

Special Series:
Prepare for Training Level, Test 1

Make Smooth Transitions

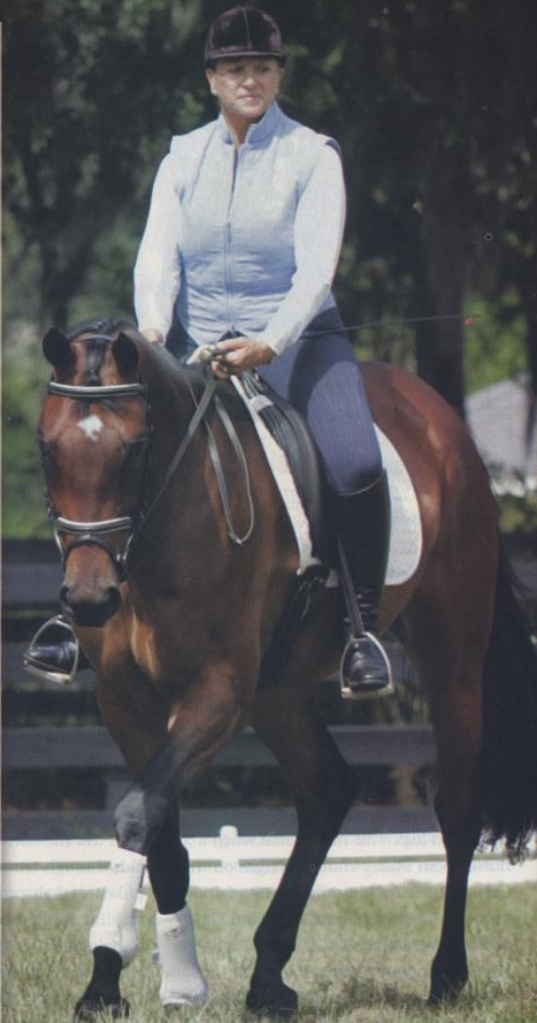
In Part 2, Lynn Palm explains how to use your seat and aids to make transitions.

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 all 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 help you prepare for one of the most basic dressage tests at a show, Training Level, Test 1. I'll demonstrate on the appendix-registered Quarter Horse Indian Harvest. (He is by Indian Artifact, and I own him jointly with Jill Crow of Denver, Colorado.) I love Quarter Horses 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.



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

Last month, we began by improving your position and balance through longeing. In future issues, we'll cover other basic test and training components, we'll practice the test and then go to a show. Our short-term goal for this month is to work on making smooth upward and downward transitions.

The Theory Behind the Lesson

To ride a test well, your horse must be responsive to your aids. Because of their quiet, laid-back natures, Quarter Horses sometimes can be slow to respond, so this is something you need to work on. You want your horse to react to light aids (I also call them signals or cues) that you give to make smooth transitions from one gait to another. For the horse to respond and go forward with light leg aids, the rider needs to be able to use her seat. If the seat is used, the horse responds to the leg aids better. The seat is the director. The leg and reins aids are the supporting cast. The seat aid.

Here are different ways to use your seat and hips as an aid:

1. You can passively let your hips follow along with the motion of the horse.
2. You can increase that movement from your hips, which makes an "action" on the horse's back, and he thinks, "Oh, she wants me to do something." When the rider accompanies this seat/hip action with a slight squeeze of the legs, the horse naturally goes forward.
3. When you want to slow down, stop the movement of your hips. To do this, tighten your lower abdominal and rump muscles. The horse feels this change along with your restricting hand aid and moves into the downward transition.

My husband, Cyril, and I teach our students that the emphasis is on the action of the seat supported by the leg. The seat and the leg together control the horse from back to front.



The seat is the primary aid and can be used in different ways. When transitioning to canter, for example, the seat and hips move in a scooping motion as if you were on a swing and propelling it to go higher.

Training Road Map

The Training Scale is a progressive road map that you'll want to follow in the training of your horse. It begins with **rhythm**—your horse must first be steady and rhythmical as he walks, trots and canters. Next is **suppleness**. You must train your horse's muscles to be loose and relaxed. Then you'll need to develop **contact, impulsion and straightness**. Finally, once you have trained your horse to be correct in all these qualities, you will arrive at the goal of dressage training: **collection**.

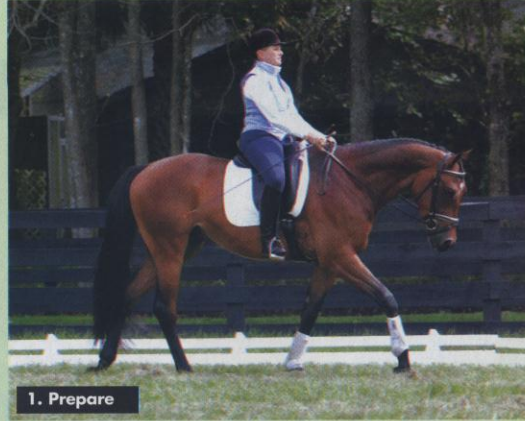
Upward transition

To do an upward transition from walk to trot (right), I prepare by looking ahead and increasing the power and authority of the movement of my hips (1). I position my legs a few inches behind the girth and vibrate them to get the horse's attention (2), and I cue him to trot (3).

