

Trail Horses and Dressage - Mutually Exclusive Or A Little Used Key To Success?

By Donna Snyder-Smith

page 1 of 5

If your idea of heaven is the sun on your face, the wind in your hair and the smell of pine, sage, or the ocean, you're probably a died-in-the-wool trail rider, and wouldn't be caught dead wearing a black jacket and while breeches or riding your horse in a 66 X 198 foot piece of real estate surrounded by a foot high white fence and big letters! Does that mean the specifics of the training methods known around the world, as "dressage" have no value for you and your horse? Let's take a look.

Trail horse: four legs, a head and a tail.

Dressage horse: four legs, a head and a tail.

Trail horse: calm, responsive, obedient

Dressage horse: calm, responsive, obedient

Trail horse: able to move out when asked

Dressage horse: able to extend all gaits when asked

Trail horse: able to slow the gait when asked

Dressage horse: able to collect the gaits

Trail horse: stops obediently, stands still until asked to move off

Dressage horse: stops squarely and stands quietly and at attention at riders request

Trail horse: accepts scary objects on the trail without panicking

Dressage horse: accepts scary objects around arena without panicking

Trail horse: does his work in a relaxed manner

Dressage horse: works in a relaxed, rounded outline

Trail horse: should be a pleasurable ride

Dressage horse: correct frame makes them easier to sit and control

Trail horse: needs to be balanced to avoid excessive concussion on front end

Dressage horse: goal is to be balanced and light in all movements

Trail horse: more fun and comfortable to ride if supple and obedient

Dressage horse: better scores if supple and obedient to rider's aids

Judging from the above list, it would seem that trail horses and dressage horses have more in common than one first might think. It would be better for all concerned if the word dressage were associated more with the "training" of a horse and less with showing one, but in this country at least, most people associate the word dressage with a specific form of competition. In its purest form the word describes a variety of training systems with a common purpose, that of helping the horse regain all of his natural, unencumbered balance, suspension and elasticity of steps, through the use of supplying, engaging, strengthening and straightening exercises. These exercises can help our horses carry us on their backs in a way which allows their forehand to become light and their head and neck relax and stretch into a beautiful arch. As an added bonus, the muscles which are being developed when dressage exercises are used as a part of a correct training regimen, make the horse more beautiful to look at and less subject to injury. They also tend to have less soundness/arthritis issues as they age, which means they get to live full and happy lives.

A great example is a half Arabian named Elmer Bandit. Bred by his owner, Mary Anna Woods, Elmer was the result of Mary's crossing her appendix Quarter mare, Dandy Lain on the Arabian stallion, JD's Junell Junaid. At 32, Mary and Elmer completed 14 rides, (bringing their lifetime mileage total to 17,000 miles), winning three sweepstakes awards (high point open horse), and competing in six states and three regions and they are still competing as of the end of 2008.

"In 1980 Elmer earned the NATRC Grand Champion Award and in 1986 he was the first horse inducted into the NATRC Horse Hall of Fame." "Elmer was trained going down the trail" says his owner and rider, Mary Wood. "When he was five I took him to the Girl Scout National Center West, a 14,000 acre camp near Ten Sleep, Wyoming; with three and six day pack trips and dude rides, Elmer got plenty of conditioning. We competed in four NATRC novice rides that year (1976). By the following June he had earned his first National Championship (he now has 23). We have taken dressage lessons off and on since I started riding Elmer. When I don't take lessons, I find myself getting sloppy. One year I focused on learning new ways of moving his front and hind feet independently so we could finally back around a tree fluidly. I am working on getting Elmer's neck centered between his shoulder blades and on getting him round. I have stopped lying about feeling things that I don't (like when Elmer pops a shoulder). I see better than I feel, and am left brained, so although I try to use visualizations, I am rarely successful, but insist that the instructor give me some visual clues to use, to help when I don't feel something Elmer is doing or something I want him to do.

