

Create. Expression

Catherine Haddad & Morten Thomsen explain how to make your horse's gaits more expressive.

Text and photos by Julia Wentscher

Curious broodmares peek through the bushes that border the outdoor arena at Catherine Haddad's training facility in Vechta, Germany. They are observing a training session with Haddad's coach, Morten Thomsen. Haddad, 45, has lived in Germany for 17 years and is one of the United States' most experienced international competitors.

The mood is light and friendly this morning, and the pleasant weather has contributed to everyone's good mood. But the work is serious. Rider and trainer are committed to one thing—improving the already spectacular collection of Haddad's top Grand Prix horse, Cadillac. They agree that the 1997 Danish Warmblood gelding was born with a genetic proclivity for piaffe and passage. Thomsen trained Cadillac's sire, Solos Carex, who was renowned for his effortless piaffe and passage tours and his ability to pass this attribute on to his offspring. "It was an incredible feeling to ride this horse," says Thomsen, who won the 5- and 6-year-old Danish Championships with Solos Carex. "Sometimes when I just clicked at him he stayed so much in the air that I wondered if he might just passage up there and never come down."

Creating Collection

Today's session is about collection in the trot—how to create it, sustain it and make it more expressive. "Grand Prix horses are made, not born," says Thomsen. "Of course it helps to have natural talent like this horse, but the right kind of work can make any horse better, even the super-talented ones. We want to improve Cadillac's trot today by taking his natural gift for suspension and directing that energy more forward through the entire horse." They start with the basic trot. Haddad warms up in rising trot with a relaxed, round frame and slightly lowered poll. Thomsen observes every stride but says little for the first few minutes. Cadillac shows off his good balance and suppleness by gently leg yielding from the quarterline on each long side and pushing nicely into a 10-meter circle as soon as he reaches the track.

After checking his lateral suppleness on both hands, Haddad shortens her reins on the 20-meter circle, puts her leg on (still in rising trot) and asks for more suspension from the trot. Thomsen reminds her to ride toward the bit so Cadillac's hind legs follow the forehand. Cadillac's tendency is to offer too much suspension when collected, giving an impression of float and bounce but not enough pushing from behind. In other words, passage is easy for him, and Thomsen reminds Haddad to "keep the feeling of the working trot in the collection. Lower his neck slightly, and make it flatter so he is not pulling himself into the air so much. Ride just a little

EXERCISE 1:

Create Suspension

Correct suspension comes from energy that is redirected from a purely forward-pushing motion of the hind legs to a motion that pushes both forward and into the air. To do this:

- Send the horse from an active hind leg toward your hand.
- Capture the energy with more emphatic posting (or sitting), while maintaining exactly the same tempo and encouraging the horse to lift his abdominal muscles toward his withers with your leg.
- Bring more cadence into your body by emphasizing the rhythm through your posting or sitting.

Feel the horse respond as he lifts his withers and offers more suspension. Double check that you are riding toward your hand, not backward from it.



Morten Thomsen



Haddad uses the forward energy of Cadillac's hind legs to push through any resistance he offers in changing bend or flexion. Training without stirrups is an important part of her program, she says. "I do it two or three times a week after warming up. My seat needs as many updates as my computer."

more forward." Haddad obliges with imperceptible aids and a subtle shift of gears occurs. Cadillac picks up a tiny bit of tempo without losing his bounce and (*voilà!*) a smooth, powerful collected trot emerges. "Ja! Like this!" confirms Thomsen when he sees the shift, and this united pair are up and running.

Sitting trot follows with the addition of shoulder-in to haunches-in and shoulder-in to renvers. "Keep the inner hind leg stepping forward under his body all the time," coaches Thomsen, and he gives a few key adjustments to the rider so she can bring Cadillac's shoulders or haunches more into alignment with the forward motion.

The lateral movements are a good test of the throughness Thomsen wants to see. "If Catherine positions the haunches just a hair too much to the inside when riding haunches-in, the

EXERCISE 2: Shoulder-in, Haunches-in, Renvers

Ppractice shoulder-in–haunches-in–renvers to create the suppleness needed for more expression. Remember, your seat bones define the line on which you ride; your leg position determines the shape of the horse's body. Pay attention to tempo and rhythm. They should not change.

1. Start on the short side, establishing good flexion through the horse's neck with your inner leg. The inner leg encourages the horse's barrel to move from inside to outside, creating a slight bend in the body, which shows up in the neck. This is flexion.

2. Ride onto the second track. Maintain a straight line with the hind legs while keeping the bend and flexion. Your inner leg tells the horse's inside hind leg to step straight forward. Your upper body turns slightly to the inside following the horse's head, neck and shoulders.

A well-timed tapping from your inner leg/spur asks the horse's outside shoulder to reach freely forward and add expression to the movement.

3. Switch to renvers by putting your inside leg back

and moving your outside leg forward. Your seat bones and the center of your horse's body should stay on the line you are riding. Change bend and flexion from the inside to the outside, but the bend is now concentrated behind the saddle, not in front of it. The outside hind leg is now stepping forward.

4. Ride straight forward before the short side. Create inner bend and flexion on the short side again to prepare for another shoulder-in for the second track.

5. From shoulder-in, keeping your seat bones on the same line, transition to haunches-in. Switch from an active inside leg to an active outside leg. The center of the horse's body is the swivel point. Bring his shoulders back to the line by straightening your upper-body position out of shoulder-in. Touch the haunches to the inside with your outside leg/spur. The inside hind leg continues to step forward, but the bend has been changed from in front of the saddle to behind the saddle.

