



# IDEA CROSS- POLLINATION





## Dressage Tips for Western and Jumping

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**T**o many, dressage has a reputation for being fancy and complicated.

Dressage is in essence, however, simple training that teaches the horse to use its body correctly. In fact, the French word “dressage” actually translates as “training.” Any discipline can benefit from fundamental dressage concepts and techniques.

FEI-level dressage trainer, Christina Morris ([www.christinamorrisdressage.com](http://www.christinamorrisdressage.com)), of Fox Trot Farm in Warrenton, Virginia, is no stranger to cross-training. Prior to her current focus on classical dressage, Morris competed on the Quarter Horse circuit and currently trains and sells horses who go on to compete in hunter/jumpers.

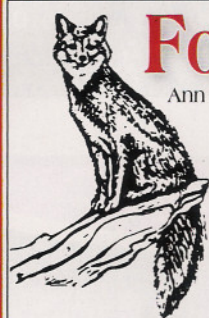
Good dressage schooling embraces a holistic approach, which benefits the horse both physically and mentally. “Dressage is helpful in teaching the horse to use its whole body from the hind end, over the back and through the neck evenly and equally, which improves the horse’s gaits and ridability,” explains Morris. “This creates longevity and helps promote soundness. Dressage is built on a scale of training, which teaches the horse to carry himself and become more sensitive to the aids. Dressage work also has the element of repetition, which helps ‘explain’ to the horse what you are seeking.”

The dressage training scale applies to all disciplines. At the base of the pyramid comes rhythm, which addresses energy and tempo. The next tier is relaxation, which encourages elasticity and suppleness. The third tier of the pyramid’s base is connection or contact, which seeks acceptance of bit and of rider’s aids. The final three tiers of the dressage training scale, impulsion, straightness and collection, apply to higher levels of dressage training. The three base elements, however, should be a part of any horse’s training. “If there’s a missing link in my horse’s training, I go back to the training scale and address the basics,” remarks Morris. “The basics for a Grand Prix horse are the same as



the basics for any discipline. You need to have that solid foundation to move up the ladder."

For western riders, dressage helps create greater sensitivity and lightness. The horse develops over the topline and through the back. For riders in the jumping disciplines, dressage creates a more balanced and adjustable horse. Are you ready to get started? Read on as Morris explains some simple dressage techniques you can incorporate into your daily schooling routine.

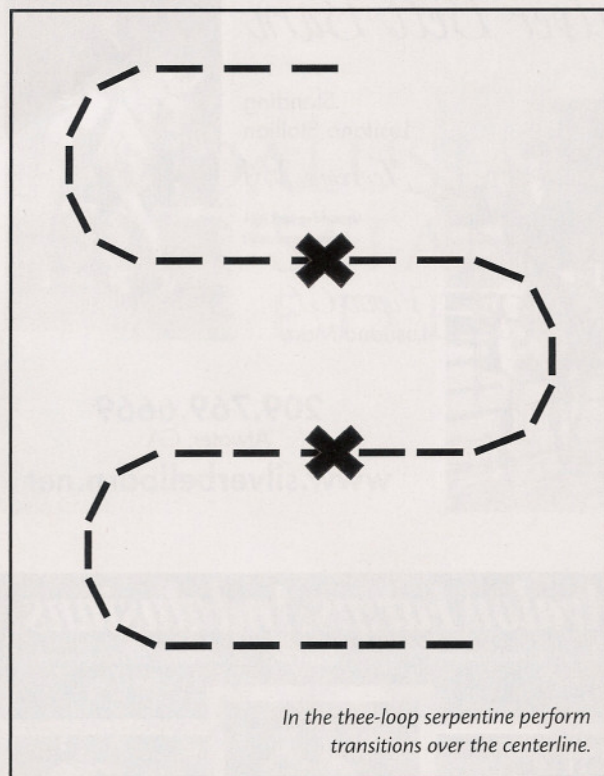


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## STARTER EXERCISES FOR WESTERN DISCIPLINES

### The Serpentine

A three-loop serpentine with transitions is a great way to help the horse listen to the "whoa" aids of downward transitions, as well as develop lateral and longitudinal suppleness. Beginning at the walk, ride three equal loops that incorporate the whole arena (See diagram above). A few strides before you reach the centerline, begin preparing for the downward transition with half halts. The purpose of the half halt is to prepare your horse for a movement. When done correctly, it rebalances the horse, shifting his weight to the hind end and lifting the front.

