

stand at the arena with a copy of the test the first time I ride it at home, to make sure I have memorized it and am riding it correctly. Note what you need to improve, and work on those things before going to the show. It can be surprising what challenges pop up when you ride a test in its entirety.

On a daily basis, work on the basics. Proper preparation at home will increase your chances of success in the show ring.

## Steady Tempo vs. Frequent Transitions

**Q** I'm confused. Riders are often told to ride frequent transitions within the horse's gaits (e.g., working trot/lengthening the strides/back to working trot, etc.) to gymnasticize the horse. A trainer in the area, however, told me to instead pick a steady tempo and rhythm and stick to it. Which of the two approaches is more beneficial in dressage?

Eva Langston

Buffalo, New York

### MARTIN KUHN

**A** Your confusion is understandable given the apparent contradiction. Some of the confusion comes from terminology derived from poorly translated sources. Germans in particular, often use the word "tempo" to describe the pace of the gait. For example, "*arbeits tempo*" describes a working gait, and "*versammeltes tempo*" describes a collected gait. To its credit, the U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) is doing good work through its manuals, certification programs, rephrasing of the training pyramid, etc., to standardize terminology.

"Rhythm" refers to the correct footfalls and phases (suspension) of the three gaits—the beat. That is: a walk must have a four-beat rhythm, a trot

must have a two-beat rhythm and the canter must have a three-beat rhythm. If there is deviation from the above rhythm, whether in the working, collected or extended gaits, then we have a fundamental breakdown in the first level of the training pyramid. Sadly, such a breakdown is not uncommon. (Pacing in the walk is a common example.)

When talking about tempo, we are referring to the speed in which those footfalls occur—the beats per minute—within the established rhythm. A quicker tempo in the trot results in the horse picking up his legs more swiftly within the established two-beat rhythm. However, if we get a horse too fast, in the trot for example, we call that rushing. This most often leads to a loss of balance which puts the horse onto the forehand and, often, heavy in the hand. We often see this happening in young, green horses when asking them too soon to lengthen the stride in trot. If the tempo of a horse's gait becomes too slow—in the canter, for instance—we see a loss of the proper rhythm, a four-beat canter.

Take note that when performing a good lengthening, medium, or extended trot or canter, the tempo should *appear* to become slower, not faster. This is accomplished by means of greater activity and proper engagement of the hindquarters, which results in a greater degree of suspension. (This is not possible, of course, in the walk, which has no suspension.)

When riding transitions within the gaits, we want the horse to change the length of the stride. Changes to the tempo are an undesirable byproduct of this. That is certainly not the goal.

One of the key qualities of a well-trained horse is the ability to maintain the same steady tempo while performing transitions within the gait. This means that, while the length of steps or strides varies (working, lengthening, collected, etc.), the speed and rhythm should not.

### Suzanne Dansby Bollman

is a USDF (U.S. Dressage Federation) silver and gold medalist who has won many awards regionally, nationally and internationally. With her horses Cooper and Kasper she was long- or short-listed for the U.S. Dressage Team for several years.



### David B. Fishkin, DC, MPH,

specializes in lower back pain. He received his Doctor of Chiropractic from the New York Chiropractic College in 1988 and, in 2008, his master's in Public Health at George Washington University. Based in Rockville, Maryland, his Web site is [centerforlowbackpain.com](http://centerforlowbackpain.com).



### Volker Brommann

is a *Reitlehrer* licensed by the German FN and a USDF medalist. Trained by Walter Christensen, the German native moved to the U.S. in 1981. He maintains a close working relationship with former U.S. coach Klaus Balkenhol. Near Sacramento, California, he trains horses and riders to the FEI levels ([volkerbrommann.com](http://volkerbrommann.com)).



### Martin Kuhn

is a USDF Certified Instructor through Fourth Level. In 2007, he won the USDF Region 4 Championship for the Intermediaire Freestyle.

In 2008, his horse, Rubinstar, placed 5th at Horse of the Year at Training Level. He trains and teaches at StarWest in New Berlin, Illinois ([starwestonline.net](http://starwestonline.net)).



Have a question about dressage? E-mail it to [Dressage.Today@EquiNetwork.com](mailto:Dressage.Today@EquiNetwork.com) or send to Dressage Today, 656 Quince Orchard Rd., Suite 600, Gaithersburg, MD 20878—Ask the Experts is compiled by **Reina Abelshauer**.

