

Utilizing Dressage Principles to Train Your Mounted Archery Horse Series

Article Three – Implementing Dressage Down the Track

This is the third in a series of articles on how to utilize dressage principles in training your MA horse.

Review of Article Two

In the last article we discussed the principals of developing a true connection and balance in your horse. Developing a balanced uphill frame will make it easier to shoot and is safer then when a horse is barreling down the track on the forehand.

So Why is Balance and Connection Important to My Mounted Archery?

Some of you may be thinking, “learning how to help your horse travel in a balanced and connected manner is all good for the lower levels of our sport, but how does that have anything to do with going fast on the track to gain speed points?” I get that part of the appeal for some is flying down the track while shooting. Yes, this is a thrill for sure but how we get down the track is equally as important as just speed. Besides safety, if the horse is balanced and coming through from behind, they will actually go just as fast as horses traveling on their forehands. Well balanced horses properly using their hind end can actually go faster because they are now pushing more from behind instead of pulling from their shoulders. They will lengthen the gait instead of just faster foot falls. They will move more efficiently (using less energy) and thus will conserve energy making it possible for them to be able to do more runs or carry a second or even a third rider with ease. The horse will also experience less joint, bone and muscle breakdown and be able to carry you down the track for many more years. Biomechanics of equine movement tells us that teaching the horse to carry themselves in the most biomechanically easy way, will add years to your horse’s health and ability. This is a win-win situation for both rider and horse!



Impulsion

In the first two articles, we reviewed the first 3 steps on the dressage training pyramid of rhythm, relaxation and connection. The dressage pyramid is designed to properly bring the horse through training in the best and most efficient process. Though the pyramid is a dressage training, it can be used for all disciplines! Each step in the pyramid builds on the previous step and if we take more time on the first 3 steps, the rest will happen much faster and the horse will progress more easily than if we skip steps. The fourth step on the training pyramid is the concept of impulsion. What is impulsion? I will tell you what it is not – it is not speed. Impulsion rather, is moving with increased energy and thrust in a forward manner. If you have developed your horse through the first three levels of the pyramid, then the horse will be better able to add impulsion or thrust in a balanced fashion. If a horse is moving more balanced, and “if” they should trip on something or spook, they will be better able to save themselves. A balanced horse is also less likely to unseat you from the saddle or even fall or stumble. Having mastered the first four steps of the training pyramid will also make it way easier to stop the horse at the end of the track because they are more able to rock their weight back on their hind end to be able to stop quicker and in a smaller amount of space.

How do you incorporate impulsion? Once you have your horse moving forward from behind and connected through their backs at walk, trot and canter, start asking for more thrust and increase the horse’s stride so that they lengthen their stride and thus speed. It is important to note not to ask for more impulsion until you have a balanced trot or canter. While in an arena or field, you can start with the trot then move to the canter then ask the horse for more forward impulsion with your seat and leg. Your hands will push forward much like the feel you get when you are pushing a shopping cart forward. Maintain this lengthened stride for about 5 strides to start then shorten their stride and rock their weight back (which also slows their speed somewhat). You should be able to gradually add more lengthening/thrusting strides until you can cover 300 ft (the approx. length of a standard track).

If your horse gets too quick or loses balance onto their forehand, bring them back to a “regular” canter or even a trot or add half halts to rebalance and start again. If you are not familiar with the use of half halts, they are a way to rock the horse’s weight back onto their haunches by applying the seat, leg and hand simultaneously like you were going to have the horse halt but you keep going forward. This aid is applied very quickly over a timespan of about half to one second, then you resume sending the horse forward. Half halts are a very effective way to rebalance and bring a horse back that is getting too strong. They do take some time to learn and it depends on the ability of the rider (having a balanced and independent seat). It takes a bit of coordination but once mastered, is an invaluable tool to use for any time you need to rebalance the horse.

Once you have mastered letting your horse use more thrust and lengthen the canter in a field or arena, take this exercise to the track. If your ambition is to gallop (which is a four beat gait and not a three beat gait as with the canter/lope), then when you feel your horse is ready and listening to your aids well, you can ask your horse for the gallop. You will find that the gallop is more organized and balanced and it is easier to stop if you have implemented these training techniques. The horse will travel with his weight

back behind the saddle instead of out in front of it. It is much harder to stop a runaway horse if they are on their forehead (horse's weight in front of the saddle)!

Progressing through the training pyramid will build muscle and stamina. It will also give you a confident feeling that you can control your horse's footfalls and not feel you are being run away with. If your horse gets excited when you ask for more thrust from behind to lengthen, put them on a 20 meter circle to back them off and incorporate half halts (these can be used once or several times in a row along with the horse's strides). Some horses tend to get strong on a long straight line so if this happens with your horse, take them out of the track and go back to the arena or field. I tend to prefer an arena with fencing to an open field as the fencing tends to back to horse off.

Putting What You Have Learned to Good Use

Mounted archery training for your horse should not only consist of running down the track with an occasional trail ride thrown in. This is boring for many horses and can lead to behavioral issues. Some horses get too excited running a straight line and have a brain switch much like barrel horses that get way too excited and just want to run. Sometimes horses get triggered with running as it amps up their fight or flight tendencies. Some horses speed up in the track just to get through it quick as they know they get to stop and walk back. Some horses run fast out of fear of the shooting. Dealing with behavioral issues some horses have while in the track is frustrating when we just want to be able to shoot. One should not rush proper training of the horse. Spend time in an arena or field applying what you learned in the first two articles. Incorporate geometry into your riding. Nothing is more boring for you and your horse than only doing circles or ovals around an arena. Challenge your horse mentally and physically by doing frequent simple changes of direction, serpentines, figure eights, and other exercises. You can add frequent changes in gait (up and down transitions) as well. This will keep your horse fit and ready to take on new challenges.

It is advised to not over school the actual runs down your track. Especially for new horses in training for mounted archery, you want to spend more time out of the track than in it! Unless your horse is thoroughly schooled already, don't over run the track. I find the more you just canter or gallop the track, the more the horse will fall apart and regain the bad habits they may have started with (traveling unconnected, unbalanced and on the forehead). Incorporate dressage principals as tune ups several times a week and in between archery practices.

This is just the tip of the iceberg! You can utilize leg yields and changes of gait and lengthening in the track so your horse doesn't just associate running with the track. If you have questions or wish to take dressage principals further in training your archery horse, just contact me.

This concludes the 3 part series on utilizing dressage techniques in training your MA horse.

Stacey Youlios has been the President of the Utah Dressage Society for six of the last 11 years and is an MA3 registered level 1 instructor as well as a USA Archery level 2 instructor. She is available for clinics on MA and training your horse for MA.