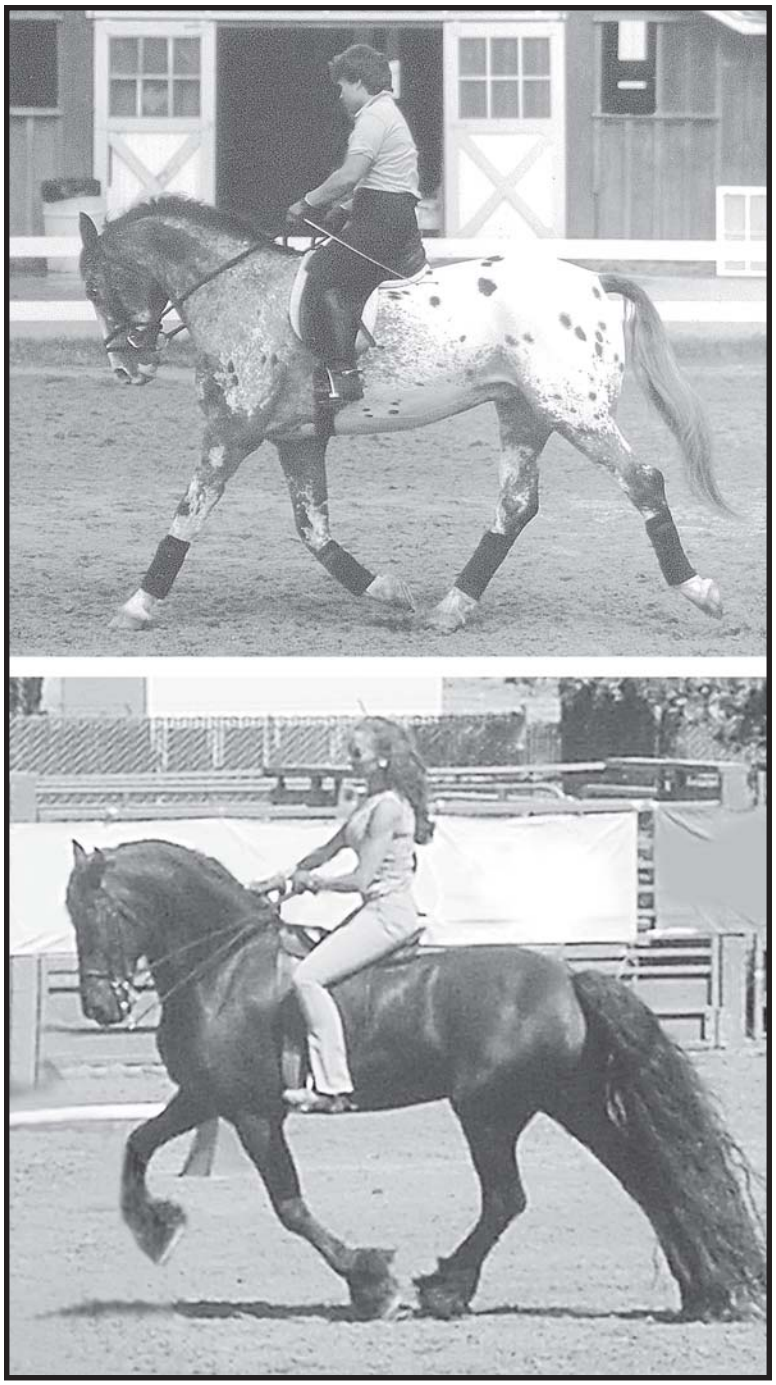


These two horses are both pretty far along in their training. Above, I am riding Painty in relaxed collection. He's raising the base of his neck, and you can see his abdominal muscles working as he coils his loins too. It is the most pleasant feeling imaginable. Note the draping reins -- filled with "life" energy. Below, Judy McHerron and Majic step forward directly into a collected trot from a rein-back. This form of the "rocker" -- an exercise that anyone can perform -- is a most valuable exercise for the muscles below the vertebral chain which actually effect collection (Photo above, by H. Schwarzenauer; below, D. Bennett).

by the telescoping neck, which is the horse's natural gesture in jumping.