When you cross over the centerline, ask for a downward transition to the halt. Wait a few seconds and then walk on. Keep the horse straight a few strides over the centerline before introducing the new bend.

In the downward transition, breathe out. Allow the thigh to relax, drop your weight into your seat bones, and allow your calf to come around the horse. In the upward transition, breathe in, bringing the rib cage up. Close the calf on the horse, bringing the horse into the upward transition.

Don't sit hard or lean back, which causes the horse's back to drop and the hind end to disengage. If you feel you are sitting heavily in your seat, bring your chest and rib cage up so that the horse's back comes up to meet your seat bones.

Once you are performing this serpentine smoothly, you can move up to the trot with walk transitions, and later to the canter with trot and walk transitions.

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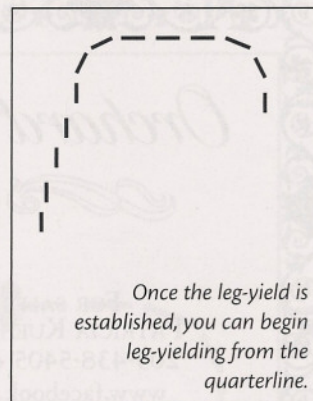
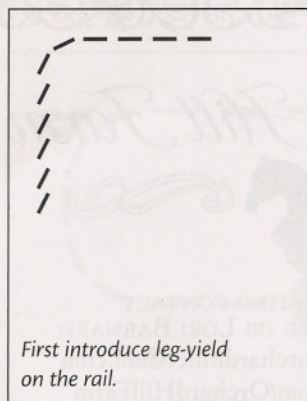
## The Leg-Yield

A good way to supple your horse laterally and tune your horse up to your aids is to leg-yield. You can start leg-yields once the horse is forward, relaxed, and accepts the contact. In the leg-yield, the horse's body remains straight, while he moves away from the direction in which he is flexed. When first starting the leg-yield, riding along the wall on the long side of the arena sets parameters, helping the horse understand what's being asked of him. Ask for no more than a 30 degree angle in your leg-yield.

Start in the walk approaching the long side. As you come out of corner, straighten the horse and change the horse's flexion toward the wall. If you are tracking left, your new flexion will be to the right and you will leg-yield to the left (See diagram at right).

First, make sure you are sitting square in the saddle over your horse's spine. Shift your weight slightly to the outside seat bone to tell the horse to follow your center of gravity. Be careful not to collapse your inside hip. When you feel the right hind start to come up, ask the horse, with your right leg at the girth, to step over. You can open the right rein to allow the horse's right hind to step under and cross over. Make sure the horse is not leaning with the left shoulder and falling out, causing him to "banana" to the right. The outside aids will keep your horse straight and forward.

Be sure the horse steps both sideways and forward. Be careful not to ask for too much flexion and bend. With a green horse, ask for only a few steps and give frequent breaks.



## STARTER EXERCISES FOR JUMPING DISCIPLINES

### Transitions

Hunters, jumpers and event horses need the ability to rate and adjust their stride. Transitions within the gait are a great way to create the ridability needed to smoothly negotiate a course by improving the horse's balance, response to the aids, and collection. Top jumpers have solid dressage skills that allow them to gallop to a fence and then collect for the jump as well as perform the rollbacks often seen in a jump-off.

Start with transitions within the gait at the trot and canter on the long side, picking a spot where you want the horse to lengthen and come back. Half halts prior to asking for collection rebalance the horse and alert him to pay attention. The horse's response in

## The Other Side of the Coin

Morris also cross-trains other disciplines into her own dressage work. Among her favorite ways to mix up her horses' schooling and break out of a rut are to free jump and trail ride. She notes incorporating free jumping helps her dressage horses become looser in the back and encourages them to bring their shoulders up. "They learn to use themselves differently than in dressage," she says. "They also have to pay attention. It's an excellent way to develop confidence, which transfers to the dressage work." Trail riding offers a mental break and allows the horse to open up the frame and outline.



