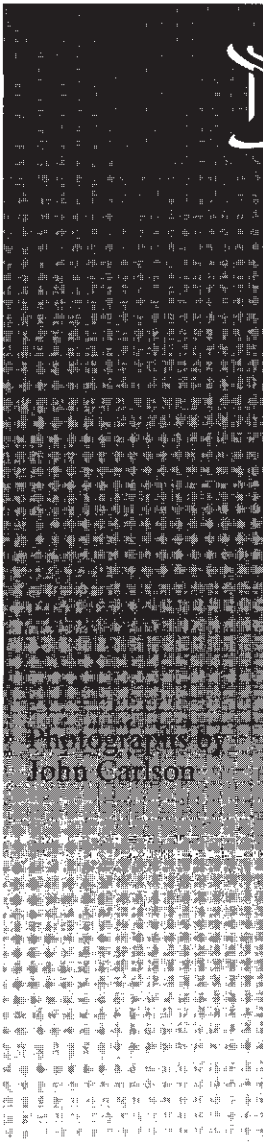


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“Dressage in the Cow Country”

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DRESSAGE

in Cow Country



DENNIS REIS is a long, lean cowboy who once tried to earn his living on the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association circuit. In a cowboy hat, boots, and fringed chinks, he appears as far removed from a derby-sporting dressage rider as humanly possible. The two appear as distinctly different as a heavy western saddle and a no-bigger-than-your-bottom dressage saddle. What could be more at odds than the slack, one-hand reining style of a cowboy and the double-fisted, taut-reined dressage rider?

That's what Dennis Reis used to think.

"When I first saw a dressage rider, I thought if someone ran up and snipped the reins, the rider would fall right off."

Ten years ago, after working with Pat Parelli and master horsemen Ray Hunt and Tom Dorrance, Reis opened his own training facility in Penngrove, California. He began offering clinics, starting colts, and working with problem horses. The area around his ranch turned out to be a hotbed of dressage activity. Many of the horses he started were Thoroughbreds and warmbloods destined for the dressage ring.

The realization that a cowboy could use a philosophical approach to training, and could turn out willing, free-moving horses in a very short time, blew the dressage people away. They began bringing upper-level grand prix horses with problems to Reis for repair. Thus began Reis' classical education.

The first thing he learned was that he had already been doing dressage without knowing it.

"If you're riding and training your horse, you're doing dressage," Reis explains. The word itself, in French, means teaching or schooling an animal. But this schooling means a good bit more than what is commonly considered horse training.

The practice of dressage is horsemanship, based on love and respect for horses, which offers a natural, systematic approach to the mental and physical development of the horse. To do this requires clear communication with the horse and the ability to "listen" to the animal, something Reis had already been doing with colts and problem horses.

Dressage, he decided, had as much to offer the cowboy as the cowboy had to offer the dressage horse. He founded what he calls "universal horsemanship," based on the principles of classical horsemanship put to practical use.

So what do half-passes, haunches-in, shoulders-in, and pirouettes have to do with spins, slides, roping a steer, or cutting a cow?

Everything, according to Reis. Dressage maneuvers are more than elegant expressions of equine grace. Every exercise has a purpose in developing suppleness of mind and body, strengthening the horse, and improving his ability to carry a rider, and most importantly, uniting horse and rider.

