

German Training Scale: The Limitations for Everyday Riders, and an Alternative Approach

Diana Waters, January 2023

The German Training Scale is often quoted as the only correct way to train a horse. This essay examines a typical interpretation of the German Training Scale and discusses its limitations regarding everyday riders. It also suggests alternatives to the Scale which may be more suited to the everyday horse and rider wanting to achieve lightness, balance and harmony.

Below is a brief summary using information from an article about biomechanics¹, which refers extensively to the German Training Scale. I've used this single example, because it explains clearly and in quite a lot of detail the concepts that I have seen used and spoken about commonly.

German Training Scale

Rhythm and Suppleness (Losgelassenheit)

Work the horse long and low in an even rhythm and tempo. This creates a rounded back and allows the back muscles to move freely and with suppleness.

Contact

Shorten up the reins: The back must stay round, hind legs bend more and front end lifts.

Impulsion and Straightness

Once the horse is swinging through the back, into an even contact, (impulsion) you can begin to ask for straightness with circles and lateral work.

Collection

Once the horse is straight, you can begin to ask for collection (defined here as bending of the haunches).

Summary of Explanation

The concept works on the basis that you begin by loosening the horse and teaching him to lift and round the back by riding him long and low in trot to engage the nuchal ligament. At this stage, you are looking for *Losgelassenheit*: suppleness combined with looseness, with the horse moving freely forward and all joints bending and stretching equally well. This is a prerequisite for contact, impulsion and straightness. From this, you take contact: you shorten the reins, maintaining the round back, so that the hind legs bend more and consequently the front end lifts. If the horse drops the back, comes behind the bit or evades the contact, the answer is more driving aids, the theory being that the driving aids will cause the hindlegs to bend more and the neck to lift. Next you ask for impulsion: for the horse to swing through the back into an even contact. Only once you have achieved impulsion do you begin work on straightness, which is achieved with circles and lateral work, eg shoulder-in by driving with inside leg into light inside rein flexion. Collection is next, defined here as bending of the haunches. One way to do this by using rein aids to increase the duration of the stance phase of the hindlegs, releasing the energy each step while the hindleg is in swing phase.

Limitations

The German Training Scale is based on a model of “movement before balance”, involving doing most of the early work in trot. As you may have noticed, the rider is relying heavily on the effectiveness of the driving aids in causing the hind joints to bend.

I think that if this all goes to plan, with a skilled, strong and fit rider on an unspoilt warmblood, it can work really well. However, in practice I don't think the system is well suited to everyday riders on everyday horses. Here's why:

What I have often seen with riders that try to use the German training scale is that the horse often does not seek long and low contact with a round back if he has blockages in his body. The rider then gets stuck at the first hurdle. Some people overcome this by working the horse on the lunge without a rider in a good rhythm and tempo until he finds a better long and low posture. This is much better, but does not solve the next problem:

From the long and low posture, the rider is asked to pick up the contact. The horse is supposed to maintain a round back, lift the head and bend the hindlegs. If the horse doesn't yet understand rein contact, he will often drop the back, come behind the bit or evade the contact. The answer, according to the German system, is more driving aids, the theory being that the driving aids will cause the hindlegs to bend more and the neck to lift, and the back to round. The rider attempts to use the driving aids, but more activity will only increase the bending of the hind legs if the horse does not run. Additionally, a “driving” seat used on a hollow back causes more hollowing. When the horse is on the forehand and not round in the back, he is not “on” the seat aids, therefore, he won't respond to soft seat aids maintaining tempo. Therefore, the rider uses strong seat or hands to maintain tempo and prevent rushing, but these aids

usually interfere with the movement and prevent the back from swinging. This is the start of the pushing and pulling that we commonly see.

The German scale implies that straightening should not take place until the horse is “losgelassen” and swinging through the back into an even contact on both reins. Although in theory the horse bends all joints equally in “Losgelassenheit” which is a precursor to straightness, in practice I’m not sure how this can be the case if the horse is not travelling straight. Firstly, if the horse is not straight, how can all joints be flexing equally? Secondly, if the horse is not straight, there are blockages in his body which prevent the energy flowing through, so how can he be losgelassen?

