



**My student, Marie-Frances Davis, rides Restless Lark, a 14-year-old Appendix registered Quarter Horse owned by Marjorie Sutton of Corona Del Mar, California. He is by the AQHA stallion Rugged Lark and out of a Thoroughbred mare.**

*Special thanks to Lyn Morgan, owner of The Surrey in Potomac, Maryland, for the riding clothes used in this series. Contact The Surrey at (301) 299-8225.*

## Special Series: Prepare for Training Level, Test 1

# Start by Improving Position & Balance

In Part 1, Lynn Palm explains training theory and shows exercises that give you confidence.

By Lynn Palm with Patricia Lasko • Photos by Sharon P. Fibelkorn



If you're like me, you love dressage because it's the basis of good riding for any discipline. I teach many riders who, despite their fears, have dreams of being able to take their horses to a dressage show one day. I know how intimidating this can be, especially when you're surrounded by big warmbloods, but take heart. In this multi-part series, I'm going to get you started and help you prepare for one of the most basic dressage tests at a show:

Training Level, Test 1. I'll demonstrate with one of my American Quarter Horses. I love them because of their quiet temperaments and forgiving natures, but of course, you can follow this program on any horse.

Our long-term goal is the same as the "purpose" of the U.S. Equestrian Federation's (USEF) Training Level, Test 1: "To confirm that the horse's muscles are supple and loose, and that it moves freely forward in a clear and steady rhythm, accepting contact with the bit." This is the beginning of dressage training for any horse. To get there, our short-term goal for this month is to work on your position. Your position is the basis for your effectiveness and is scored on all dressage tests.) A well-balanced, steady position allows your horse to relax and become rhythmical in each gait.

### The Theory Behind the Lesson

A correct position is a huge part of riding well, because once you have control of yourself, you don't interfere with the horse. You also build confidence, because you and the horse have clear and consistent communication. Think of the horse's performance as a reflection of your position. Imagine carrying a 2-year-old child on your shoulders as you shop at a mall. If the child is rambunctious, he will move around, and you will constantly move to stay balanced under him. If the child is quiet, you can go about your shopping without a problem. The same is true for the horse. When the rider is balanced, the horse relaxes and the rider is able to feel and ride in a clear, consistent rhythm. If the horse loses his rhythm slightly, a balanced rider in the correct position will be able to feel this and easily regain a steady rhythm, due to his clear coordination of the aids. When a horse is not relaxed, he changes his rhythm—surging in speed and then slowing. He won't want to move straight or go forward, or his strides will be quick and running.

## TO FIND YOUR Seat Bones . . .

Sit on a hard chair. Bring your legs squarely out in front of you (photo 1). Feel your two seat bones. With your crotch bone, they form your seat's triangular base of support.

If your upper body leans too far forward (photo 2), you only sit on your crotch. If your upper body leans backward, you sit on your tail bone (photo 3). In these positions, you can't absorb the horse's movement, and you will bounce in the saddle.

While mounted (photo 4), using one leg at a time, bring your leg in front of the saddle flap. When you sit with a straight back, you can find your seat bones and get the feeling of being balanced on your seat.



## LONGEING EXERCISES Upper Body

**The shoulder shrug:** Slowly lift up your shoulders and, at the same time, breathe in (A). Hold your breath a moment, then slowly lower your shoulders and breathe out (B).

**The arm raise (C):** Hold your hands together near pommel and breathe in as you slowly bring your arms up over your head, even with your ears. Hold your breath a moment, then slowly exhale as you bring your arms down.



