

Creating a more responsive horse

with Karen Pavicic

by Alison King



Karen Pavicic and Don Daiquiri.

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The past few years have been busy and successful ones for Karen Pavicic of Surrey, BC. Last year she represented Canada at the World Equestrian Games and she now has her sights firmly set on qualifying for the 2016 Olympics after what is shaping up to be another fruitful winter season in Wellington, FL. Whether riding her grand prix mount Don Daiquiri, or working with young horses just beginning their dressage careers, Pavicic focuses on responsiveness during every schooling session and suggests you should, too, no matter your discipline or level.

“**R**esponsiveness means that the horse is “on the aids.” The horse should demonstrate a soft chewing mouth, stay in front of the rider’s leg, and be supple through the back and body. When horses are truly responsive they are “through,” giving the rider the feeling that they could do anything with ease and without any resistance.

In the dressage ring, responsiveness relates specifically to the collective marks under submission and will be evident at every level. For example, a horse at training level will be asked for less demanding exercises than a grand prix horse, but the submission mark is still worth the same amount. If a horse is truly responsive, regardless of the level, the performance will look and feel effortless.

LESS IS MORE

Some horses are naturally hotter to the aids and will seem more responsive, while others are more dull. They may be less responsive by nature, but are often made this way from repeatedly receiving unclear aids from the rider. Remember that all horses are naturally very sensitive; for example, even a “lazy” horse will react to a fly on his side. A rider can easily make this type of horse even more dull with the overuse of aids (natural and artificial). It is imperative that horses like this are trained correctly and respect their riders.

In general, for less responsive horses, repetition is key. Small circles and turns can contribute to horses becoming “lazy,” so frequent changes of exercises and changes of rein and gaits are very helpful. Sometimes, the most beneficial thing for this type of horse is a change in scenery. Going off the property, hacking, or even some cross-training with cavalletti or small jumps can be very helpful.

Improving responsiveness - try this at home!

Attention to detail in daily work – paying particular attention to transitions – is especially important to encourage responsiveness.



Photo 1 & 2: Begin on a large circle in a good working trot.
Photo 3: Next, ask for an active, forward, working canter.
Photo 4: While maintaining the circle, perform a transition to trot for two to three strides only; establish good balance through the use of half-halts and go forward to canter again. Repeat these steps several times before changing rein and performing the exercise in the other direction. (Ed. note: if your horse tends to be a bit dull to the aids, giving him a change of scenery outside the arena can help perk him up.)

Horses that tend to be hotter can get anxious or anticipate movements, especially at the highest levels where the horse may perform the same tests at every competition. In such cases, it is important when schooling patterns from the test that you take time to prepare for each individual movement. It may mean that you ride a smaller circle in the corner before a transition, for example, to ensure the horse is waiting for

and responding to your aids, rather than simply anticipating what comes next. It is also important that riders practice giving free walks often throughout the schooling session.

A well-trained horse is neither overly reactive nor delayed in its response to the rider's aids. I always find it inspiring to look at some of our very talented para riders as a good reminder of how horses can be trained to react to very light aids.



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For examples of responsiveness, Karen is inspired by para riders (such as Canada's WEG bronze medalist Lauren Barwick with Off To Paris, pictured), whose horses are trained to react to the lightest of aids.

TROUBLESHOOTING TIPS

- For horses on the cooler end of the spectrum, beginning the work in canter rather than trot is helpful, as most horses naturally have more impulsion in the canter.
- If the horse gets strong and runs through the half-halts instead of coming back to trot during the exercise, ask it to move away from the inside leg in a leg yield or shoulder-in before the downward transition. Riding a smaller circle to the inside of the large circle can also be effective.
- If the horse gets sticky when asked to go from trot to canter, the use of the whip in the outside hand will aid in the upward transition. This reminder helps the horse to strike off on the outside hind leg into canter. If the trot speeds up and/or loses balance when canter is requested, then rebalance the trot first with the use of correct half-halts before asking for another canter depart. 🐾

Calf stretches for better leg position

by Jamie Camp

Creating a more responsive horse through an effective seat requires the ability to tilt your pelvis posteriorly (tuck your bottom) while engaging your core, keeping an open hip, and keeping your heel down (“dorsiflexion” of the ankle). Opening the front of your hip (instead of arching your lower back) is essential to keeping your heels down while remaining effective in the saddle.

EXERCISE 1

Our muscles are part of a system working to achieve strength and mobility, which can be affected by previous injury and habitual positions. As riders spend most of their time in relative hip flexion (closed hip) in the saddle, stretching the front of your hip (photo 1) allows your core to function and your heels to fall. This stretch is achieved by kneeling in a lunge position with your ankle dorsi-flexed. Both knees should be at 90-degree angles. This stretch should be felt by tucking your bottom (posterior pelvic tilt) and opening the hip of the kneeling leg. You should feel your glutes (bottom) working, and a stretch from your hip down the front of your kneeling leg. Stretches should be held for 30 seconds x 4.



EXERCISE 2

An inability to dorsiflex your ankle can be caused by true joint stiffness or muscle tissue stiffness. The knee-to-wall matrix (photo 2) can improve ankle joint mobility in three dimensions. With a bent knee, push your heel into the ground and pulse your knee towards the wall. Then complete big knee circles, feeling movement through your ankle. A calf stretch against the wall with a straight knee targets the other part of your calf that crosses your knee joint to improve muscle length.

Core stability is also necessary to maintain an effective seat and create a straight, balanced, supple and receptive horse. If your coach notices issues such as rounded shoulders, poking chin, or an inability to get your heels down and secure, then it is important to get assessed and corrected to ensure all parts of your core are firing properly and aren't weakened due to previous injury or habitual postures.



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