

DRESSAGE TODAY

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# EXTRA

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Your  
Dressage  
Horse

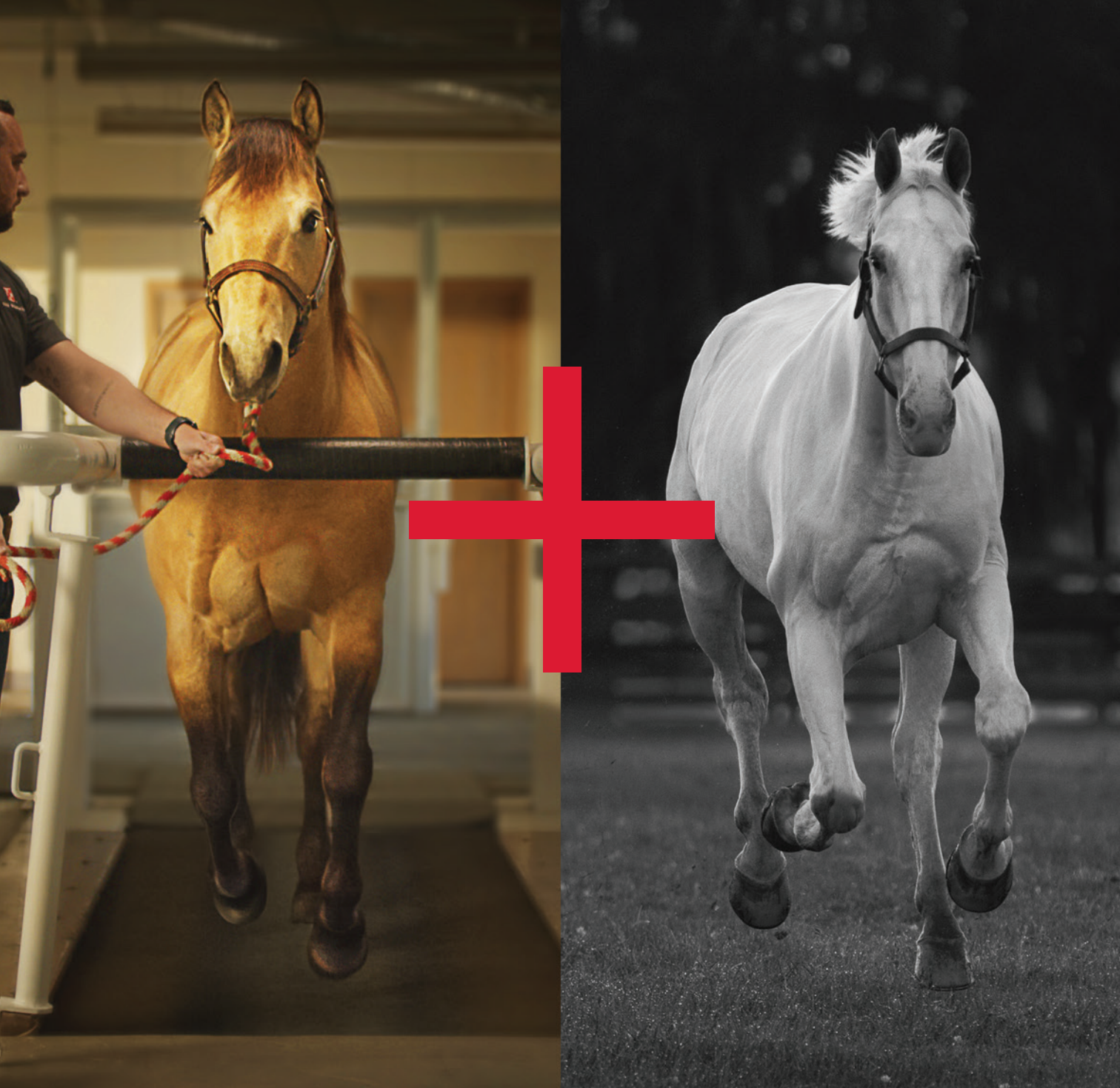
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# KEEP YOUR DRESSAGE HORSE MOTIVATED

German Grand Prix rider Uta Gräf explains how to train  
using the rider's moral obligation to the horse.

