

Clinic with Jeremy Steinberg – July 29 & 30, 2023

We recently had the privilege of working with Jeremy Steinberg (former USDF Youth Coach) for the second time, and once again we've benefitted immensely from his considerable knowledge and experience!

My mare (Chai) and I are currently preparing to compete in the GAIG/USDF Region 5 Second Level Jr/Yr Dressage Championships in late September; our goal for this clinic was to receive Jeremy's feedback on the development of the collected work so far and any insight on how to improve.

Because of Chai's conformation, it can be difficult for her to show clear uphill balance and self-carriage in the work, which can be frustrating because these qualities are so important in order to be successful from 2nd level up; Jeremy immediately understood this and helped me fine-tune my approach to training the collected gaits with Chai to better accommodate her flaws and maximize her expression, balance, and harmony throughout the training process. Working with Jeremy this weekend really helped to clarify and put into words many of the concepts we'd recently been encountering in our training at home.

For example, he described how there are two types of cadences that can appear in the collected work: "good" cadence and "bad" cadence. The difference between the two has everything to do with the ever-elusive concept of uphill balance. Good cadence is, inherently, an "uphill" feeling; as the hind legs come under and engage more readily, they are placed in a more ideal position for greater weight to be put on the hindquarters, and thus the trot or canter naturally gains a feeling as though the horse is climbing higher and higher with each stride. On the other hand, when the hind legs are out behind, where they cannot contribute properly to the balance, the horse may still give you what seems to be a "cadenced" feeling; however, if this is the case, the fact that the hind legs are not coming under properly manifests itself almost immediately in two ways: first, the lowering of the horse's poll (loss of balance where there should be a noticeable improvement in balance as greater weight is put on the hindquarters) and similarly, an immediate decrease in the tempo or the RPMs of the trot. Tempo and engagement are very much connected. As soon as the tempo of the trot begins to slow, the engagement of the hind legs subsequently falters, and this is where we start to get the feeling of "bad" cadence in the trot. We need to "rev up the rpms" or quicken the hind legs (speed up the tempo) in order to achieve the level of engagement necessary for the horse to get more of ideal cadenced feeling. This is where the idea of avoiding "subtraction" wherever possible originates. The right kind of cadence is never achieved by "subtracting" tempo from the trot but from "adding" tempo and therefore engagement. Again, like I mentioned earlier, what we consider to be "good cadence" is just the feeling we get in the trot of more weight being successfully transferred to the hindquarters as the hind legs come under into a more ideal position for this to occur. So, how do we get this to happen? Lateral work and transitions, especially trot-halt-trot transitions.

These transitions are cumulative; with each repetition, they improve the horse's ability to bring the hind legs under, gradually shifting the entire balance back. Envision a seesaw with a bowling ball placed in the center. This is the horse. We use the transitions and lateral work to shift the bowling ball, or weight, back to the hindquarters; as the hind legs are pushed down, the forehead appears to rise in relation to the hindquarters ("relative elevation"). Sometimes, however, the horse can do the work and

bring the hind legs under without actually pushing more weight down on the hindquarters. But take into consideration the nature of a seesaw. Yes, we can try to directly move the weight of the bowling ball back to the hindquarters in order to elevate the forehand by using the transitions or lateral work to create the ideal situation for this to occur, but we can also help the horse become more uphill by simply lifting the forehand; again, think of the seesaw: if you lift the forehand, the bowling ball will naturally roll back to the hindquarters. So, we can help the horse get more of the good cadence feeling in the trot by lifting the poll every so often, especially prior to the transitions. This ensures that the horse doesn't feel inclined to "dive" in the downward transitions and thus avoid placing greater weight on the hindquarters. Instead, we want the neck to arch up and come slightly in during the transitions to help tilt the seesaw and move the weight of the bowling ball back to the hindquarters; think about it like this—how can the horse put more weight on the hind if the neck isn't up and in? Obviously, the last thing we want is for the back to hollow, but as long as the hind legs are engaging and coming under, the horse isn't even close to hollowing their back, so we can be pretty risky about bringing the poll up to help tip the weight back onto the hindquarters.

In the canter work, all of these concepts were re-addressed in order to help achieve the same kind of uphill balance, the approach differing only in that canter-walk, walk-canter transitions and shoulder-fore became the critical means of initiating that shift in weight responsible for tilting the seesaw back onto the hindquarters. At this point, it's important to again take into consideration Chai's inherent "downhill" balance (meaning that her stifle isn't level with her elbow, but higher) and the impact it has; we can be more forgiving if she takes a few trot steps in the downward transition from canter to walk, because it's naturally more difficult for her to bring the hind legs under in the manner necessary to make the transition. However, at the same time, there is no reason she shouldn't be able to give us a decent transition from walk to canter. By focusing all of our efforts on the walk-canter transitions and the collected canter itself, we can naturally improve the quality of the canter-walks. Unlike the walk or trot, the canter is what is considered to be an "asymmetric" gait, meaning that both sides of the horse do not work equally as the horse performs canter work. Jeremy used the analogy of some riding a skateboard; the leg on the skateboard is responsible for carrying the majority of the person's weight, while the other propels the skateboard forward. Both legs work, but they do not use the same muscles, and one leg may work harder than the other. This is the same in the canter. The inside hind leg is responsible for carrying weight; this is the one we want to focus on when attempting to shift greater weight to the hindquarters. By introducing shoulder-fore in the collected canter, we can improve the alignment of the inside hind leg so that it can more easily come under into that ideal position to carry more weight that encourages the weight of the bowling ball to roll back to the hindquarters during the canter-walk and walk-canter transitions. At the trot (which, again, is a symmetric gait), we work with shoulder-in to ask the inside hind leg to carry more weight, and travers to ask the outside hind leg to carry more weight; thus, both legs start to engage and come under equally to put more weight on the hindquarters. But, because the canter is asymmetrical, the straightening work we do is inherently different.