Jumper and Speed Events: Consider this: I classify open jumping and barrel racing together as a single solvable riding problem. Why? Because there are no barrels in a barrel race and no obstacles in a course of fences – until you hit one. To win in jumping, you must be able to rate (collect) your horse, and you must be able to turn fluidly. It is of only secondary importance that you be able to jump. In other words, what's important is to execute flexions (lateral bends or turns) and transitions (longitudinal bends or flexion and extension of the vertebral column). In the end, the jump-off and the barrel race break down to an almost identical sequence of accelerations, decelerations and turns, for which the appropriate contact is whatever the round horse moving at speed offers his rider.

Racing: Want to keep your racehorse sounder longer? Here's a hint from 18th-century French riding master François Robichon de la Guérinière, who wrote, "I admire the new English breed, called the Thoroughbred…but it is a shame to see so many of them return from a day of hunting with their front legs all a-tremble, and break down so early in their lives…if the English only knew how to supple their racehorses and properly round them up…" Jockeys who "water-ski" on their horses' mouths not only damage the mouths and induce difficulties in breathing, stiff backs, and lame legs, but they add seconds to the horses' times. Although the racehorse must go more on the forehand than other sport horses (if the horse lightens the forehand too much, he will catch wind and slow down), it's still possible to race one without jamming its neck. Willie Shoemaker, the greatest of modern jockeys, exemplified the

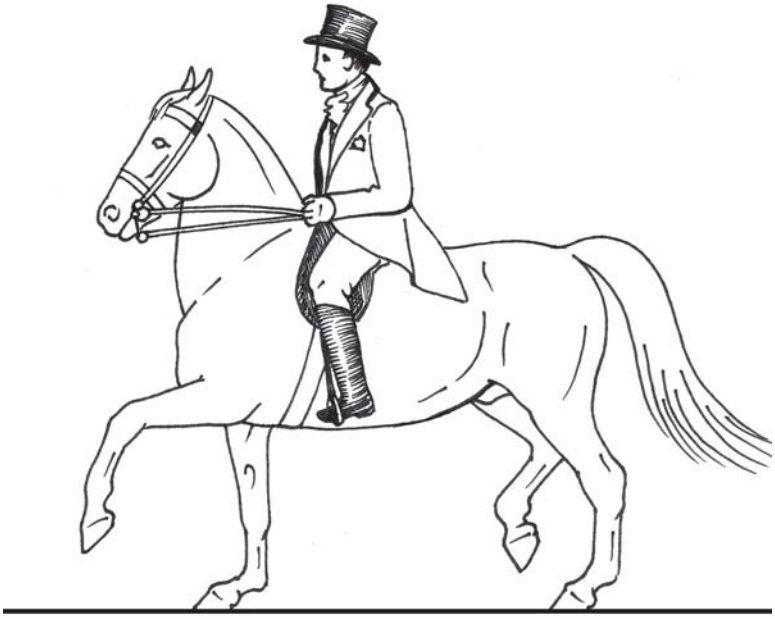


These riders both understand how to carry their hands at the level of their navel, so that the line of the rein crosses at the level of the base of the horse's neck. However, what's missing in the upper picture is sufficient "give" or sympathy. This rider does not pull but she does not give when the horse releases, either. This causes him to brace the muscles that connect the back of the skull to the neck and then "break" in the wrong place (at the 3rd neck joint instead of at the poll). The lower rider is much better; the worst fault here is the horse's tendency to lean on her hands, and her tendency to tolerate this due to going at a greater tempo than the horse is really ready for (Deb Bennett photos).

effectiveness of the soft touch and the ability to stay out of the runner's way.

Reining: There's no doctrinal hang-up under Western hats about having "straight" reins that look and function like banjo strings, and most reiners, whether their horses show in a snaffle, bosal or curb bit, ride on what master dresseur Nuno Oliveira used to call "draping" reins, which are neither slack nor taut. The rules, the judges and the situation all call for enough contact and collection that the horse can be "completely dictated to." Strange how this seems to be possible – even on draping reins.