*By Uta Gräf with Silke Rottermann • Photos by Silke Rottermann*

**M**otivation is defined as the inner will doing something to reach a certain goal. Making the dressage horse a true partner that stays motivated to work over the years is a challenge as complex as training the dressage movements themselves. What makes it so difficult? Unlike us, the horse has no higher goals behind every step we ask him to do. Whereas we are prepared—spending long hours of hard and dedicated work with the aim of improving our skills and progressing—what reason should the horse have to go this way with us? If we don't want horses simply to become a means to fulfill our competitive ambitions, we have to think about ways of making them happy in their work.

Of course, there's no recipe that always works with every horse, but over the past decade I have, with the help of my partner, Stefen Schneider, developed my own training system, consisting of several ingredients I consider essential for creating the proverbially "happy athlete" about which so much is discussed. In this article, I will take you through these components, which let you and your horse work together in harmony.

Remember that whatever goals we aim for with our horses—may it be elementary or Olympic level—we absolutely have to treat the horse as a unique individual. What does this mean? It means that we have to take into account the nature, the personality, the character and natural abilities of every horse. If we do so, we respect the horse, and this I would call the moral obligation of a rider, which is the premise of everything. It doesn't matter if we train a talented or an average horse. Respecting a horse also means respecting his mental and physical limits and working within them. Then we have the possibility that

the horse likes to work with us and likes to be ridden, which has to be the common goal.

## **Allow Your Horse To Be a Horse**

This might sound too simple, but I am convinced that the most important factor in keeping the horse's will to work day by day is allowing him to live a life as close to nature as possible. It doesn't matter that horses have been domesticated for thousands of years. They still are, and always will remain, herd and flight animals. I don't claim this is the rule, but all too often we see valuable horses wrapped in the proverbial cotton wool, spending the greater part of the day in the stall, whereas in nature, a horse would move up to 30 kilometers (more than 18 miles) daily. To satisfy the natural needs of horses—and movement is an essential one—it's by far not enough to exercise them only an hour under saddle every day.

Many training problems are caused by the fact that horses are not allowed to have enough exercise on their own, which also causes a lack of social contact with other horses. If we take care that our horses are kept naturally, we have a horse that is not in need of fulfilling his desire to run when we want him to listen to us and learn. As dressage horses usually are of great value in every aspect, riders often hesitate to keep them in a field or in company. I want to encourage these hesitant owners by reporting on my own experiences in keeping high-performance horses the natural way. For



Horses enjoy several large turnout fields at Uta Gräf's farm in Germany.





**Uta Gräf rides Damon Jerome H, the 6-year-old reserve champion at the 2011 FEI World Championship For Young Dressage Horses. She advocates creating a happy athlete, like this horse, using turnout and lots of social interaction.**

more than 10 years, all of my horses have been kept in big, open stalls three meters (about 10 feet) broad and 10 meters (about 33 feet) long. They have only half-height, padded partitions between each horse to allow social contact. If this doesn't work with a horse, we try to find the appropriate partner. We also keep the stallions, like my Grand Prix horse Le Noir, in one of these stalls with a gelding next to him, and it has never been a problem. The bedding is deep straw. About half the box is bedded, but not the whole box.

All of our boxes have big grassy paddocks that are accessible all of the time so the horses have plenty of room to move. During the day, all of my geldings, no matter if they are youngsters or Grand Prix horses, go out in a big herd in which ponies and horses of all breeds and sizes share big fields in the summer and a huge paddock with limitless roughage in the winter.

We have about 34 acres in two fields

with a small creek going through them. The herd goes out from spring to late autumn from 8 a.m. until it gets dark. In summer, they are out 24 hours a day and only in for giving feed, if required by the owners. Our Andalusian stallion runs with the big herd. He is very social with the geldings and is the herd leader. Le Noir goes out with a donkey friend. Damon Jerome H (DJ), the 2011 6-year-old reserve world champion dressage horse, and the older stallions go out alone but with other horses in sight.

In this environment, in general, the horses become more relaxed and even-tempered. A good example is DJ, who is such an eager horse. He wants to move and be occupied all the time, and I am sure I would have problems in his training if he were kept in a typical stall. Because he is able to move all the time in his field, DJ is able to listen to me when being ridden instead of trying to get rid of bottled-up energy.