Movement

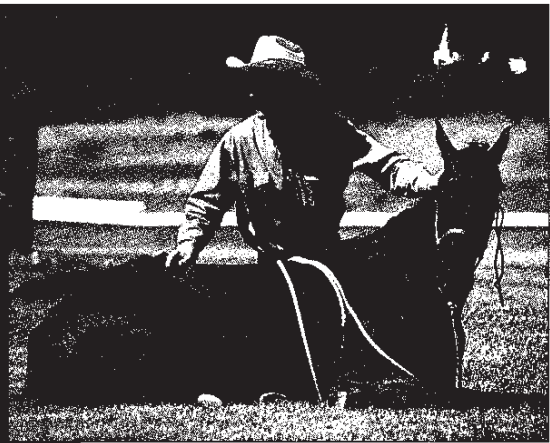
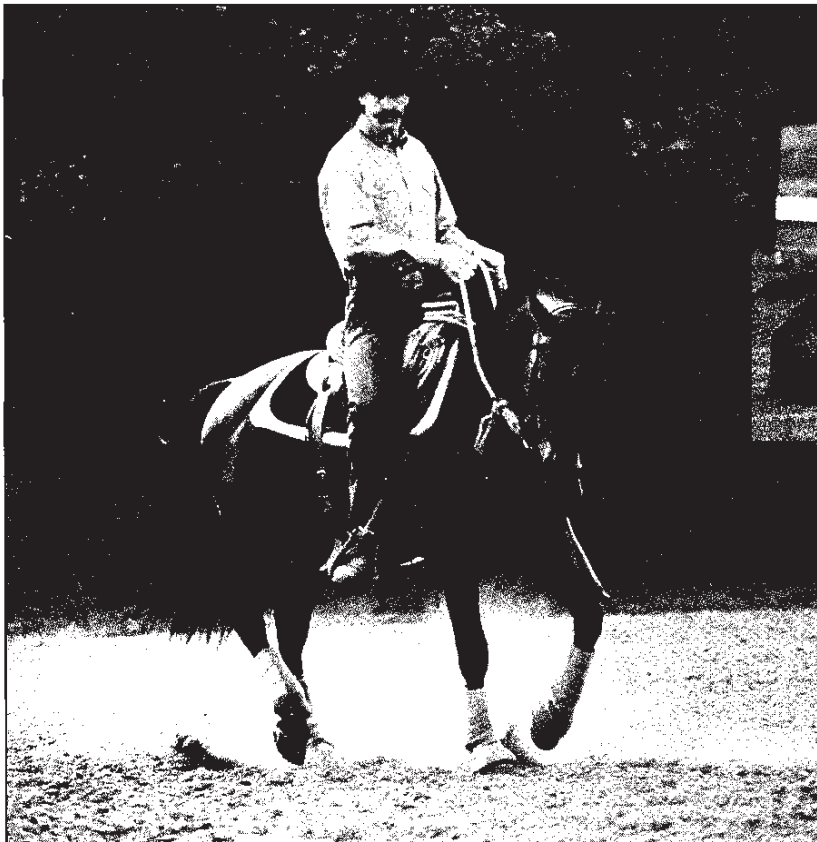
Knowledge of the horse's movement is an important part of universal horsemanship. Reis wants the horse to willingly "give" his feet to the rider, but this cannot be done until the rider understands the sequence and timing of the gaits.

"If you don't know where your horse's feet are and how they should be moving, your horse will never give you the responsibility to place them where you want."

A rider should not ask a horse to attempt lateral work, changes of lead, or even simple transitions without first being aware of the horse's body position. By knowing which foot to address and when to make the request, the rider will be

Photographs by
John Carlson

In a leg yield, the horse is asked to move away from the bend. The right leg asks the horse to move to the left, while the left leg opens up to allow the horse to step in that direction.



After a demonstration on how to lay a horse down, Reis and the horse relax together, showing the trust that has been built between the two. This trust will carry over when the horse is ridden.

Reis' Quarter Horse stallion 32 Calabar performing a half-pass—moving laterally in the direction of the bend.

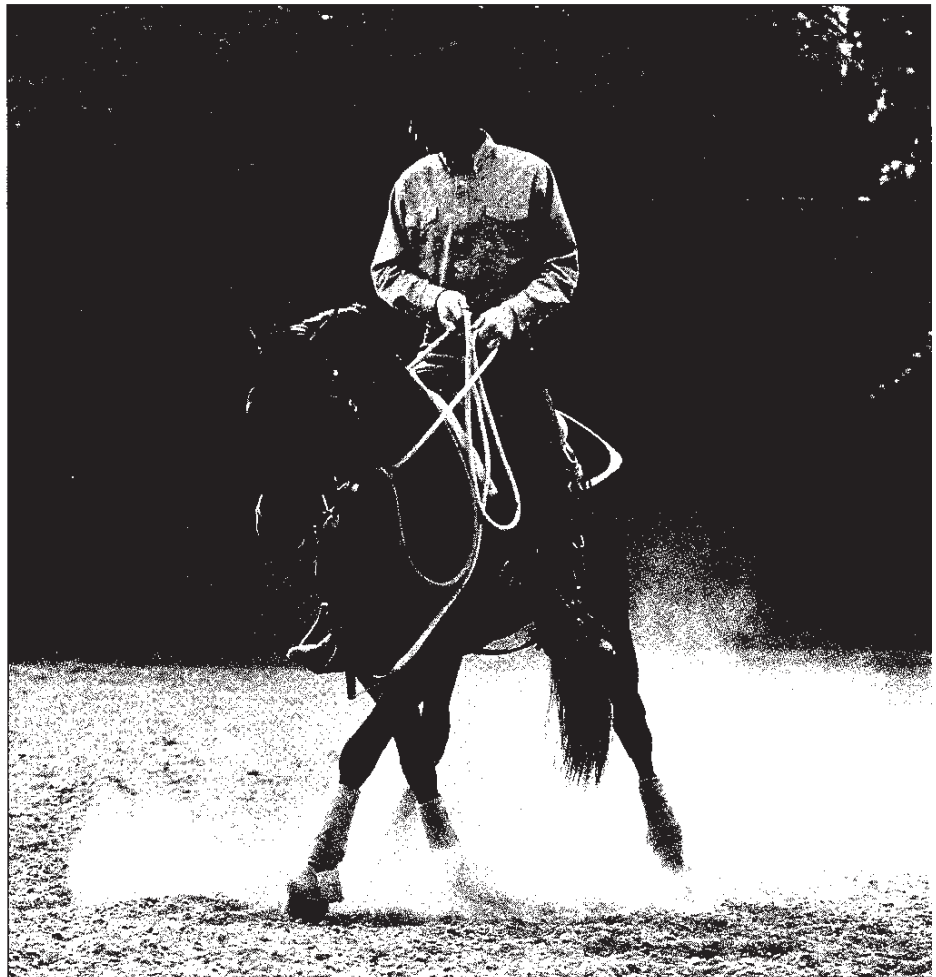
A half-pass helps the horse develop the correct posture for a spin or turnaround.