Show Pleasure: Many of these horses are trained to move with their heads and necks stiff and "set". They succeed by memorizing their routine at the cost of the quality of their gaits and movement and therefore can be ridden – or perhaps we had better say "operated" – on any rein contact at all that is lighter than whatever would hurt or frighten them. In other words – these horses have learned to expect no "flow of life" coming through the reins from their riders at all. They perform like machines. To me, a pleasure horse is an exceptionally generous and willing animal, soft and biddable in body as well as in temperament, who waits for my "flow of life" to direct his every smallest movement. The machine-like horse, however, that is ridden continuously with an artificial "neck set", is frequently cranky. This difference illustrates a law: Whatever your concept is, that is the kind of horse you are going to have.



A very knowledgeable gentleman engaged in the process of helping a badly-trained horse learn to move better. The animal is a Lipizzan stallion that has learned to go at collected trot or passage (as here) by uncoiling its loins, stiffening and flattening its back, and dropping the base of the neck. To cure this, the rider must be willing to do the following: (1) spend a lot of time at the walk and a very slow trot, waiting for the horse to figure out how to balance himself with respect to the rider's weight and the reins; (2) turn the horse into a curve or circle *every single time he loses his balance* from back to front and begins to rush forward, never getting tempted to pull back at all; (3) wait at the same pressure for the horse to release the tight crest and poll muscles; (4) when the horse DOES figure out how to balance himself, and when the moment of release comes, the rider must be awake and aware, ready to give the reins forward -- this constitutes the rider's release to the horse. Don't ever think the horse doesn't notice and appreciate this reward!

Great riders are great precisely because they are willing and able to learn from horses. Beautiful riding elicits only movements that an unbitted, unburdened horse would perform when displaying his beauty. The posture required in these maneuvers is shaped by the animal's spine. As a rider, how much bit contact will you need to "take" to capture that brilliant performance in barrel racing, hunter rounds, dressage, reining, three-day eventing? Only your horse can tell you the answer. Try cutting him some slack and opening the way for him to offer his best.

SIDEBAR: DOING AWAY WITH THE FRAME

Today, competitors of all stripes describe horses whose necks are more or less arched as being "in a frame." If you've heard the expression, you may not have realized that the idea of the "frame" derives from a series of well-known drawings originally created for Wilhelm Müseler's Rittlehre ("Riding Logic", see illustration p. 17). These images show how the horse's outline changes as he becomes increasingly collected.

An imaginative riding instructor (we will not name this person, but she was a "founding mother" of the USET) took these illustrations from Müseler's book and then drew frames around the horses at the different stages. For her, for her students, and for thousands of others, the external frame is what defines the degree of collection. And there is one grain of truth to this way of perceiving collection: as collection increases, horses do, indeed, become shorter from nose to buttocks.

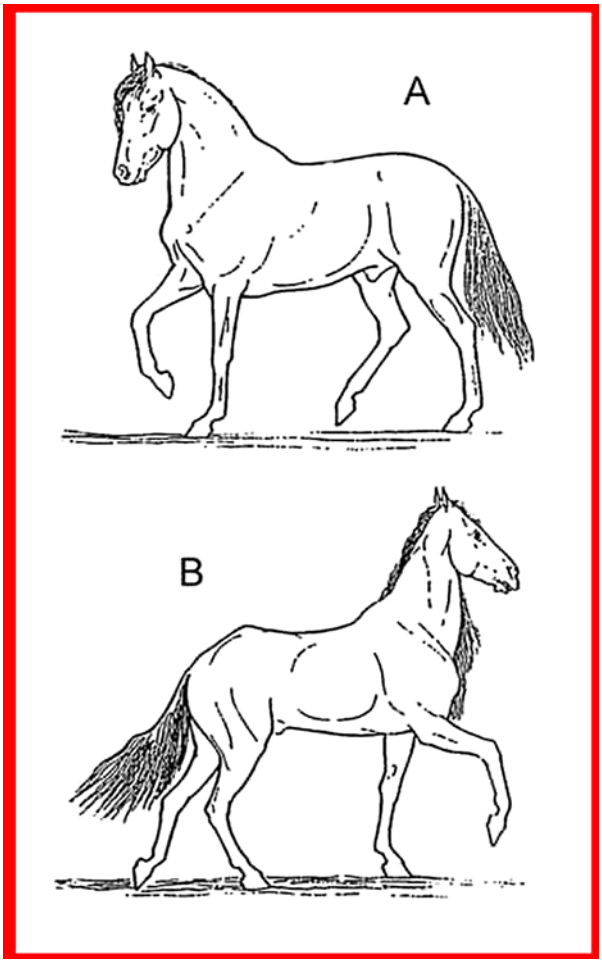
But this is to muddle cause and effect. Where does the impetus to shorten the outline come from – and how much bit contact does this imply? The drawings show reins going straight like banjo wires from the rider's hands to the horse's mouth.