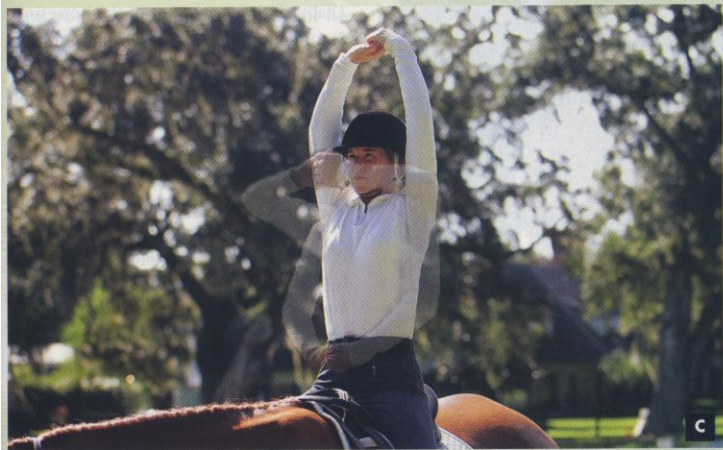
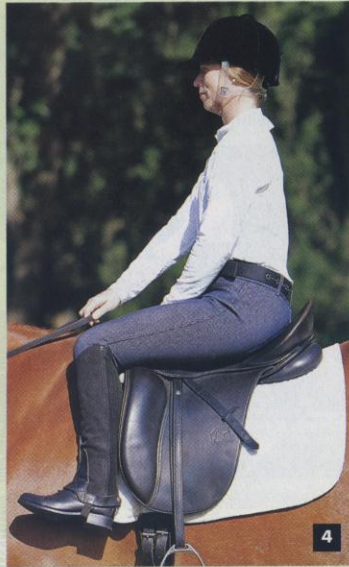
Another reason to improve your position and balance is so you won't depend on the reins. As humans, we use our hands to do everything: eat, talk, type, etc., so it's natural to grab the reins. But, as riders, we need to get out of this habit.

For me, training a horse to be supple and loose means relaxation. When he is relaxed, you can ride him in a steady

rhythm in all gaits. Too many horses are tight, tense, worried, insecure, hot-tempered or the opposite, lethargic. Often, these horses have their heads up too high, and their backs are hollow. They don't want to go forward correctly and are not relaxed or supple. Correcting these faults begins with a correct rider position, which allows for good balance.

### The Lesson

The best way to learn how to balance and develop a good position is to have many lessons on the longe line. If you don't have a regular instructor, get a friend to longe you. But, before you get on your horse, make sure you know where your seat bones are, because you need to sit on them. Your seat is your main source of



balance and your most important aid, so learn to use it correctly from the beginning. If the seat is not your source of balance, all kinds of bad things can happen: Your upper body gets stiff, you balance on your hands, you grip with your thighs or knees, or you push down into your stirrups. Sit on the edge of a hard chair, and

bring your legs squarely out in front of you, lined up with your hips. You want to feel your two seat bones on the bottom of your seat. With the crotch bone, they form a triangular base of support. If your shoulders and upper body lean too far forward, notice how you are now sitting only on your crotch. If you lean backward, the opposite happens, and you find yourself

## Lynn's Plan for Setting Better Goals

Whatever your riding goal is, find where it first appears in the U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF) dressage tests. (You can find them at the Web site usef.org.)

The USEF is the national governing body for most equestrian sports. The USEF Dressage Committee makes rules and writes tests for competition. These tests are progressive, and whether or not you plan to show your horse, you can use them to help you make training goals.

Start at the beginning and correctly learn to do all the tests that lead up to the test containing your goal. Maybe you want to do flying changes one day, or you simply want to control your horse better and have him in balance. Each test gives guidelines to get you there with progressive steps that develop both you and your horse according to the Training Scale.

The Training Scale is a progressive, six-step road map you need to follow in your horse's training.

- The first step is **rhythm**. Your horse must be as regular as a metronome when he walks, trots and canters.
- Next is **suppleness**. You must train your horse to be loose and relaxed.
- The third step is **contact**. The horse seeks an elastic connection with the rider's quiet hands.

These first three elements define the purpose of the USEF Training Level tests, which is "To confirm that the horse's muscles are supple and loose and that it moves freely forward in a clear and steady rhythm, accepting contact with the bit."