Photo Courtesy Rosa King



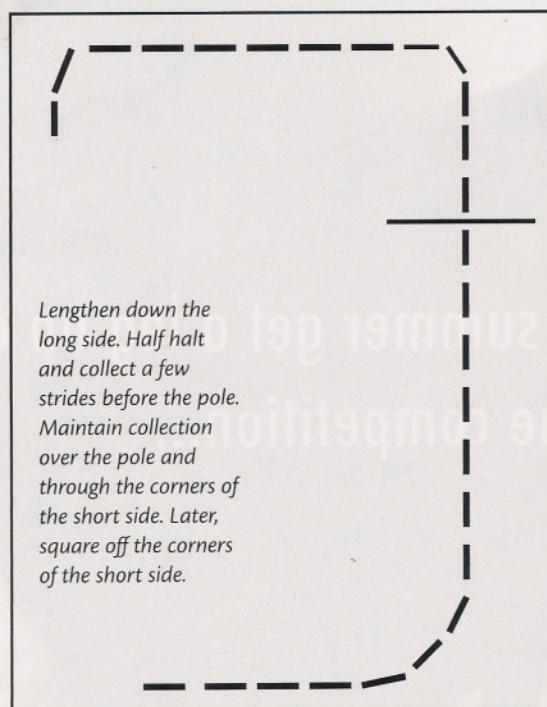
and out of the transition should be immediate and clear while looking seamless.

The next step is to add a pole about six strides before the far corner of the long side (See diagram at right). Ride the short side in a working canter, lengthen on the long side, prepare with half halts, and start to collect about three strides before the pole. Maintain that collection over the pole and into the next short side. The horse should stay soft and round through the transitions.

Once the horse is responding smoothly to the forward and downward aids, square off the corners. Make sure the horse stays straight and balanced through the outside aids, while also being soft through the inside aids. The outside aids keep the horse's body straight and forward. The outside rein brings the horse's shoulders around, while the inside aids create bend and keep the activity of the inside hind. Keep the inside rein slightly open in the corner to allow the inside hind to step under the horse. In between each squared turn, make sure the horse stays straight through your legs and reins while maintaining the same outline and tempo.

Repeat on the next long side. This is a good introduction to collection and speed control.

Remember, exercises that improve the basics benefit any horse, regardless of discipline or level of training. Give it a try!



## An Eventer's Perspective



Three-day eventer, Rebekah Simmons ([www.stonehousefarmonline.com](http://www.stonehousefarmonline.com)), of Mars, Pennsylvania, is a NAYRC Bronze and Silver Medalist who has competed through the CCI\*\* level. Having brought a variety of horses through the levels, Simmons understands the role dressage plays in developing safe and solid jumping skills. She notes that while the dressage phase of a three-day event forms the first of three scores for the competition, the benefits of dressage extend into the jumping phases.

"In cross-country, when you are galloping at speed and have turning questions, the horse needs to be very rideable and very rateable. In cross-country, you encounter multiple questions, such as combinations and turning, when steering, adjustability and balance become very important. This is when dressage comes in handy," explains Simmons. "A classic example of how this training carries into jumping is the point where your horse has to go from a gallop at speed between fences to balancing to prepare for a jump. The balance and speed have to change at that moment. We can't expect horses to magically know how to rock back on their hind end to change their balance because we put a fence in front of them. This must be taught on the flat first!"

These skills also apply in the jumping ring. "In the show jumping phase, you receive much of the same benefits from the dressage, but the horse should jump around in a more consistent and compressed balance," notes Simmons. Again, this is something that is first strived for through flatwork before we can expect it to carry through to jumping.



Fourteen-time world champion reiner, Craig Johnson (www.craigjohnsonreining.com), of Gainesville, Texas, has brought home over a cool million in NRHA earnings. Do you want to know one of the secrets to his success? Johnson incorporates basic dressage techniques into his reining horses' daily warmup. "Dressage has been very helpful for me for creating a structured warmup that allows my horses to be able to loosen up and get prepared for the things we're going to do," says Johnson. "It also allows them to get into an accepting and trainable frame of mind where they start to connect with me at a deeper level before I go out and start doing the more high-level reining maneuvers."

Johnson's typical warmup might include 10 to 15 minutes of dressage movements and suppling exercises, such as leg-yield, shoulder-in and half pass at the walk and trot. His goal is to supple the shoulders and hips while enabling the hind legs to reach deeper under the body. This warmup includes work on the circle, on straight lines throughout the arena, and on two-tracks across the area. Johnson notes that he performs these dressage exercises in a western position and frame.

"If you allow yourself to play with this for 10 or 15 minutes, you'll find it's the perfect warmup for your horse," notes Johnson. "You'll be pleased with all the other things you'll be able to do with your horse in a shorter amount of time. It has actually shortened my riding time by quite a bit." ■

## A Reiner's Perspective



Photo: DW Equine Photography



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