Higher degrees of collection. All are characterized by the proper relationship of the line of the reins to the base of the vertebral chain within the neck. Higher degrees of collection cannot occur unless the whole of the animal's topline is in release and its loins are coiled. And note the draping reins -- in EVERY case -- even in the extreme extended trot shown in the bottom photo (extension of stride cannot occur without underlying, continuous effort of collection). As to questions of "contact" -- When the neck is "stacked up and stretching over the top" as in all of these photos, the horse is *taking* the contact which the rider is simultaneously *offering.* The reins are filled with life and when they are most filled with life, they are also most weightless! Yes: it is a mystery, a conundrum, a joy, and one of the great portals to total awareness.

A: A rider in antique costume at a British exhibition; collected trot. B: A young Barbie Breen on a Thoroughbred horse under Chuck Grant's coaching; a beautiful, light piaffe on the haunches. C, Captain Beudant, about 1910, on the Barb stallion Robersart; passage. D, Captain Beudant and Robersart extend the trot stride to an almost unbelievable degree. Note the excellent "rainbow" tail!

Misinterpretation of Müseler's intent makes collection's effect – the back to front shortening – look like its cause, leading to the mistaken impression that pushing from the back end toward rigidly fixed hands at the front will induce a horse to squash himself into a shorter "frame".

In practice, there isn't one iota of difference between the dressage competitor's term "frame" and the Saddle Seat and Western Pleasure competitors' term "neck set" or "head set". The latter two terms have been around for much longer in North American riding. No matter what it's called, the concept decrees that a horse is to function athletically while continuously holding its head and neck in one position. In practice, this is equivalent to teaching the horse to brace the muscles of its poll, neck, and topline – which in turn creates a front-heavy horse and great reliance on relentless "piano wire" rein contact. Riding a horse who has been forced into a frame or head set is like being on a patrol boat where the captain has gone berserk and ordered all the crew, except for himself at the throttle, to stand on the nose of the ship. The stiff, wooden ship (or horse), with its curved and arched "prow", tips nose downward while its rear-mounted propeller lifts halfway out of the water even as the captain guns the engine for all it's worth.



Collection and anti-collection is just as possible among gaited horses as among trotters. Above, two Paso Finos are both executing the paso corto gait. (A) is beautifully collected; (B) achieves a very high poll position by stiffening his back and dropping the base of his neck. This is what makes the front of the neck bulge -- Saddlebred people refer to this as an "elk neck."

In addition to the "frame", nearly every aspect of collection illustrated in Müseler's drawings has, at one time or another, been distorted into a position of

At left, the author and her Rocky Mountain gelding Oliver are caught by the camera in a classic, ground-covering, barefoot, old-fashioned amble. Oliver could hardly BE any "rounder". This should put to rest any question that "gaiting" can't be done "round". Oliver is regularly schooled in leg-yield and shoulder-in (both at a walk and in gait), and over cavalletti and jumps -- all exercises intended to help him gain, and maintain, the strength needed for true collection.