To me, it also makes no sense to ask the horse for impulsion before he is straight for the same reason: the crookedness in the horse’s body prevents the energy flowing through. Maybe that is why there is so much use of the “driving aids” to maintain “impulsion”. I certainly see a lot of competitive riders pushing their horse on with strong spurs to try and achieve impulsion.

Alternative Approach

I have learned, from my mentors and the horses themselves, to school horses by showing them gently and precisely what to do in walk, rather than by driving them into it in trot. This is great for any horse and rider, because it is a two way conversation with room for mistakes on both parts. Mistakes are not going to cause increased stress and strain on joints, or tiredness and frustration. There is not the need for a strong, fit, highly co-ordinated rider and a naturally balanced horse, but the horse and rider can both begin where they currently are and progress together at a pace that suits them, making real and meaningful changes. It’s also suitable for experienced and highly skilled trainers and talented horses, because showing the horse the way eliminates the need for “driving” and high impact, and encourages lightness and balance from the start.

Blockages

I use the word “Blockages” as a general term to describe areas of tension and “stuckness”. Blockages can come from physical issues such as injuries and ill fitting tack, which must be ruled out, but they are most commonly training issues, and most horses will have them to some extent. If the horse pulls, braces, pokes his nose, sticks his head in the air, leans on the bit, tilts his head, is crooked, or does not respond to leg aids, he has blockages in his body.

Unblocking, and understanding Rein Contact and Posture



If the horse already understands what to do when you pick up the reins, he will not hollow the back or evade the contact. For this reason, I teach this very early on. If I am using a bridle with reins attached to bit or noseband, the horse needs to understand how to respond to rein aids before I expect to have any type of contact.

First he needs to be soft in the jaw and poll. I teach him to soften the jaw in halt, in-hand by gently moving the bit in his mouth (never backwards) until he chews. In this way, any blockages in the poll and jaw are released. Next, I teach him to pick up. When I pick up the reins, the jaw and poll are already soft. I want him to lift the base of the neck, with the nose out so that the poll doesn't drop. I do this in-hand first so that I can gently correct

any issues with nose coming behind the vertical, poll dropping, or jaw or poll bracing.

Once the horse understands the mechanics, I repeat under saddle in walk, picking up the reins as he lifts the head, and letting them out as he reverses the process, drawing the reins out through my fingers as he stretches. Because the posture of his body is correct, he naturally learns to collect, lifting the front end and lowering the haunches as I pick up the contact.

There is no need for driving aids during any part of the process, because the removal of blockages means that the horse moves freely forward and is in self carriage from early on. He maintains his own forward movement and naturally bends his hind legs through having learned the correct posture during the pick-up, which is now in his muscle memory. If he has not learned this, then I still don't use driving aids! I go back a step and show him again from the ground.



Straightening, Collection and Impulsion



In-hand, then under saddle, in walk, I teach the horse lateral work, including giravolta, leg yield, shoulder-in. I can now use any of these to straighten him, putting his front legs in alignment with his hinds. Rather than using driving aids to push his body into place, I use the appropriate lateral exercise, which he has learned to do from soft aids, to realign his front end with his back end. In walk, these can be taught and used with lightness and accuracy. When he becomes crooked, I straighten him.

The horse is now both straight and collected, and has no blockages in his body, which means that he moves freely forward in lightness and balance. This means that I can now release him into impulsion, in trot and canter – like turning on a tap when the horse has been unkinked. The impulsion

