

Lengthenings

By Danica Yates

Every dressage test from first level through grand prix includes movements requiring the horse to lengthen his stride. In first level the movement is called simply “lengthenings”, starting in second “medium” gaits are introduced and in third level “extensions.” These terms simply label the ability of the horse to lengthen his stride at the various levels. As a horse progresses in his training, he will be able to show more increase in the thrust from the hind end and increase in ground cover. To perform the movement well at any level, the rider must communicate to the horse with her leg, seat and hand, and most importantly, have the horse set up well with good impulsion.

The first aid that plays a role in the trot and canter lengthenings is the connection in the hand. An important part of all dressage moments is the quality of contact. The hand must not be too light which throws the horse away and fails to give him proper support and connection to be through. Nor must the hand be too heavy and restrictive which blocks the horse’s movement, “holds him up” and disallows the horse to swing and stretch. The hand is perhaps the most difficult aid to develop properly and learning to find effective contact can be difficult. But lengthenings are a good illustration of the quality of contact. If the horse is not soft and supple in the contact, often he will brace, the tempo will quicken or the rhythm will be inconsistent in the lengthenings.

The second aid that plays a role in communicating to a horse to lengthen his stride is the seat. The seat and leg in conjunction are called the driving aids. What riders need to be very careful to avoid in lengthenings is over driving with their seat. If a horse feels too much pressure from the rider’s seat driving down into his back, it will cause him to attempt to avoid the pressure and hollow his back. In this case the hind end will go out the back door and a good engaged lengthening is not possible. Instead, the rider needs to be very tactful with the seat aid and actually stretch up to lighten the pressure in their seat to cue for a lengthening. This will allow the horse to lift his back and step his hind legs under him as he pushes into a more ground covering step.



For engaged, expressive lengthenings, riders must stretch tall with their upper body and open their thighs, avoiding driving down with their seat which causes horses to drop their back and flattens their stride.

The final aid used to communicate the lengthening is of course the leg. Very minimal pressure from the leg should be required. The leg aid can be applied like a hug from the lower leg that sends the horse forward accompanied with a slight softening of the hand and arm. A touch with the whip behind the leg can be effective to engage the haunches further. It is very important to avoid kicking your horse and rushing him forward. Pressure from the leg and whip should only be used to cue the horse for the movement and possibly reinforce it a time or two but not drive every step. By far the biggest mistake that riders make in attempting to lengthen a horse's stride, is to lose good contact and engagement, the horse then falls on his forehead as the rider kicks him faster and faster.

The biggest key in performing a quality lengthening lies in preparing the gait beforehand. To do a good lengthening, the horse must be balanced carrying weight on his hind end, connected in the hand and sensitive to the leg. Again, the amount of weight carried on the hind end, the amount of engagement, and thus the magnitude of the lengthening depends on the horse's level of training. But, at any level, the principles for preparation are the same. Working horses at training level sets the ground work for maintaining an even tempo and being sharp to the leg. Transitions are a very valuable way to help horses learn to react from very light aids. Repetition and consistency in requiring a reaction are key (reinforcing the light leg aid with the whip if the horse does not react, then repeating the transitions again asking with a light aid first). Starting at first level, horses are asked to show adjustability in their stride. Very important in teaching the beginnings of lengthenings, is to only ask for as much difference in stride as the horse can give while staying in balance. Don't try to go too big too quickly or your horse may not learn to do it correctly in balance.

To have good extensions, horses must have good impulsion in the collection. To enable the horse to stay engaged in a big stride, they must be able to stay engaged on a short stride. Explosive extensions come from energy loaded up in a packaged frame and then opened up. In the transitions from one length of step to the next, energy cannot be created, just transferred. In collected gaits, energy creates jump upwards; in the extensions, energy pushes the horse forward in thrust. The best place to create energy, is when it is contained on a smaller step. In other words, to set your horse up for a good lengthening, you must first develop good impulsion in the collection. Activating the hind leg and revving the horse up in the corner is a good way to prepare for a powerful and smooth extension. Collection generally requires more effort for horses than lengthening. After your horse has been working in collection, all it takes is relaxing the hand and touching the horse with the leg and he will be happy to open up the step.

In some cases, if a horse has been worked too much on a small step and ridden with a restrictive hand, he must be encouraged to relax and move freely again. These horses benefit from a lot of big open circles or work on the rail encouraging them to slowly take the step bigger with a very soft contact. Relaxing and suppling exercises are valuable to teach these horses to step forward to the contact and lift their backs. The quality of contact dictates how well the horse will be able to adjust his stride. If he is bracing or locked he will not be able to use his body well.

Stride lengthenings and later in a horse's training extended gaits are beautiful to watch and splendid to ride. There is nothing more pleasant to see than a horse staying free in his back and even in

his tempo push from his hind end and cover ground. Quality of contact, lightness of seat and sensitivity to the leg all play a role in enabling the horse to perform this movement well.

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