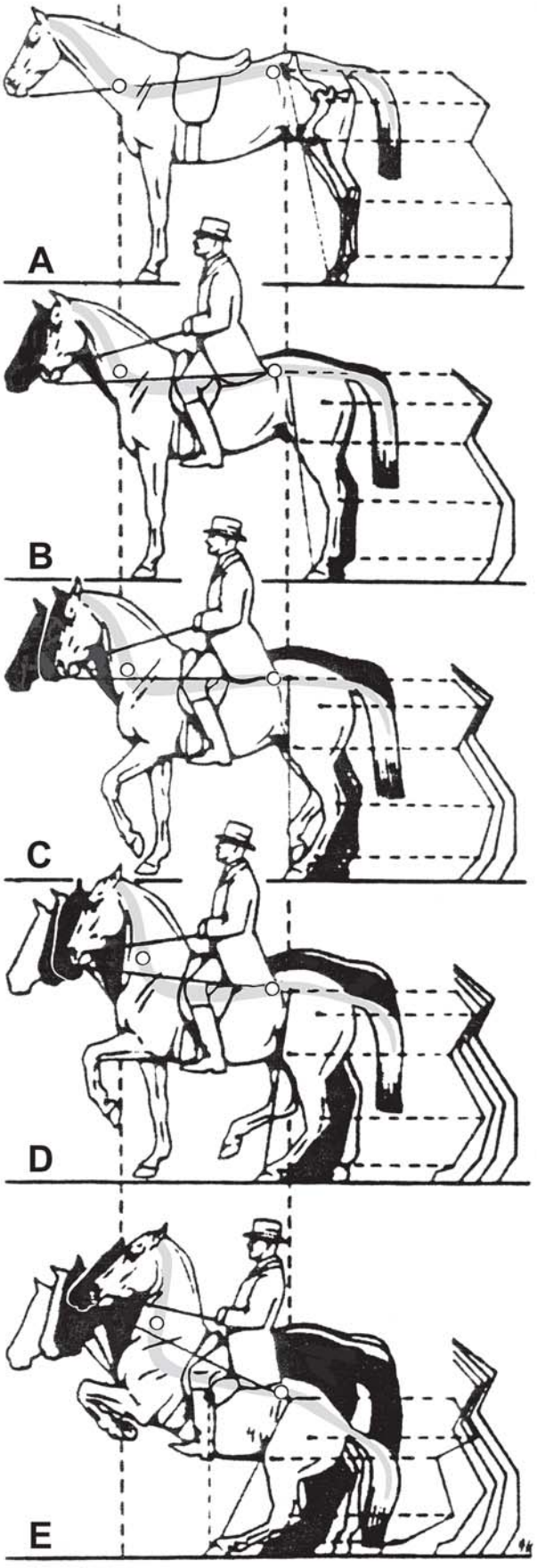
absolute predominance by people who are quite ready to make rules, or to defend an idea of how they *think* things work, but who don't actually ride well enough to have successfully performed the alpha and omega of horsemanship: starting a colt and finishing a horse. Horses have been declared "collected" and "light in hand" when they:

Carry their neck erect with a very high poll – never mind that the base of the neck has sunk, so that the overall outline of the neck looks like an elk or a deer.

Draw back from the bit, putting little or no pressure on it – never mind that this completely deprives the rider of control, because it deprives him of a vital line of communication with his horse.

Are "rocked back onto their hindquarters" – never mind that the middle of the horse is hollow and sagging, his mouth is gapping, and there is, in fact, more weight upon the forehand than upon the hindquarters.

Here is the famous series of illustrations from Wilhelm Museler's "Riding Logic." Instead of modifying the images by drawing frames around the outside of the horse, I think we can best understand collection by seeing what is going on *inside* the animal's body. I therefore have drawn in the changing shape of the vertebral chain (gray), and marked the points representing the palpable base of the neck and the loins. Degree of collection is measured by noticing the relationship of these two points: the higher the base of the neck with respect to the core of the loins, the greater the degree of collection. The topline must, however, also be in release and you must see that the base of the neck is always either rising or trying to rise. By these few criteria, the quality of all movements and maneuvers whatsoever may be judged, across all forms of work, activity, and competition.