My experiences with this kind of horse-

keeping have only been positive. If horses live a life close to the one they would live in freedom, they are more content, which is an important precondition when we ask something of them in our work. Often one can hear objections that keeping highly trained and fit horses in a field with others is a dangerous thing, resulting in more or less serious injuries. This will happen mainly if horses are not used to going in the field or having company because they were never allowed to. Still, it's almost never too late to get horses used to it. In more than 10 years, we've never had one serious injury resulting from our horses living out together. The huge advantages we've gotten from it far outweigh the small scratches sustained now and then.

### **Make the Horse Comfortable**

Horses don't have a motivation caused by visionary goals like we have. So one part of my dressage horses' training has to be making them feel comfortable. This is particularly important if a horse has fulfilled my requests. For that we have some instruments at our disposal:





**Gräf says, “Many training problems are caused when horses are not allowed to have enough exercise on their own or allowed to have social contacts with other horses. If we take care that our horses are kept naturally, we have a horse that is not in need of fulfilling his desire to run when we want him to listen to us and learn.”**

Praise the horse by voice or by patting him. As soon as he has done something correctly, I reward him in one of these ways, establishing the wish to please in my horses. They know: *If I try hard and do something asked of me, I have a nice life.*

Stop aids that demand something and allow the horse to go forward, which is the most natural thing for flight animals. This doesn't mean the horse feels uncomfortable beforehand, but he will be more motivated and try his hardest in movements that are not easy for him.

Remember, the horse is your partner, not your enemy. This means don't fight him. Instead, ask yourself why differences appear. Often it helps to go a step backward in the training or try other ways to get a horse to understand you. For example, you can go back to working in long lines or in-hand.

You can only work with the horse's

natural abilities. Advance him within these abilities, but don't push him beyond them. Don't forget that the general goal has to be that the horse likes to work with you rather than learn a certain movement. Don't sacrifice the horse's joy and will to work toward reaching goals he is not yet ready for or cannot honestly deliver. Make sure you rarely demand 100 percent of your horse in the training, especially if he always offers 150 percent. Always work with what the horse is offering you on that day.

In your training, take care to always begin a session with something a horse likes to do and is easy for him to execute so he feels confident when you advance to more demanding exercises later on. The warm-up phase at the beginning is something very individual. Still, it's paramount that you begin with walk; how long then depends on the horse. Some horses prefer being ridden a longer time in walk to become loose.

Others relax more doing a fresh canter after the walk period. It's similar with the elevation during this first phase: Most horses prefer starting low and deep in the stretching position, but some like to begin with more elevation. You have to tailor it for your horse.

To warm up, I usually work my horses in a stretching position at the beginning, bringing the back up. For me, the warm-up is not only for the horse but also for the rider. If you begin to relax and feel comfortable, the horse will sense this and adapt to it. In the main phase of each training session, pay attention and don't do too many things at once. Instead, set yourself a target to focus on. Although dressage is about working horses more and more in a collected frame, we have to remember that in freedom a horse never moves in a collected way for a long time. Collection is strenuous and demanding for every horse.

With this in mind, we must make the following a principle of dressage training at all levels: a constant change between working in the appropriate elevation (according to the training level of each horse) and allowing him to move forward in a stretching position after a period of collection. In my usual training session, this change happens all the time. I do it not only so my horse doesn't tire physically but also because it prevents demotivation. Like with a student at school, you will not keep the horse's concentration for long if you demand one task after another without allowing him a breather in between. So if you enable the horse to have short phases of fresh forward movement or a quiet walk, it is easier for him to keep focused.

In addition, the horse also learns that after working well in collection—for example, showing a nicely centered canter pirouette or a good half pass—he is rewarded by getting long reins and moving in a less-strenuous position for a time. If you use this principle of constantly changing between collection and elevation with stretching and forward movement, your horse soon recognizes that his efforts will



**"A horse learns that after working well in collection, he is rewarded with long reins and moving in a less-strenuous position," says Gräf. She uses small pieces of carpet as outdoor footing because they are soft and do not freeze.**

be followed by a more comfortable life.

### **Learn to Use Impulses**

Sometimes people approach me, asking how I can ride my horses with the slightest aids and still produce expressive tests. Unfortunately, we sometimes see dressage horses being pushed forward by the calves all the time. This is another important element of my training to which all horses respond positively: I only give impulses. I have learnt from my partner, Stefan, who practices the traditional Spanish riding style, that it's enough to give the horse an impulse. If the horse reacts to it the right way, minimize the aid immediately, which means lessen the pressure. You can easily exercise and school your horse that way, for example, by doing different lateral movements along one long side of the arena. Most horses find it easiest in shoulder-fore or travers, but you can also practice it by doing shoulder-in or renvers.