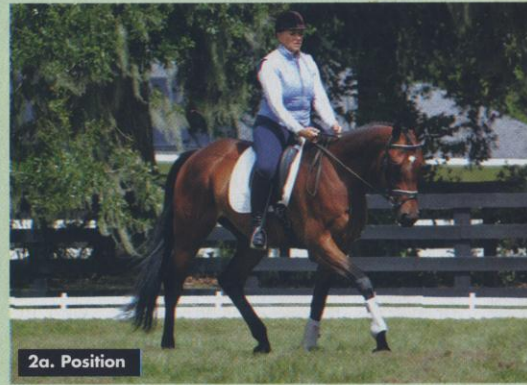
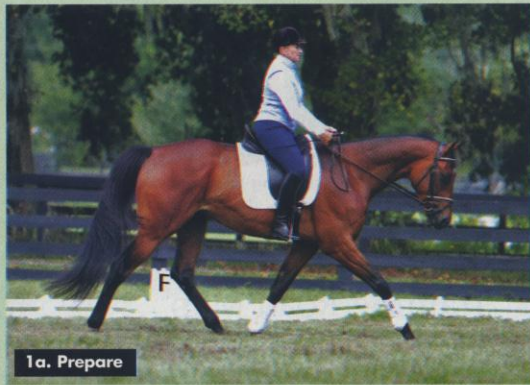
Downward transition

To do a downward transition from trot to walk (below), I prepare by looking ahead and deciding where I want to make my transition and making sure the horse is straight between my legs and reins (1a). I position my aids for the downward transition (2a). Then I give him the cue (3a): I sit tall and stop the movement with my hips. I keep my legs on his sides (to encourage the engagement of his hind legs) and restrict him with the rein by closing my fingers.

Upward Transition: Walk to Trot



Downward Transition: Trot to Walk

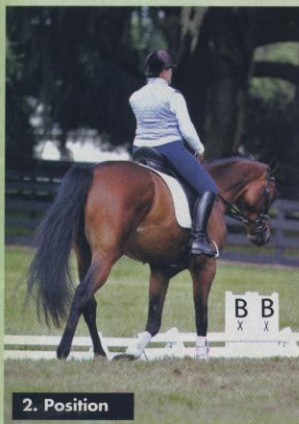


The upward transition.

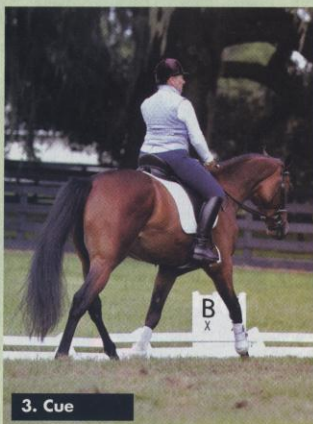
When you want to go forward in an upward transition—halt to walk, walk to trot, trot to canter—increase the movement of your hips. This means move your hips more powerfully forward with authority and squeeze a little with your leg. Position your legs a few inches behind the girth and below an imaginary line half way down his barrel. That is the area most sensitive to your leg aids. You

want your leg long so you can use the upper part of your lower leg to cue your horse. Bring your leg slightly back and vibrate it to get his attention. If there is no reaction, give him a bump with your leg or a sting with your dressage whip. When he responds, reward him and, next time, use the lighter aid. If he doesn't respond immediately, repeat the sequence. The idea is for the horse to respond to light aids.

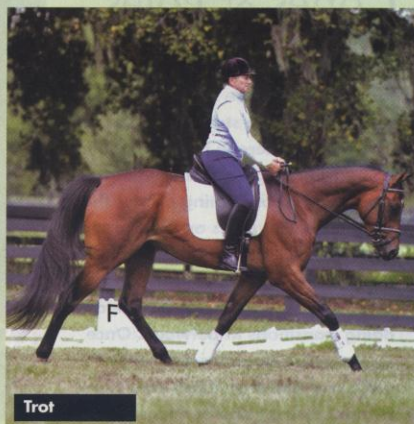
Horses love lightness. To illustrate this idea of developing light aids, I use the example of a fly. How much does a fly weigh? Nothing. But when a fly lands on a horse, he feels it, doesn't he? Or how about this example: Make a fist and put it against your own ribs as lightly as you can. You still feel it, but if you start gripping and squeezing and pressing, it hurts! And you say, "Ouch, I don't like that." So the more you grip and squeeze or give