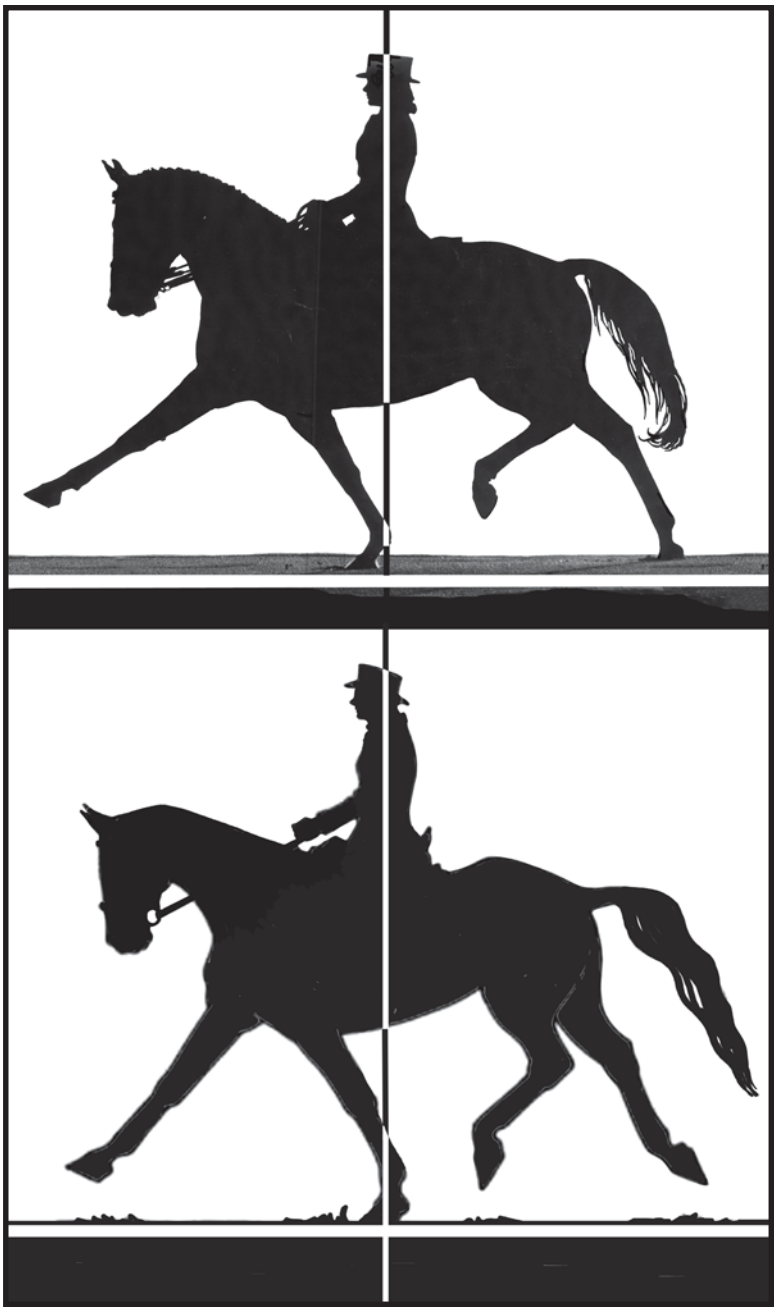
Have a vertical forehead – never mind that the horse is grinding its teeth, gapping its mouth, wrying its head, or wringing its tail.

Raise their knees high – never mind that the stifles aren't bending and the hind toes are cutting ruts into the ground with each sweeping protraction of the limbs.

Take short steps – never mind that the fore-hoofs have become dished because the animal is pounding and dragging the toes backwards with every step, not to mention being completely out of the proper cadence for the gait.