helping the horse to smoothly and confidently execute a maneuver.

Here are the basics: A walk is a four-beat gait. The horse picks up and puts down each foot separately. Simple? Well, sort of. If the first step is with the right front, the next footfall will be the left hind, then left front and right hind. If the first step is the right hind, the next foot to move will be the right front, left hind and then left front. This might seem confusing, but it helps to remember that if a hind foot moves first, it pushes the front foot on the same side. If a front foot goes first, it will pull the diagonal hind foot next.

At a trot, the horse moves with a two-beat gait. The feet travel in diagonal pairs, with the right front and left hind striking the ground at the same time; followed by the left front and right hind landing together. You can sit a trot by remaining in the saddle and giving your body over to the horse's movement, but posting makes it easier on both of you.

Here's where the diagonals come into play. When traveling in a circle, you should rise with the horse's inside hind-outside front pair. This takes your weight off the inside hind, which is called the driving leg. By freeing this leg, you ease its burden of pushing the horse through the turn.



Outside of the arena, whether you're a cowboy gathering cows, a trail rider, or an endurance competitor, alternating diagonals will allow your horse to use his body evenly. He will be less likely to tire one set of muscles prematurely and less prone to unsoundness.

When the horse tips from a trot to a canter, he changes to a three-beat gait. In a circle, the horse should travel on the correct lead, meaning the inside front is the farthest forward-reaching foot. The sequence begins with the outside hind, then the inside hind-
outside front diagonal pair strike together, and lastly, the inside front. Canter in a straight line, the horse may be asked to take either lead, but for the same reasons you alternate diagonals at a trot, it is wise to change leads periodically when cantering for extended periods.

By becoming aware of leads and diagonals, you not only improve the horse's performance, you increase his longevity.

"Your horse won't pay the price for being ridden. You'll help him remain sound and balanced," Reis says.

Transitions

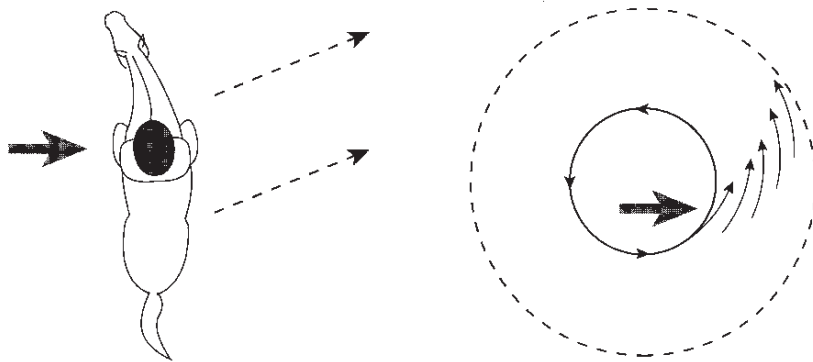
"Transitions develop the horse. I don't just ride in mindless circles," Reis says. He takes every opportunity to execute changes in direction, speed, and gait, and to do them in a manner that has meaning to the horse.

The trick is not to push the horse through a transition, but to set it up so the movement can be done smoothly and willingly. Otherwise, the horse will become braced. To avoid this, Reis advises riders to visualize what they want from the horse and to take the time to place themselves and the horse in the proper posture for the change. "If you aren't prepared for a transition, you have no business going through with it."

