

# Longitudinal Suppleness

By Danica Yates

Longitudinal suppleness refers to the relaxation and stretch of a horse's topline from back to front. For a horse to achieve elastic self carriage, he must be free in his back. To be able to perform the increasingly more demanding movements as a horse progresses up the levels, he must have full use of his back, not tensing or stiffening the topline. We shall discuss how to know if a horse is tight in the back, and exercises and techniques on how to help promote longitudinal suppleness.

'Lateral suppleness' refers to the side-to-side relaxation in a horse's body where as 'longitudinal suppleness' refers to the relaxation back-to-front in a horse's topline. Both are important to enable a horse to carry himself in a relaxed and balanced manner. When a horse is stiff, lateral suppleness is often the first problem. If the horse does not want to flex in the poll and is heavy on the forehand, he needs to work more uphill in front of the leg and be supplied laterally to release the tension in the back. When a horse carries his poll as the highest point but is short in the neck, it is indicative specifically of a lack of longitudinal suppleness. Horses like this must be taught to reach for the bit and unlock the back longitudinally. All horses can benefit from the following exercises for encouraging longitudinal suppleness.

When I get a horse who does not want to readily accept the contact and reach for the bit, I will start off very simply with this walking, stretching exercise. First I allow the horse to walk on a long rein, encouraging him to step forward in his walk- not letting him be too slow or short in his step. Then I slowly shorten up my reins, keeping my body relaxed, and mentally tell him to keep the tempo and not go quicker or slower. Horses showing tension may try to toss their heads when they start to feel the contact, others try to jog off. I take a light feel of the horse's mouth and ask him to march quietly forward until the horse accepts the increased contact and softens his topline, bringing his back up. Then I stay in the collected walk, keeping him forward but staying dynamic with my hand-- supportive but quiet and not fussing with the horse's mouth. Then when he is quiet and walking forward, I will let the reins out, and go back to a free walk. Try this, repeating the transitions until the horse does not resist the increased contact but lengthens and shortens him frame willingly. This will also teach your horse to relate the forward stretching walk to the collected walk with more contact. The goal is to maintain the forward impulsion in the walk, sustain the same tempo and have the horse reach for the bit even with the frame and stride shortened.

Next I will use transitions between the gaits to supple up the horse's back, the most simple of which is walk/halt on a circle. When the horse halts, he should not lean into the bit nor should he suck back. It is important to continue to ride the horse back to front even in downward transitions, thinking forward into the halt. Do not rely on your hand to cue the halt. Try instead to use your body, engaging your stomach muscles and upper thigh as you sit deeper into the saddle and close your hand. A big distinction in learning to ride back to front and allowing your horse to reach for the contact, is to never take or pull backwards on the horse's mouth. Instead, you must simply close the hand into a fist around the reins for the half halt and use your body-- known as 'blocking.' In these transitions, you should never

feel that you must have a death grip on the horse's mouth to keep him round. It is your job to maintain a soft connection and keep his hind leg active and coming under to help his back stay up and soft. Next, I will use walk/trot transitions to engage the horse's hind end and encourage a soft back, using walk to canter and halt to canter transitions for the more advanced horse. It is important to keep your hands out of the way and use them only in a supportive connection or in clear, brief half halts.

Finally, and probably most useful in the dressage work, I use transitions within the gaits frequently, allowing the frame to slightly lengthen and shorten to promote longitudinal suppleness. It is very important to not always get stuck on one stride length. You must teach your horse to travel on any stride length that you choose. Bringing the horse back and teaching him to take smaller, more energized steps is valuable to strengthen his hind end and move toward creating collection. It is also useful to send the horse forward often, to freshen up the gait and release any tension in his back or mind. Lengthening can also help relax the rider's body to avoid ever feeling clenched like you are holding onto something you might lose. Moving the horse forward and back helps remind you, as well as the horse, to release tension in your body and breathe.

Transitions within the gaits can be done at the walk, trot or canter. Perhaps the most beneficial is to do them in the canter because when you bring the horse back, you will know very clearly if you lose engagement and suppleness because the horse will break to the trot. Dressage riders often think of stride length as either full out lengthened or collected and thus over school that dichotomy. The truth is, a horse's stride length is on a continuum and can be schooled at any length on that continuum. You can send the horse a little forward, bring him back, send him forward again. Or collect, collect on the spot, go a little forward, collect on the spot, extend, etc. Again, your horse should develop the ability to travel on any length of step that you choose. Don't worry about always holding your lengthening for full diagonals or for long periods. Focus on the transitions and try to incorporate them in new places in the ring-- on circles, serpentines or various sections of diagonals.

Sending the horses forward and back has many advantages including allowing him to stretch over his back, teaching him to move forward and stretch to the contact. Similar to how we bring the horse back in transitions between gaits, as we go to collect the horse, we do not want to shut the energy down by pulling back. Instead, we want to have a sympathetic hand that works in conjunction with our whole body. We wish to promote longitudinal suppleness so that that the horse learns to reach for the connection and can best use his back to carry himself in a soft connection. When longitudinal suppleness is achieved, you will feel that the connection is more dynamic, allowing for better communication with your dance partner.

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