A helpful way to practice this is to ride with a metronome and set your horse's footfalls to the metronome. In the trot, for example, set the metronome to the correct one-two, one-two beats per minute. As you ride transitions within the gait from working trot to lengthening or collected to medium and vice versa, the speed of the footfalls should remain the same.

If you can accomplish this, you are well on your way to gymnasticizing your horse. Don't be discouraged if it doesn't happen immediately, as this is an involved process with most horses. Being able to ride these transitions within the gait without any change in the tempo is a great way to test if your training is on the right path. The transitions are also tools to help accomplish it.

## Square or Rectangular Horse for Dressage?

**Q** I'd like to buy a horse with a suitable conformation for dressage. My question is should I look for a rather short-backed and square horse, or a long-backed and more rectangular one? What's currently considered most suitable for dressage?

Carey Neiman  
Fredericksburg, Virginia

### VOLKER BROMMANN

**A** Horses come in all kinds of different shapes and types. Generally, I believe that rectangular horses are more suitable for dressage than horses that are built like a square box. Short backs also generally make it harder to achieve lateral suppleness in the horse. Because of his longer back, a more rectangular horse is better able to swing in his back, facilitating relaxation and throughness. In general, horses that are shorter coupled are tighter in the back because their back muscles are a

bit shorter. But, that is not *always* the case. This means it's more challenging for the rider to achieve relaxation and longitudinal suppleness in the horse. The length of the back might affect the horse's scope of stride. Imagine a short board and a long board placed over two buckets. When standing in the middle of the short board, jumping up and down, there won't be a lot of swing. When doing the same on a long board, there's much more swing to it. As a rule of thumb, the shorter the distance between the hip and the shoulder, the less swing a horse has naturally. In the half pass or shoulder-in, it's easier to bend a rectangular horse than a short-backed horse.

Tightness in the back can transfer to the mind, creating negative tension and touchiness in the horse, which also makes it more difficult to achieve relaxation and suppleness. Although short-backed horses generally have an easier time collecting than rectangular horses, depending on the structure of the legs and joint placement, both relaxation and suppleness are necessary for the horse to use his muscles correctly and keep his body healthy in the long run, including in high collection.

There are always exceptions to the rule. When assessing a horse for dressage suitability, it's important to look at the overall conformation—the entire picture—not just at the length of his back. Generally, I look for a good connection between the back and the neck/withers, as it allows the horse to support himself under the rider. The neck should blend smoothly and harmoniously into the back via long, sloping withers that reach far into the back as opposed to small, short and unpronounced withers.

Also, the relationship between the horse's back and neck should be good as it directly affects the balance of the entire horse, including how the hindquarters tie into the movement. For example, if

the horse is square but has an extremely long neck, it gives the rider the feel as if the horse is constantly ahead of her, too far out in the front. Conversely, a longish back coupled with an extremely short neck makes it difficult for the horse to stretch his back. Ideally, the horse's forehead, midsection and hindquarters should complement each other in length and size. As a general rule, the shorter the back—the closer the hind legs and front legs are to one another—the choppier the gaits (it has nothing to do with the horse's size).

When looking at a young horse that hasn't been under saddle for long, I make sure he looks well-balanced when moving and standing. His legs should be straight. I also look at the angles of the horse's hip, buttock and stifle joint. For a dressage horse, the angles should not be too open, but rather closed. The same applies for the stifle joints downward to the hocks. Open angles, exhibited by straight-legged horses, make it harder for the horse to collect.

The size of a person also affects whether to choose a horse with a longer or shorter back. A tall rider with extremely long legs will have little room for them on a short-backed horse. A heavier rider who requires a rather large saddle should make sure the saddle does not sit on the horse's loins (which is more likely if the horse has a short back), as it inhibits the horse's ability to relax. On the other hand, a petite rider should not choose a horse that is extremely long in the back—simply because he will be harder for her to ride. As a general rule, horse and rider should fit each other optically. At shows, although dressage judges don't necessarily judge the picture, it might trickle into the evaluation of the pair.

Whenever assessing a horse for the first time, make sure to keep an open mind, even if you spot conformational