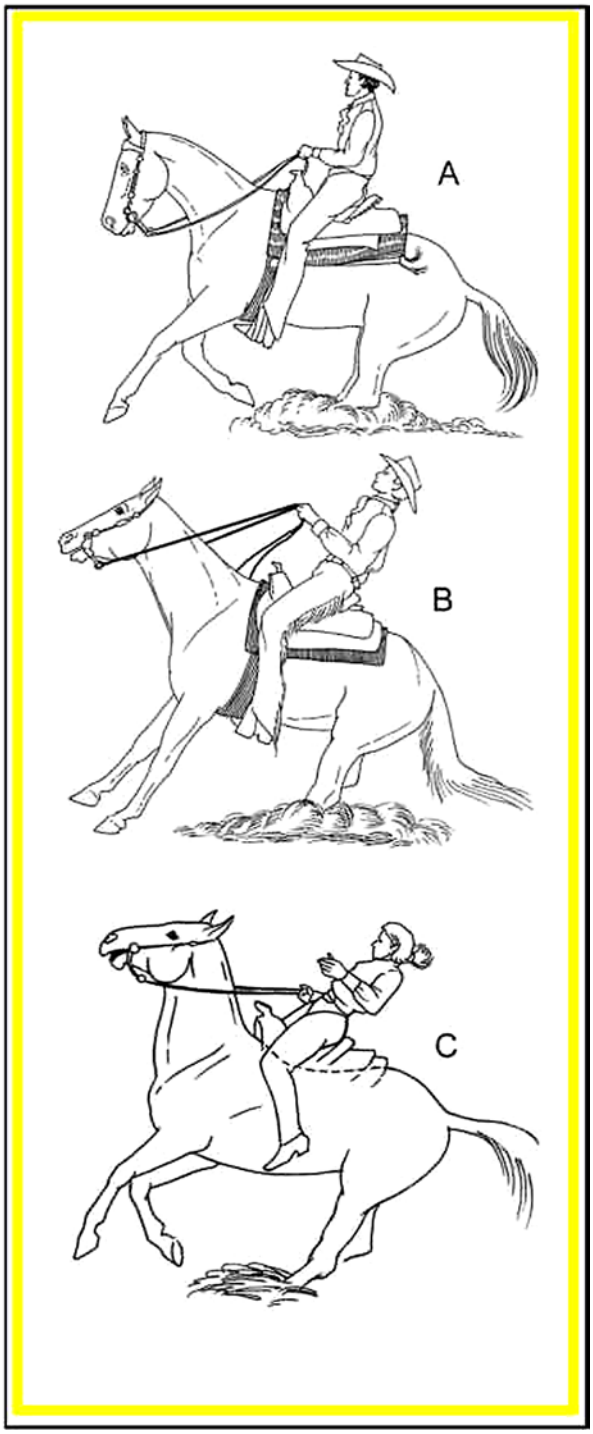
Go slowly forward – never mind that the footfall order for the "jog" preserves no period of suspension, so that the horse merely steps from one diagonal to the other — or that the footfall order for the "lope" is actually that which properly pertains to a walk.

Most of these things – relatively vertical carriage of the forehead, relatively slow forward progress, carrying weight upon the hindquarter, relatively greater flexion at the knee and hock, and so forth – are actually ideals, signs that, *if all were present at one time*, would indicate that the horse is



Good vs. globally incorrect "extension" of the trot. Both silhouettes are tracings from photos. The top photo shows superb work -- absolutely as much as you could ask from this particular horse. Notice that as the width of the horse's steps increases, his body must stretch and go "closer to the ground." His loins are coiled, his whole topline is in release, and despite the vigor of his movement, the rider can sit it with ease and aplomb. The lower photo, unfortunately, shows a former U.S. national champion at Fourth Level. Something is wrong with the judging when we place performances like this. Note that the animal is not even trotting -- there is no time in a trot when the camera should be able to catch the animal standing on one front foot with both hind feet off the ground simultaneously. Note the stiff, hollow back and the neck breaking in the wrong place (implying bracing at the poll). Lack of release along the topline and the fact that the animal is being shoved forward at a tempo far greater than it can handle with ease and balance, make it move roughly. The rider's body will, in turn, defend itself from the pounding by causing her to brace her back and stick her neck out. It's hard to believe, but I not infrequently see this silhouette image painted on the walls of equestrian colleges and represented in dressage club logos in the U.S.

really collected. Problems begin when we engage in "idol worship" – which is to say, focusing on only one or two facets of the whole "jewel" of collection, which causes the rider to settle for very little – to settle for a one or two-dimensional imitation of the real thing. Please don't settle for anything less than diamond quality!



Among reiners, the obsession is not with the extended trot or high head carriage, but with the sliding stop. Many people believe that leaning back will help the horse "rock its weight back" onto the hindquarters. As the photos prove, leaning back only hinders the animal by making it more difficult for him to coil his loins and raise the freespan of his back, raise the base of his neck and "drop over" for that beautiful, relaxed, "paddling" slide like the one shown in A. There is no way on Earth that the rider can actually rock the horse back -- so please stop trying to do it. Instead, learn how to cause the horse to re-posture itself -- change the shape of the vertebral column. The "how" is the same whether you have a reiner, a gaited horse, a Park horse, or a dressage horse, because all horses have the same physical structure and mechanism for collection.