- Next on the scale is **impulsion**
- Then **straightness**.
- Finally, when you can do all this, you will arrive at the pinnacle of dressage training: **collection**.

## Longe-Lesson Progression

Longe lessons help a rider develop balance and a good position. I begin with exercises at halt and walk, letting the rider keep the stirrups and reins (1). The seat bones can be felt when the body is aligned correctly—shoulders over hips (2). When more secure, the rider goes without stirrups (3).



sitting on your tailbone. In these positions, you can't absorb the vertical shocks that come through your body when the horse moves, and you will bounce.

Once you're on the horse, find your seat bones again and sit over his center of gravity, which is just behind the withers. If your back tends to arch or round, use your stomach muscles to straighten and flatten it. Now, get your body in alignment. In a good position, an imaginary line perpendicular to the ground should run through your ear, shoulder, middle of your hip and back of your heel. When your body is aligned correctly and your shoulders are over your hips, you will feel your seat bones.

When sitting correctly, your hips will move forward and backward as they follow the motion of the horse. Think of using your seat in the same way you do when you're on a swing. Your back and seat must be flexible because you want to 1) absorb the movement of the horse and 2) influence him. Learn to balance from your seat and relax your thighs, knees and legs. You want your seat bones to stick to the saddle, and you want to feel how comfortable it is when your hips swing with the horse's motion. This can be difficult to learn, because most riders are not flexible. What they tend to do (incorrectly) is move their shoulders back and forth, so they don't stay over their hips. You need to do just the opposite: Move your hips with the horse's movement, and keep your shoulders still.

Other position problems include an arched or rounded back that keeps your hips from moving at all. Or, if the rider's back is straight and stiff, the hip joint is not flexible and, at times, the rider bounces in and out of the saddle at sitting trot and canter. The horse reacts to this pounding by changing his rhythm, moving his head up and his back down, swishing his tail and more. So work that hip joint and get it flexible.

I begin my longe lessons by letting the rider keep her stirrups and reins. The rider



**Once your balance and position on the longe get better, your confidence will grow, and your communication with your horse will also improve.**

can emphasize her leg aids to keep the horse out on the circle and feel more in control by holding the reins. When you take the reins away, riders lose confidence, so I do that in a gradual progression. When the rider gets more confident, she can ride without reins or stirrups.

As the rider progresses, I start exercises at walk. I want her to do upper body exercises at walk and trot, posting and sitting, before I take the stirrups away. Then, longeing in the easier direction first, I'll take the stirrups away and do hip and leg exercises. This work makes you more confident in your riding because your balance and position are better, and you can influence the horse. As you progress, continue to work on the longe from time to time.

Next month, I'll teach you how to use your improved seat and aids to make smooth upward and downward transitions. Then, I'll give exercises for relaxation and bending. We'll practice each movement in the test and, finally, I'll take you to a show. 🐾

*Lynn Palm began her equestrian career as a dressage rider, and it has been the basis of her training. She currently spearheads the drive to add dressage to the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) list of disciplines. As a member of AQHA, she won a record four AQHA Superhorse titles and more than 34 World and Reserve World Championships. She has performed more than 50 bridleless dressage exhibitions to music throughout the United States, including the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, with Rugged Lark. She gives clinics worldwide and is a regular commentator on RFD-TV and HorseTV. She and her husband, Cyril Pittion-Rossillion—a Riding Master from the Ecole Nationale d'Equitation—give clinics year-round at their farms in Michigan and Florida. The Web site is [lynpalm.com](http://lynpalm.com).*

To learn more, read "Developing the Rider's Seat" in the December 2005 issue of *Dressage Today*. Find more longe-line exercises from Lynn Palm on the Web site [DressageToday.com](http://DressageToday.com).

## LONGEING EXERCISE Flex the hips

**Flex your knee and ankle. Lift up your knee (1) and turn it out (2). Bring it back in and down. This is a good stretch to flex the hips.**