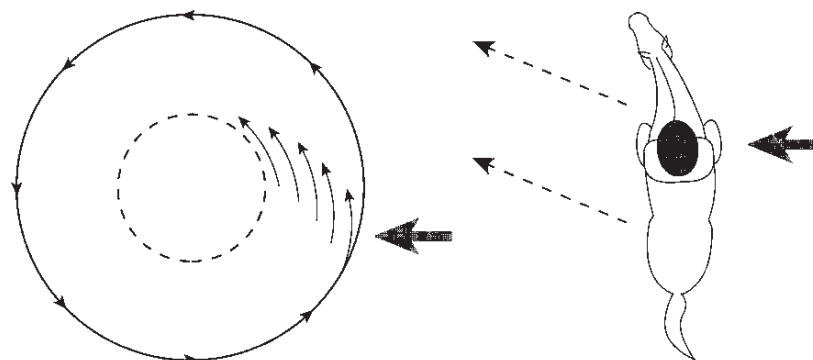
Lateral moves

Virtually all the side-to-side movements in classical riding can be used in the development of a western horse. When done correctly they will help the horse become supple, strong, and to obtain the correct posture for spins, rollbacks, and flying lead changes.

The most basic lateral exercise, a leg yield, can be likened to a side-pass with forward movement. If the horse is bent (arced) to the left, you ask him to step to the right by applying pressure with your left leg. If the horse understands leg aids, he will yield to leg pressure by stepping away from it. The motion is away from the



In a leg yield, the horse is arced to the left. The rider's left leg asks the horse to step to the right. A good way to practice this is in spiraling exercises. Begin riding in a small circle, then leg-yield outward to form a large circle. Work circles in both directions, so the horse gets equal practice leg-yielding to the right and to the left.



In a half-pass, the horse is arced to the left, but the rider's right leg asks the horse to step to the left. Practice by riding in a large circle, then half-pass inward to move in a small circle. Be sure to work in both directions.

direction of the bend. This movement is handy for opening gates and being able to maneuver your horse alongside other objects. It also prepares the horse for further athletic advancement.

Another lateral exercise, the half-pass, is a much more difficult maneuver for the horse. In this movement the horse is asked to step in the direction he is bent. If he is arced to the left, you ask him to step to the left by using your right leg. The half-pass can be used to perform the same tasks as a leg yield, but its primary function, besides limbering, is to build the foundation for more advanced maneuvers. It sets the horse up for another limbering exercise, the haunches-in, and a strengthening exercise, the shoulder-in. It also gives the rider necessary tools to straighten the horse. It helps the rider refine feel and timing, and improve his awareness of the horse's body position. The posture used in the half-pass is the same as that a horse needs to execute a spin, and is a precursor to flying changes of lead.

Collection

It's not a head-set. It's not conformity to a frame or a picture of what collection should look like. It's not a reduction in speed or shortening of stride.

So what the heck is it?

"It is something that comes from within your horse. A posture he generates deep inside his body. He is balanced and straight and engaged. He is off the forehand, round, and his back and neck are turned off—not braced," Reis says, and goes on to describe how great a collected horse feels to ride. How the movements are fluid and elastic; transitions flowing and soft. The horse is light and easy to guide. He yields his body to the rider.

This sort of collection comes only after the horse has been developed, using the exercises already mentioned. It can happen only after a rider has acquired the feel, timing, and balance to ask the horse for such a high degree of engagement. Dressage riders call it "riding from back to front."

Although the classical rider rides the hindquarters of the horse, most of

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Back in 1983, Dennis was competing at the Cow Palace, here on Cotton Rosser's *01 High Tide*.

us learn to ride only the head and neck. The engagement that comes with true collection can be amazing. The impulsion and power the horse expresses can be unnerving. Some riders may not be prepared for the responsibility the horse has given them. For this reason, Reis stresses the rider, as well as the horse, must be ready.

"If the rider can't ride with a loose rein around the arena at a walk, trot, and canter, and can't ride without stirrups, he isn't ready for collection."

Another important aspect of collection is understanding that each hand should act independently to subtly ask the horse to soften and yield. A rider who does not have this finesse will cause the horse to stiffen to the bit, to brace and become rigid.

With so much to learn, and so many intricacies, the task of the classical rider might seem daunting. But Reis doesn't think so.

"It's not the destination; it's the

journey. I enjoy taking a more artistic approach to horsemanship, but I don't feel it becomes art until you have worked and ridden through good times and bad, and taken the time to develop your horse-handling skills and cultivated an inner feel."

This article has just touched the surface of classical riding. Whether you ride a Quarter Horse for ranch work or school a warmblood for upper-level dressage, there will always be room for improvement. Like any art form, the search for perfection is never-ending. But the reward comes in growing ever closer to what my friend Tom Dorrance calls true unity. And as Dennis Reis knows, it's not getting there that counts; it's the ride.

A native Texan, Patti Hudson now lives near Long Creek, Oregon. She is a full-time free-lance writer who enjoys everything from ranch work to dressage.