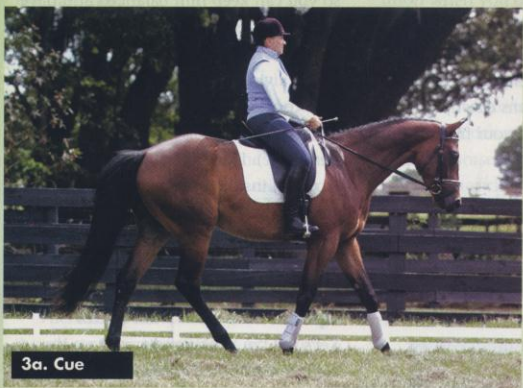
2. Position



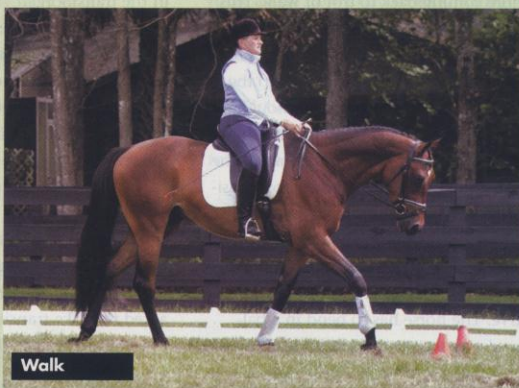
3. Cue



Trot



3a. Cue



Walk

pressure with your legs, the more the horse resists or ignores you. It's the same with the whip and spur. You can use the whip or spur as a guide or correction to say, "No, I'm not going to let you make me squeeze more. If you don't go from lightness when I use my seat, you're going to get a tap with the whip." This works with the horse's natural instinct to move away from something uncomfortable.

For the trot-canter transition, the seat

aid is slightly different because of the movement of the horse. The action of the hips is a scooping kind of movement. I compare it to sitting on a swing when you want it to go higher—a pushing-forward motion with the hips. It's easiest to do at the sitting trot, but when you reach a certain skill level, you also can do it at the posting trot during the sitting portion.

If the rider uses the seat as the primary or directing aid, she should begin to feel the

horse responding to lighter pressure with the leg aids, and that's the goal. At first, when you're learning this, both seat and leg might need to be a bit exaggerated to feel something happen. As the horse learns and understands what you want, you will do less and less until the seat and leg aids become very small. Remember that the aid always comes from the seat with support from the legs.

Another reward for the transition to

Multi-Transition Exercises Cones & Poles

Try these variations:

On a 20-meter circle (see diagram, far right), walk five strides, trot five strides, walk five strides, etc. You can also do this exercise in a straight line. If you're having trouble counting strides and coordinating aids at the same time, put poles on the ground about 24 feet apart (right). Walk over one pole, trot over the second pole. Walk a pole, trot a pole, etc., doing transitions in between. Once that exercise becomes easy, try walk-trot-halt-trot. Keep your horse straight, using reins and legs.



canter is only to canter five or six strides before coming back to trot or walk. This does two things: It controls the horse's balance and the quality of his response to the aids in the transition. If you do the transitions before he is strong enough, he will have a tendency to lunge into the next gait. A good canter must start at the transition. So if you've had a poor transition, you'll have a poor canter.

In the test, you're asked to canter in the corner, which is perfect because you're naturally working with the bend in that curve. The horse has to bend in a balanced way to take the correct lead. All

this gives him a good chance to do well in the transition.

The downward transition.

Your legs stay in contact with the horse's sides to encourage the engagement of the hind legs as he transitions down. Use your seat aid first. Then close your fingers on the reins.

The Lesson

In Training Level, Test 1, all trot work may be ridden sitting or rising, and halts may be done through the walk. You are asked to make transitions between markers. This gives you a lot of time to ask

your horse gradually in a soft, light way, so you can keep him balanced and have smooth transitions.

Think of the circle as four parts, and set up a visual tool for yourself, using four cones to mark the quarter points of a 20-meter (66-foot) circle (see diagram, next page). Place a cone about two meters (six feet) inside B and another inside the track at E. Place the other two cones on the centerline inside the circle points. As you ride, keep the cones on the inside of your circle.

