

TACTICAL TRAINING

By Luis Lucio

This is one of the most difficult issues when training dressage horses.

Postural control and repetition are important for us, the dressage trainer and rider, but it can be a hard job and 'unnatural' practice for the horse.

The dream is to be able to perform a Grand Prix test in a dressage arena with a willing and motivated horse, as a real happy athlete and, for sure, not an easy goal to get.

In my opinion the key of success should go through a pattern based on, at least, these 5 points:

1. Good relation with our horse

Trying to shape the horse's body before getting a good mental & emotional attitude has no way to succeed.

Examples:

- It is difficult to concern a horse about low neck positioning while he is feeling fear or not paying attention to us...
- How can we change hind legs movement or positioning when our horse feels bored or has no motivation to work.

No way to get the body before the mind. You have to get the mind first.

2. Right & clear technical priorities

Technical priorities are usually difficult to establish or, we choose the wrong ones. Often we give the horse too many messages at the same time and he is not able to follow or understand.

Good training means being able to choose the right technical priority for every horse and rider and along the right period of time.

Example:

- Is difficult to train a horse to stand still and square during the halt, but you cannot try to correct both issues at the same time.
- Often we try to get good contact with horses that are unbalanced on the forehand. They cannot exist at the same time.

Prioritizing what is the most important thing to work on is a difficult task and decision to make. This is often the defining quality of really experienced trainers. A good trainer should establish the right targets for every moment of the horse training and try to get them in the correct order.

Not so easy...

3. Expert tactical approach

Pressure management makes the difference between a horse improving or not. The Parelli principle that “Release teaches” is one of the keys in a horse’s learning process.

Repetition can improve technical performance in some cases, but it’s hard to know just how much. Too much repetition creates fatigue, and reduces the understanding and motivation of horses.

Decisions about how much to ask, how many times, for how long and when to finish are fundamental.

The use of breaks and rewards during the training sessions are the big tools to give to the horses understanding and motivation.

Example:

- Technical mistakes in dressage execution when created because of horse’s extreme tension should be rewarded rather than punished.
- Asking for more than the horse is offering will negatively affect his level of ‘try’ on other exercises.
- Ignoring some mistakes can be a strong strategy in training. It increases the horse’s confidence and trust in the trainer.
- Regular breaks with zero technical message from the rider (Passenger lesson mode) is an incredible help for horses to recover mentally, physically, and emotionally, and it helps them understand what they just did.

We spend more time in a dressage horse’s life trying to solve tactical mistakes from the past than in improving the technical level of execution.

4. Training analysis and control tools

Modern training needs to include some tools to help riders and trainers to analysis and control their daily work with horses.

The use of hearth rate (HR) measurement devices has been traditionally associated to conditioning horse training, quite usual in other disciplines as racing, eventing, or even show jumping.

Areas so important in Dressage as mental & emotional behavior or CNS (Central Nerve System) stress and recovering while riding, can be also studied through the HR control devices and help riders and trainers to know “were” horses are.

Assumptions will be clarified or denied by facts..

Example:

- Will be a good decision put pressure to a horse which shows in slow lazy walk a HR of 140 ...?

- How long should be the break between two consecutive phases of a training session with high level of demand.... ? Which info we use for such a decision...?

Constant information about horses HR while training, gives us a strong tool to know about horses stress, understanding and fatigue, either physical or emotional. Just a watch around our whistle can be enough...

5. Constant readjustments

Training dressage needs a “good eye” , that means that whatever is our plan we have to be able to change it in case things are looking like going in the wrong direction.

High performance training in all other sports develop full detailed plans for all the different areas of performance but good trainer should be able to be ready to read and change routines when needed.

In dressage we often follow patterns and topics that bring our horses to a “no way out” situation.

Example:

- “Horses have to be always active”
Often we override horses in all situations following this concept that – normally- make horses run and stress with no reason and all the time...even from minute 1...!
- “Horses have to show good contact”
This issue is often misunderstood and makes lots of riders pulling on the reins all the time...., coming into a very damaging area for the horse: the constant pressure.

Good riding and training should forget topics and try to make the horse understand the purpose of our work, establishing for every horse, every day and every rider the right decision to be taken in order to achieve our long term goals.

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