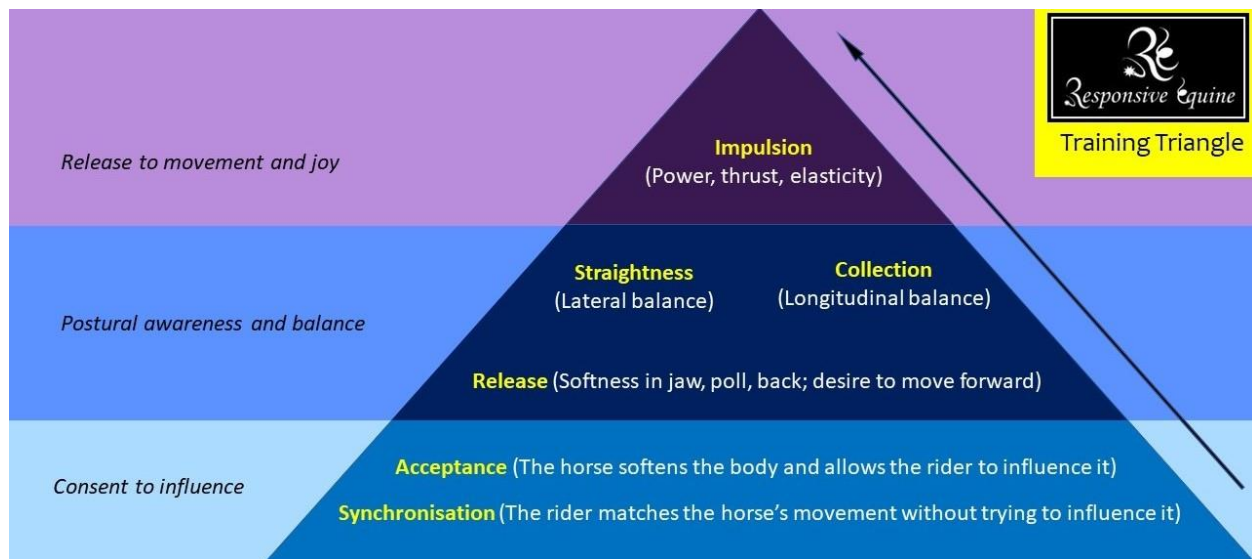
does not require driving because he is in self carriage, having figured out his balance. The collection does not require me to direct his hind legs with my reins, because he seeks a position of balance throughout his whole body, having been shown how to find it.

Having taught the horse everything he needs to know in walk, we can now work with collection and impulsion in trot and canter, without any need for driving. If there is a mistake, it is corrected with positioning his body from light aids, as he has been taught in walk how to adjust each part of his body into balance when asked.



Responsive Equine Training Triangle

I would like to emphasise that the methods explained here are not my own ideas, and are nothing new but have been learned from my mentors and from the horses themselves. I have created the Triangle to represent these methods and as an alternative to the German Scales of Training. This is the process I go through when schooling any horse. I begin by meeting him where he is at, then asking him to allow me to influence him, then showing him what to do and how to do it, then releasing and enjoying.



Explanation

Synchronisation

The rider is balanced and moves precisely with the horse and without impeding or altering his or her movement in any way. This means the rider allows the horse to move in his natural tempo and especially does not push the horse on to walk faster.

Acceptance

The horse allows the rider to influence his/her movement. This requires synchronisation, and for both the horse and rider to be relaxed and focused.

Release

The horse is soft and yielding in the jaw, poll and back and moves willingly forward without being driven. The desire to move forward comes as a natural consequence of the unblocking of his or her body, and is usually first offered during a release to long rein. If the forward is not offered, the horse should not be pushed or driven, but more unblocking may be necessary.

Straightness (lateral balance)

The horse is correctly aligned with front legs directly in front of hind legs. This is achieved through lateral work, first in-hand and then under saddle.

Collection (longitudinal balance)

Lifted shoulders, haunches flexing, neck arching to poll at highest point, and open in the gullet, light to the aids, nimble and maneuverable. This often happens simultaneously with straightness, and can be further aided by transitions and rein-back. As the horse becomes more collected, weight is carried further back. The longitudinal balance changes according to what the horse is doing (eg piaffe has weight further back than trot) and the ability to alter longitudinal balance leads to collection.

Impulsion

Controlled power and elastic, expressive movement. The horse offers impulsion when released and allowed to go forward once he is working in lateral and longitudinal balance.

Conclusion

I believe the German Training Scale has been and continue to be used successfully by many horses and riders. However, I believe that it has limitations when being used by non-professional and non-competitive horse and rider combinations where the rider may lack strength or fitness, or may not wish to ride using strength, and the horse may not have optimal conformation for the approach of “driving” from back to front, and movement before balance. I have created the Responsive Equine Training Triangle to provide a visual representation of the French based methods of balance before movement which allows a gentler and slower way of training and eliminates the need to “drive”. It also has the added benefits of producing horses that can work at the highest levels in lightness and self carriage.

References

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