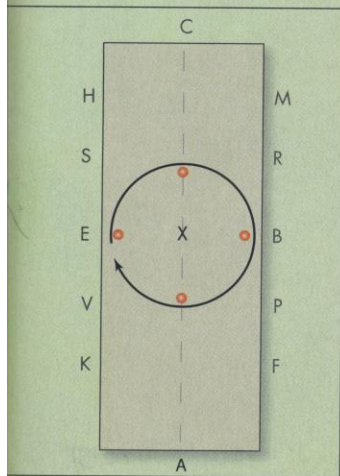
Upward transition: walk to trot

Let's say I'm walking toward B on the right rein and beginning a 20-meter circle to the right at B. I plan to transition to trot between the cone on the centerline and E and then come back to walk between the next centerline cone and B. To do these transition, I use a system I call PPC—Prepare, Position, Cue. Prepare with your eyes, position your aids and wait. Then cue your horse with your seat and legs. The reins help to keep him straight along the bent line. I turn with my outside leg and rein. So from B to the cone on the centerline, I have to be sure the bend is established.

Prepare: As I approach the first cone on

Lynn Learns a Lesson

When I was training My Royal Lark for dressage shows in Florida some years ago, I was working on three-tempi changes. Some days, he'd be perfect, another day he'd do one change every four strides and, another day, he'd skip and do every two. It wasn't consistent. So I went to author, trainer and coach Jane Savoie for help. She said he was doing Third and Fourth Level movements but he didn't yet have the conditioning and roundness he needed to show at the upper levels. "Start in First level for your own confidence," she told me. "Go back to First and Second Levels and do simple lead changes, canter-walk-canter, for a whole season." By the end of the season, my three-tempi lead changes were there, even though I hadn't been training them. I went back to the basics, and it showed me what I was missing in my training. That was a very valuable lesson.



the centerline, I look ahead to E and plan my transition.

Position: I position my aids. My inside leg is at the girth; my outside rein is against the neck; my outside leg is farther back than my inside leg; the inside rein flexes my horse's head a little inward with an open rein. If a horse has the tendency to fall in a specific direction, an indirect rein is necessary to keep him balanced on a curved line and flex his head inward. (Next month, I will explain the open and indirect rein in detail.)

Then, as I pass the first cone, I review the aid sequence for the upward transition to trot. The horse is still bent in the direction of travel.

Cue: I give the seat aid, supported by my leg, and the transition should happen by the time the horse's shoulder is at E. Depending on the horse, begin to cue a minimum of 10 feet before the letter. When your horse is more responsive, you can do it closer to E.

Downward transition: trot to walk

Prepare: Continuing on the 20-meter circle, I trot toward the next centerline cone after E and look ahead to B.

Position: I ready my aids.

Cue: For the transition down, instead of

following the horse's motion, I stop the movement of my hips, keep my legs on the horse's sides and restrict with the rein by closing my fingers.

Upward transition: trot to canter

Prepare: Again, trot on a 20-meter circle. At B, I look ahead to the cone on the centerline and review the aids to canter.

Position: The horse is already bent slightly with my inside leg at or just behind the girth and my outside leg positioned farther back.

Cue: Just before E, I give the action of my seat and support it with a squeeze of my outside leg. The horse's outside hind leg makes the first step in the canter.

While training at home, I like to see riders pick up the canter at a specific letter. If you can do it at a designated point at home, it will be easier in competition when you only have to do it between markers.

Try these multi-transition exercises

1. On a 20-meter circle, walk five strides, trot five strides, walk five strides, trot five strides, etc. Remember that if you keep the horse bent on the curve, you'll have a better chance of keeping him in an uphill balance as he goes forward.

2. Once that exercise becomes easy, try walk-trot-halt-trot transitions. If you have a sensitive horse, you have to halt

longer to let him settle and think. If you have a laid-back horse, you don't want to stand still too long, because it will be hard to get him going again. Keep your horse straight, using your reins and legs before and during the transitions.

3. You can also do this exercise in a straight line. If you're having trouble counting strides and coordinating aids at the same time, put poles on the ground about 24 feet apart (see photo, p. 44). Walk over one pole, then ask for trot. Trot over the second pole, then ask for walk. Walk a pole, trot a pole, walk a pole, etc., doing transitions between the poles.

This month's homework is to practice your good position while riding upward and downward transitions. Smoothness is the key. Don't hurry. To learn more about how to make good transitions, you can read "Transitions: The Secret to Balanced Riding" by Henk van Bergen with Beth Baumert in the August 2002 issue of *Dressage Today*. [For back issues, call (301) 977-3900 and press 0 for the receptionist.]

Next month, we'll talk about bending, straightness and staying rhythmical and steady—all important basics of the Training Scale that are tested in Training Level, Test 1. 🐾



Lynn Palm began her equestrian career as a dressage rider, and dressage has been the basis of her training, no matter the discipline. As a member of the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA), she won a record four 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 at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta with her AQHA partner Rugged Lark. She currently is spearheading the drive to add dressage to the AQHA list of disciplines. She gives clinics worldwide and is a regular commentator on RFD-TV and Horse TV. She and her husband, Cyril Pittion-Rossillion—a Riding Master from the French national equestrian school—give clinics year around at their farms in Michigan and Florida. The Web site is lympalm.com.