By understanding how my balance and Elmer's straightness affect Elmer's performance I avoid saying "Why didn't you do what I asked?" We often practice going down the trail, getting round. On dirt roads I leg yield Elmer back and forth. I know dressage helps Elmer, but sometimes we get distracted, and spend most of our trail time just going along on drooping reins, enjoying the scenery. Every year it seems that Elmer becomes more powerful especially when climbing hills, and he can still out trot any horse, which wants to race.

The only difference between the pleasure trail rider, the competitive trail rider and endurance riders is length of time in the saddle, the amount of conditioning required and sometimes the speed at which a course or distance is covered. All horses which spend time on the trail must meet and handle the dynamics of topography and footing. These elements ask balance and strength questions of the horse which he must be able to answer successfully if he is to maintain his soundness over the miles and years, succeed in gaining ground over an opponent safely or maintain his lead, and provide a "minimum risk" ride for his human partner.

Endurance rider Steve Rojek and his wife Diane are well known for their consistent success in the field of endurance riding, which ranges from winning regional and national rides, to being selected to represent their country in multiple Pan American and World Championships.

“Dinah and I feel very strongly that dressage is a great way to cross train for the sport of endurance riding. After all, dressage means training and god knows we never stop training and retraining. We feel that encouraging the horse to move forward with suppleness, straightness and self-carriage can only be to his advantage while traveling over the trail. We receive instruction three times weekly; always seeking those moments of true balance, that can often happen after half halting and inviting the horse to work from his hind quarters. The endurance ride is the test to see if the horse can maintain this balance at all gaits over the long haul. Allowing a horse to run a 100 mile course on the forehand is unfair and only serves to shorten his competitive career. Dinah and I also feel cavalletti work is a great way to strengthen a horse’s shoulder muscles, another bit of cross training that the horse can call upon when the going gets tough.”

When considering dressage training for your trail horse, you needn’t get fancy. Stick with the basics; good, energetic but calm forward movement that is balanced, lateral AND longitudinal suppleness from nose to tail, and prompt responses to both upward and downward transition aids. If you work regularly and diligently on these simple things, you can’t help but improve your horse. One of the easiest ways to evaluate balance in a horse is to pay attention to the tempo of the horse’s gait. Every time a horse loses his balance, the tempo of his gait will alter...sometimes subtly and sometimes radically. If it is hard for you to determine when your horse changes his tempo, try riding to music or buy a metronome at your local music store (there are now electronic metronomes). Put it in your arena and practice riding your daily exercise routine to different settings; four beat walk, two beat trot, three beat canter. Of course not all horses will move at the same tempo at each gait. Some will tend to have a quick tempo, while others will have a slower tempo to their footfalls, so you may need to play around with your new toy until you can find the tempo setting that seems to “click right in” to your horse’s movement. A horse with a very quick tempo is often rushing and out of balance. As you work through the various gymnastic patterns of dressage, circles, serpentines, half-circles and reverses, transitions, etc. pay close attention to using the balancing aids of half-halt and activating leg to steady or slow your horse’s tempo. Riding what are commonly known as “school figures” accurately, while combining them into gymnastic patterns which set your horse up for successful accomplishment, means you’ll have to think through the demands each exercise calls for in the horse and how one exercise might be blended with another to enhance your horse’s strengths or strengthen his weaknesses. THAT’s dressage! Did I say it isn’t rocket science? Well, it isn’t, but it DOES take time, thought, and practice, just like it would take you time at a gym to build various muscle groups in your body so you could do the things (sport) you want to do without injury and with more grace and/or power and ease.

Use cavalletti (simple poles on the ground) to teach a horse to alter his stride length without changing the gait tempo. When you can shorten and lengthen your horse’s stride fluidly and without loss of tempo, you have effectively taught your horse how to cover ground efficiently and you’ve also been training him how to contain his mental as well as his physical energy should he need to, without breaking gait, or his stride becoming tense and choppy. Ever get caught behind a slow horse on a single track trail and have your horse fuss and fume as you pull on the reins in an attempt to keep him from running into the horse in front of you? Dressage training can help you solve this problem and may even help prevent you or your horse getting kicked.

