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Seven Ways to Improve Your Naturally Gaited Horse with Classical Dressage

By Jennifer Klitzke

H-X-F, extended trot along the diagonal. Oh, dread, my German warmblood Seiltanzer has never been smooth to sit, especially at the extended trot, and over the last twenty years both of us have aged. Each stride has become more dislodging, resulting in back pain, sagging breasts that seem to hit me in the face with each step, and sometimes “splash”—the loss of bladder control! What began as a beautiful dance between horse and rider has now become a losing fight with gravity.

Three years ago, I joined other aging baby boomers and retired from showing hard-trotting horses, but I didn't want to give up riding, especially the beautiful dance of dressage.

This quandary introduced me to the bounceless stride of the Tennessee walking horse, and I have learned that I'm not alone. The gaited horse industry has seen a continual climb in popularity. Tennessee walking horses, Missouri foxtrotters, Rocky Mountain spotted horses, Icelandics, Paso Finos, and Peruvian Pasos are among these naturally smooth-gaited horse breeds. Not only that, I was thrilled to learn that dressage actually improves the gaited horse's quality of movement. The principles of dressage build balance,

forwardness, relaxation, suppleness, and engagement and can actually transform a pacey horse into a smooth four-beat gaiting dance partner.

Below are seven ways to improve your naturally gaited horse by using classical dressage methods and transform an ordinary ride into a beautiful dance, even while on the trail!

1. **Equipment:** Just as it is no fun to dance with ill fitting shoes, an uncomfortable horse is an unhappy dance partner. Dressage methods are best applied by riding your horse with a well-fitted snaffle bit that encourages salivation and acceptance of the bit as opposed to bits engineered for pain avoidance. A hollow mouth, double-jointed egg-butt snaffle works well for many horses, because it doesn't pinch the horse's cheeks or hit the top of the horse's pallet. Equally important is a properly fitting saddle that does not pinch the horse's shoulders or touch the top of the wither.
2. **Long and low:** Begin and end every ride with 5-10 minutes of a brisk, forward walk on a long rein, and encourage your horse to lower its head and neck to stretch from nose to tail. Stretching the top line muscles will help lengthen your horse's stride.
3. **Transitions:** Every ride should be choreographed with changes of direction and tempo to keep it interesting for you and your horse. Walk, gait, canter, halt and reinback are great transitions that will strengthen your horse's back and haunches to carry itself from behind which is more comfortable to sit and attractive in motion. Transitions also improve the communication, and your equine dance partner will better listen and yield to you as the dance leader.

4. **Bending:** Twenty-meter circles, three-loop serpentines, spiraling in and out of a circle are great exercises to encourage a horse to bend through the neck, shoulders, and rib cage, and teach the horse to step deeper under its body with its hind leg. Bending exercises strengthen the horse's topline muscles, back and haunches, improves a horse's balance, lightens the forehand to carry itself more poised, and helps smooth out a rough gait.
5. **Lateral exercises:** Zigzag leg yields, turn on the haunches, turn on the forehand, haunches-in, shoulder-in, and half pass are great dance moves to strengthen the horse and build trust and communication between you and your dance partner.
6. **Cantering:** Many gaited riders believe that cantering ruins the naturally smooth gait. On the contrary, cantering a gaited horse actually improves the gait. Cantering up hills, cantering in 20-meter circles in both directions, or along the rail will strengthen your horse while lengthening its stride and breaking up a pace.
7. **Become a student:** There are a few gaited horse trainers and nationally known clinicians who use dressage methods to improve the movement of naturally gaited horse including Bucky Sparks, Gary Lane, Lee Ziegler, and Larry Whitesell. Audit their clinics, read their books, and watch their training DVDs or find a local dressage instructor to help you get a good start with suppling exercises.

The classical dressage training methods will help your horse improve its smooth gait, make your horse a more mentally connected dance partner, and transform even a ride on the trail into a beautiful dance that you can enjoy well into your senior years.

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