Begin by giving the horse the usual aids leading to the desired lateral movement. As soon as he reacts, stop pressing with your calf and just gently go with the movement. If your horse has problems keeping this at the beginning, repeat, giv-

ing short impulses as often as necessary. With time, your horse will get used to the reduced amounts of aids and will react more sensitively. You can also practice this when doing trot or canter extensions: Give an impulse to get the extension started and, in the following, just relax and go with the horse's movement.

As a trainer of some of the most successful German paralympic riders, I know how little a rider needs to say to a horse to communicate what to do. These riders don't have the physical strength, and they show us that fine riding has its origin in giving the horse only small aids for only as long as necessary. Less is often more. It doesn't matter if you have reached the target you have set for a training session or not, finish the way you started: with something your horse likes to do because it's easy for him to execute. It's of paramount importance for a horse to go back to the stable or field with a positive feeling.

### **Work in a Natural Environment**

In all equestrian disciplines we want our horses to be obedient, focused and responsive to our aids at any time. Often we demand a lot in expecting all these things in a

hectic, noisy show ground. Of course, how horses react to environmental influences often depends on their individual character, but no matter. If we have an inborn super-cool horse like Le Noir or a generally sensitive one like DJ, integrating weekly hacks into a training program helps to get horses used to different situations. It keeps them motivated and also trains them physically in a desirable way.

The way you can use the countryside for training purposes depends on the terrain. I am lucky to have a hilly one with different surfaces next to our property, and I use it in many different ways. But even if you have only access to a plain field or a small park in a town, you have the possibility of making it work in your horse's favor.

At least once a week during the winter, we hack all our horses that train in the arena. We increase hacks to three times a week in the spring and autumn when there are no bothering flies around. The general aim is to show the horses something different from their dressage work and to allow them to relax their minds. But hacks can also replace a training session in the arena, especially if you have a rather lazy horse lacking the will to go forward. Very often, these horses develop a different way of going, become more diligent and more willing to work in all movements. It's an old trick that without the fencing of a typical outdoor arena or the walls of an indoor arena, such horses show better extensions. So a long, straight track in the forest or a plain field is the ideal place to activate a lazy horse without the need to push him too much. By moving without fences, a lazy horse often rediscovers the joy of the movements. You can profit from it when you return to the rectangle on another day.

If you have a horse that is not bringing his hind legs under enough in flying changes, for example, an effective way to activate them is to practice flying changes on a slightly uphill track. In doing so, the horse automatically has to activate more strength from the hind legs to create more impulsion to push his body





**The harmony that Gräf and Le Noir, her 12-year-old Holsteiner stallion, have in their partnership is obvious whether they are in a competition (left) or giving a bitless exhibition (right).**

forward/upward.

With horses that have not yet been taught piaffe under saddle, their will to go more forward homeward can be used for getting the first steps of piaffe. Ideally, you do this on a tarmac surface so the horse is able to hear the rhythm of the hoof beats, which can be helpful. But it doesn't always have to be dressage. You can ride on trails and through the countryside. Without putting any strain on the horse's legs, hacks at walk, including climbing up and down steeper hills, train the back musculature in an effective way. The horse's walk itself will also profit: Usually the horse shows increased overtrack when he is hacked out because he moves more freely.

Sometimes dressage riders complain about a not-ideal surface. No doubt we all wish for ideal conditions for the valuable legs of our horses, and some horses may have certain health issues that absolutely require a perfect surface. Still, I am a strong supporter of confronting horses without specific leg troubles with as many different surfaces as possible. Horses are usually sure-footed animals, and it schools their balance to go on many different surfaces, from tarmac to gravel, from soft fields to stony tracks in the forest. They have to look where to put their feet and, moreover, it strengthens the tendons and ligaments much better than any dressage

training on a perfect surface can ever do.

Another positive side effect is that your horse will more easily cope with less-than-ideal conditions at shows. For example, when I competed in a renowned German Grand Prix show, the arena had suffered days of torrential rain. The going wasn't ideal as the ground was deep with splashes here and there. Whereas some horses struggled finding their balance and rhythm, my Grand Prix horse easily coped with the difficult surface and managed to win the freestyle. Riding outside in the forests or fields has so many advantages and positive effects on the horse's physical and mental well-being that you should make it an indispensable part of your dressage horse's training program.