Of the three movements, Haddad prefers riding shoulder-in and transitioning to renvers. She finds this to be the ultimate suppleness challenge when performed without a loss of impulsion or rhythm.

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horse will lose impulsion." The same is true for any misalignment in the shoulder-in. The visible result is either a loss of forward energy or too much suspension coming into the trot. "I watch the inside hind leg to see that," he says. "The inside hind has to continue pushing forward toward the goal in exactly the same rhythm as the collected trot. When I see that, I know the horse is correctly aligned in the lateral movement." Haddad experiments with more or less angle, flexion and bend to find the perfect balance for the lateral work.

Through the repeated positioning and repositioning of riding shoulder-in to haunches-in to renver, Haddad challenges Cadillac to maintain his rhythm and forward energy while responding to her seat and leg aids to bend and reshape his body into the different lateral positions. She says she uses the forward energy of the horse's hind legs to push through any resistance he offers in changing bend or flexion. For instance, if Cadillac comes against her hand while changing from shoulder-in to renvers, she pushes him through that resistance from behind the saddle rather than trying to correct him with her hand.

"I think about momentum a lot when riding," says Haddad. "Like in the martial arts, the key to success is to understand how to use your opponent's momentum to your own advantage. If an attacker is running straight at you, don't put your hands out and try to stop him in his tracks. Instead, step aside and try to throw him a little faster in the direction he was already going. That is effective use of momentum."

Thomsen agrees that understanding momentum is crucial to riding a horse through from behind. Any adjustments with the reins cannot block the horse's momentum (the equivalent to trying to stop an attacker in his tracks). The energy from the hind legs must be received by the seat and the hand and



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Haddad says she works to build up Cadillac's power and teach him how to focus it.

slightly redirected—either right, left, up or down—to position the frame to the rider's advantage. If this is done by simply redirecting the horse's momentum without creating resistance in front of the saddle, it results in the elusive throughness sought by most riders. And throughness leads to expression.

Throughness Leads to Expression

Thomsen encourages Haddad to return to the circle after the lateral movements and check her "gears." He wants to be sure she has not blocked the forward momentum of the trot in any way. "Does he feel quick enough? Is he pushing enough? Should you lower the poll a little bit?" He encourages her to look for her own corrections with these questions and make sure that her horse is completely through from behind.

On the next corner of the arena, another subtle shift occurs. Haddad sits deeper in the saddle, and her arms are even softer without losing the contact. Cadillac's withers have come up, and he is stepping even more from behind. "Super!" exclaims Thomsen.

A small smile creeps into Haddad's focused expression. "You're right," she says. "I wasn't sitting down enough, and I blocked him ever so slightly with my hand during those changes of flexion."

"Now he is ready for the collection," states Thomsen. "He is offering it to you." This is the feeling a rider should have when the horse offers no resistance to being ridden completely and energetically through from behind. Haddad drops her pelvis just a fraction as she moves her seat into the rhythm of passage. Cadillac follows, and Thomsen reminds her again, "Keep all that forward energy from the collected trot and *push it up* into the passage. Redirect the forward energy more upward into his withers with your seat. *Ja!* He lifts his front legs more and more. The energy comes completely from behind. It's fantastic!"

Horse, rider and trainer are enjoying their work and taking great pleasure in showing off the lovely expression in Cadillac's movement—effortless, focused and "in the zone." Now, the power in Cadillac's passage is geared down into piaffe with imperceptible aids. "I can't

really explain this transition," says Haddad. "I just 'think it' in my seat. Maybe I stop pushing him forward, but I expect the impulsion to stay with me on the spot." Thomsen reminds her to keep the energy and rhythm of the trot throughout the piaffe and passage tour. Just redirect the trot energy into piaffe for trotting on the spot, or into passage for trotting through the air, or into collected trot for trotting over the ground.

Cadillac is Haddad's second ride of the day with Thomsen. Earlier she rode her up-and-coming prospect Winyamaro, a 10-year-old Hanoverian by Walt Disney. "These two horses are like night and day," Thomsen says. "Cadillac is a long-legged, elegant dancer. We have to work on building up his power and teaching him how to focus it. Winyamaro is a short-legged, compact power ball who needs to become more supple and proud in his presentation." But, the goals are the same for each horse: more impulsion, more expression, increase the pushing/carrying power and *keep the feeling of the trot* in piaffe and passage.

"I've been so focused on accuracy and obedience—now it's time to cut loose and go for it," says Haddad, who breached the 70 percent barrier several times last summer in international competition with Cadillac.

"Windsor [2009 European Championships] changed the face of our sport," says Thomsen. "Seventy percent isn't good enough anymore." In a world where 73 percent became the winning drop score, "the rest of us have to bump it up a notch to compete." He says the world is in awe of Totilas. "And do you know why? Because Totilas has incredible expression and loves what he does. That's why we can't take our eyes off him. It's an exciting time in the sport because the bar has been raised to a new level. Even though few horses and riders are capable of this kind of expression, it's something we all can aspire to."



Catherine Haddad rides Winyamaro her up-and-coming Grand Prix horse. She explains that the photos in this article were taken in the fall of 2009 and that now she wears a safety helmet and encourages her students and fans to do the same.