Lateral work, the movements of “dressage” or gymnastic training, which ask the horse to move his legs on a diagonal as well as a forward path, help you individualize control over the different parts of your horse’s body. They also offer a smart trainer the tools for helping prepare his or her horse to comfortably accept and carry more of his body weight and the weight of his rider on his rear legs, by stretching and strengthening the tendons, ligaments and muscles of the legs and the supporting muscle groups in the hind-end. The exercise known as shoulder-in, when ridden correctly, puts the horse into a physical posture which require he “bench press” a part of his own body weight upward by flexing the various major joints in his limbs, in each stride. Think of it as working out in a strength training program at your fitness center.

If you are a trail or endurance rider and go to a dressage instructor for help, be sure to be clear with your coach about the need to retain your horse’s free forward movement. Collection is a part of dressage training and it is necessary for a trail horse to work in collection during part of his training time, in the same way that a spring loaded projectile couldn’t be sent very far if the spring was not compressed before being released to send the object it was powering into motion; BUT, if the spring is constantly over wound, it loses some of its ability to lengthen, so, as in most things, balance becomes the important ingredient between success and in using cross training.

For more information on gymnastic training, the following books are recommended: “The All Around Horse And Rider” by Donna Snyder-Smith (Howell), and 101 Arena Exercises by Cherry Hill (Storey)

NOTES ON THE USE OF Cavalletti

The list of what can be done using cavalletti is nearly endless. Ground poles, as they are sometimes called, can be used for:

- * Improving balance
- * Improving tempo and rhythm
- * Improving articulation of all of the joints of the legs (because the work makes a horse more attentive to where he is placing his feet)
- * Increasing the muscle strength of the back
- * Loosening the hips and mobilizing the shoulders
- * Increasing thrusting power
- * Altering stride length
- * Creating a better jumping bascule

When working over cavalletti, you want to keep your horse calm but also require him to move in an active manner. Any mental or physical tension in your horse hinders his ability to move well. Work over cavalletti is all about relaxed, forward movement, so your horse can learn to adjust his body quickly and invisibly to accomplish a variety of athletic maneuvers using the most efficient muscle groups.

When incorporating cavalletti exercises into your training program, start *simply*, putting one pole on the ground and asking your horse to walk over it repeatedly until he does it quietly, as though it were no big deal. From there you can add additional poles, one at a time, until you have six, allowing your horse to become comfortable with what you are asking him to do each time you add another pole, until he is negotiating all six poles quietly at a walk. Then start again, this time trotting over two poles, working up to six in a row. Finally you can add work in a canter, but again, begin with one pole and only add additional ones when your horse no longer makes any extra fuss or effort when cantering over a single pole on the ground.

When working through the various cavalletti exercises, *the distances between the poles must be adjusted for the horse's gait and speed, and also for your horse's stride length.* The distance between poles will also be decided by what you wish to teach the horse. If you wish to collect his stride, begin with a distance the horse can manage comfortably gradually shorten the space (by inches) between the poles over several weeks. If, on the other hand, you wish to teach your horse to lengthen his stride, gradually lengthen the distance between the cavalletti, remembering that a longer stride also requires more energy for the horse. When the horse is familiar and comfortable with poles on the ground, you can graduate to true cavalletti, which offer three height settings. The lower two can be practiced at a walk or a trot, while the highest is reserved for canter work. Cavalletti poles are generally 12 feet long, but can be modified to as short as 6 feet in length.

Some Rules About Cavalletti

1. Don't scare your horse by riding him into a long line of poles the very first time you work him over cavalletti.
2. If you use poles on the ground, be sure they are secured so they will not roll if your horse steps on them.
3. Adjust the distances between the poles to your horse's stride length.
4. Use "wings," if necessary, to help you funnel your horse through the cavalletti without having to do a lot of pulling on his mouth with the reins.
5. Splint boots and possibly bell boots (for young, unbalanced horses) should be used to protect your horse's legs when working over cavalletti.