When people ask me what's my secret, I reply that it's happiness and motivation that drive my horses and me. It is undoubtedly partly technique, but this is only possible with even-tempered and motivated horses that listen and haven't been asked all the time. There's no secret to making horses happy athletes if you respect their natural needs and abilities. It's your responsibility and obligation as a rider to fulfill all the needs of your horse to make him content. In this way, he is able to pay attention to your requests. If you get him to the point where he is delighted when he is good, then you will experience the elevating feeling of being in complete unison. It's possible. So be good to your horse and that will lead to success. 🐾



**Uta Gräf** is considered a figurehead of classical dressage riding. She's well known for her motivated, relaxed and contentedly working dressage horses. She twice won the Stensbeck Award from the German National Federation for showing great promise as a rider, teacher and trainer. She completed her early training with Dutch Olympian Ellen Bontje and German coach Conrad Schumacher. With licensed Holsteiner stallion Le Noir, she won more than 25 Grand Prix classes. In 2011, she placed in the top five

at some of the most important European CDIs, including Aachen, earning a place on the German Olympic longlist for London 2012. She and her partner, Stefan Schneider, established their training facility Gut Rothenkircherhof in Kirchheimbolanden, Germany, in 1999 and have trained horses from youngsters to Grand Prix ever since.

# RULES OF THE RING: Universal Dressage Ring Etiquette

Beth Beukema shares 12 rules to help riders determine who has the right of way in a crowded arena.

**Q** I've been riding for 10 years now and have boarded at three different dressage-only barns. Unfortunately, at each of the three barns (and at shows), there are always a few riders who do not abide by ring etiquette and tend to sometimes cause dangerous situations. What are the most important ring-etiquette rules that work in every barn and at shows?—*Name withheld by request*

## BETH BEUKEMA

**A** The rules of ring etiquette are flexible and adaptable to the given situation. While riding, the safety of horse and rider should always be the first priority and common courtesy should also be present. When riding in a group, remember to communicate with the other riders and keep an eye on the patterns and attitudes of the horses around you. However, here are a few standard rules that should help.

### Right-of-Way Rules

1. In general, riders should pass left shoulder to left shoulder.
2. Remain on the second track when working at the walk.
3. Announce, in a loud voice, when you are entering and exiting the arena.
4. Keep at least one horse's length between you and another horse.
5. Don't ride up the tail of any horse. Turn across the arena.
6. Use the second and third tracks. The most used part of the ring is the track—the outermost path around the ring going into



Any K. Drago

**The safety of horse and rider should always be the first priority and common courtesy should also be present.**

each corner. When many horses are utilizing the same space, it may be necessary to use the second and third tracks. The second track is just to the inside of the outer track, leaving just enough space for a horse to pass between you and the rail. The third track is two meters (6 1/2 feet) from the rail and allows even more room for horses to safely pass you on the outside.

7. When riding a circle, look in the direction you are going and ride on the second track. This allows other riders to pass you on the outside and not cut through your circle. If you doubt that another rider is aware you are circling, you may call out, "circle," to let others know your intentions before moving to the second or third track.

8. Faster horses or horses traveling at a faster gait should avoid getting too close behind other horses. This can be achieved by circling or utilizing the ring figures such as a half-diagonal, serpentine or turning across the B–E line.

9. In a lesson situation, the person under instruction should have the right-of-way. Other riders in the arena can be listening to the instructor and anticipating where the horse and rider in the lesson will be

going next.

10. Green horses and beginner riders should be given more space by more experienced riders, who also should keep an eye out for the possible out-of-control moments that green horses and riders may experience.

11. Upper-level horses can be intimidating to a lower-level rider as they come across the diagonals. However, the basic patterns they follow are the same as at the lower levels. They should be treated as any horse and rider would be. By making eye contact, you can avoid potential collisions.

12. The use of the voice is another tool to gain the attention of focused riders and to let them know where you are planning to go.

These rules are a good starting point for approaching a ring full of horses. However, there are many situations that call for deviations from the basic rules. If a 3-year-old horse has an explosive moment and comes leaping across the diagonal while you are pleasantly trying to leg yield on a line that has now turned into a collision course with a spring-loaded youngster, you need to stay out of the way. Riding requires tact, timing and coordination with your horse as well as the other riders in the arena. 