

Cross-Training the Dressage Horse

By Bill Broe

The common denominator in all equestrian sports is the horse. In order for the horse to perform to its potential and stay sound physically and mentally, it needs to have confidence, balance and proper muscling. Being able to perform different tasks like driving or jumping can help develop the dressage horse both physically and mentally. Riding down the center line, or driving down the center line, or riding a line to a jump all has the same requirements: confidence, proper muscling, and balance.



Why choose driving over the other disciplines? What does driving bring to the horse's development? Other disciplines will bring similar benefits to the horse's development; i.e. jumping will help the horse use its back and develop the hind quarters. However, the first thing that driving develops in the horse is confidence and trust, and from those comes relaxation. In addition, the development of the back and hind quarters can be done without the burden of weight on the back.

When the horse is put into harness with a closed bridle, half or better of its natural defense, its field of vision, is taken away by the blinders. The horse can only see what is directly in front of it unless it turns its head. From that point, the horse must go forward based on trust with a heightened sense of hearing, listening for verbal commands and the assurance that all is okay. This creates a very close bond between horse and driver/rider. In the show ring, the driving horse must become accustomed to horses in close proximity as well as frightening noises that cannot be seen. When entering a cross country hazard or water crossing that is scary the horse cannot be hesitant and often must be reassured by the driver's voice or a light touch of the whip. When you go down the center line approach during a dressage test, the judge often has an unfamiliar perch, such as in a horse trailer. A driving

horse's training gives it the confidence and trust it needs to be more accepting of unfamiliar things and places.

Talking to the horse is not allowed in ridden dressage and that is where the cross-training

comes in. When I am training riding using my leg and seat, I also use words that coordinate with those aides. For example, if the horse is getting a little excited about some new object in its view, I will say "easy" in very low tone while gently playing with my ring fingers, squeezing and relaxing combined with a reassuring leg. When I use my seat and leg for canter I say the word "canter." When changing leads, I just say "canter left" or "canter right" as I use my seat and leg aides accordingly. It is similar when going into a walk, trot or rein back.

In driving, the use of the whip and the half halt take the place of the leg and seat when asking for the canter and lead changes. When doing a leg yield, I will accompany the manual aide with the word "over." When using the whip to move the horse to the side, I say "over" and the horse moves away from the whip. Combining a verbal vocabulary and manual aides over time gives your horse dual controls which can come in handy. It will begin to do what is asked of them simply by your saying it, creating a heightened sense of awareness between horse and rider/driver. Your leg and seat aides must be consistent as well, and the words you use with these aids must be consistent so as not to confuse the horse.

I find the muscular development without a burden on the back of the horse to be very helpful. In my view, the horse is better designed to pull than to ride. When training a horse under saddle, the trainer goes by feel. In driving, the trainer has the unique opportunity to

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watch the entire horse as it works, because it is right in front of you. You can see where and how the feet are placed, whether the haunches fall in a bit, or whether the horse tracks straight to the left and the right. With this information, you can customize your training better for each horse. You also now have a picture of what the horse is doing when you feel it and your aids can be used more efficiently.

Long lining and lunging with a drag (weight being pulled by the horse) in all three gaits has the horse doing resistance training while carrying no weight on its back. This type of training is done in an open riding bridle so the horse knows there is something behind it and has no fear to make it tense. The horse learns to work in a relaxed state against the resistance of the drag, building muscle. This can be conducted outside the ring as well using the drag on hills, in and out of obstacles creating serpentines -- all with the resistance of the drag and no weight on the back. This creates a very strong top line and encourages engagement of the hindquarter. It becomes very clear that when they are pushing from behind, carrying themselves, they are light in the hand yet very much on the bit. This is also visible as it is all happening right in front of you.

If anyone follows the FEI level driving competitions worldwide it is evident that all these horses have ridden dressage training. The Europeans have seen the benefit of cross-training for a long time-- combining driving, dressage and jumping. It makes for a more well-rounded horse. A horse that is confident properly muscled and balanced mentally and physically.



Bill Broe and "Bodacious"

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