

DRESSAGE

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1 home performing piaffe in hand will do it by hand self

TRAINING

David Pincus – Work In Hand II

Carole Thornton continues her informative discussion

Dressage is becoming the means to success in competition rather than an art in itself, as in former times. Certain training procedures have been lost or are no longer practised today. This can result in ever more pressure on the horse in his early years as riders and trainers strive for excellence. A well-trained horse should be able to perform into his twenties, as did Rembrandt for Nicole Uphoff, and his capacity to do so will depend on sensitive and careful treatment in the early stages of training.

David Pincus uses work in hand partly because it enables the horse to loosen without putting pressure on his muscles. Stress can be physical as well as psychological. The greater communication developed between horse and rider by using this work helps to condition and familiarise the horse with the principal requirements that will be needed throughout his life as a riding horse.

In former days the riding masters taught piaffe as a natural progression, and for the beneficial effects on the schooling of the horse, rather than, as now, a necessary part of competition.

“When aiming at training the horse to execute piaffe, either as a test requirement or as an exercise to improve the strength and agility of the hind legs, work in hand offers many advantages,” explains David. They include:

- The ability to start developing piaffe from an early age without stressing the horse with the rider's weight.
- Often when training piaffe from the saddle, the tendency is to over-ride the movement or make the horse too dependent on the aids. It is easier to see from the ground what effect the aids are having, and to adjust your reaction.
- Horses proficient in piaffe in hand will do it by holding themselves in complete self-carriage with no pressure in front and only a slight signal behind.

As mentioned previously, half steps are the basis of all piaffe work.

To develop the half steps into piaffe, David slows down the forward movement until the

horse nearly marks time on the spot. At that moment he raises the whip sharply to create the activity again. Then he repeats the procedure. This encourages the horse to dance on the spot: “As the horse progresses, I aim to use the whip less and for the horse to perform for a longer period.”

The choice of tack will depend on the temperament and experience of the horse.

“With some horses which are very strong, two trainers are required. A long line is used from the cavesson only, on the right side (assuming we are working on the left rein). The line comes over the saddle to the left side and is held by the trainer walking alongside by the croup of the horse. The other trainer is controlling the front, should the horse try to rush forward. This method makes it easier to keep him straight and under control.

“I will sometimes use two whips. I stand a few feet away from the horse. With the long whip I engage and activate the hind legs and with the other whip, which is shorter, I am able to influence the front of the horse – to control the forwardness and the height of the front. By using two whips, raising and lowering them, I am influencing the piaffe with little physical aid. The horse reacts to the visual positioning of the whips.”

The young horse is brought into the school and led around once or twice to warm him up. Sharp or nervous horses may take longer. With some horses it works better if they are ridden first. The side reins are adjusted to the correct length and height to give the horse the correct shape and the teacher some control. The horse is led on the left rein along the wall. The trainer's left hand holds both reins close to the bit and the right hand carries a long whip. The trainer is positioned next to the horse's shoulder and, with voice commands and the whip, encourages the horse to walk, trot and halt repeatedly, and later also to rein back.

“If this is done consistently, the horse learns



to observe the trainer's body and as he moves forward, the horse follows. As he halts, the horse halts. These transitions become very quick and sharp,” explains David. “By anticipating the next transition, the horse performs quick, short steps, lowering and skipping with the hind legs.”

In the next stage the horse will start to develop the correct balance and activity of the hind legs.

“I give the horse a tap with the whip on the hock, heels or croup to test his reaction. At the same time my left hand restrains the horse from moving forward more than just in short steps.”

The advanced horse is expected to show collection and engagement sufficient for such movements as the canter pirouette. The development of these qualities from an early age using exercises in hand must have a positive effect on the confidence of the horse in test conditions. He will have learned balance and self-carriage, combined with reactions which make it possible for him to change pace and direction with ease.

“The following work helps to improve the activity and rhythm of the more advanced horse,” says David. “We can increase and decrease the volume of the steps and ask for different shapes of piaffe as a gymnastic exercise for encouraging the lowering of the croup. The horse is also able to travel 10-15 metres in short half steps. Sometimes I then progress forward in trot and back to short steps and halt to maintain the activity and alertness of the horse.”

"Reining back the horse develops the engagement and lowering of the hindlegs needed in performing piaffe. From this position he will start the piaffe with already lowered and engaged hind legs. He will even be able to rein back in piaffe and then trot forward."

At every stage the trainer must be aware of what is natural and instinctive for the horse and what requires help for improvement.

"It is surprising how some talented horses will actually perform piaffe after one or two lessons, while others will show some aspects of piaffe really well but be deficient in others – for instance, one horse will be very sensitive to the whip and become very active behind, but at the same time will raise the croup and hips and lower the front. Although active, he has assumed an undesirable shape. To correct this I raise the head with my left hand and the horse is half-halted. At the same time I try to find the place and manner in which to use the whip to encourage the hindlegs to step under the horse, not merely upwards. Without allowing the horse to lower his head I allow a little more forwardness. I reward him with my voice and a pat at any indication that he is trying to do the right thing."

Some horses will clamp down and freeze with both hind legs tucked too much under the body and no activity at all. David uses the

whip high on the hind legs, very lightly, to encourage activity. "Any negative reaction such as kicking or charging forward must be corrected firmly and confidently. It is important that the horse learns to offer his strength to the trainer, not use it against him!"

To prepare the horse for the transitions from piaffe to passage he moves the horse from piaffe

into trot and then back to piaffe.

This work continues throughout the horse's working life, creating a bond between horse and trainer which it would be much harder to form from the saddle. As a logical, humane approach to dressage training, work in hand can only benefit horses expected to perform at the highest levels.



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Correction

IN THE APRIL ISSUE of *Dressage*, we published the second part of a training feature from Carole Thornton; 'Work In Hand' with David Pincus.

Unfortunately, in error we published the wrong photographs with the text.

To rectify this and to clarify points made in the text of the feature, we now publish the correct photographs and captions.

We apologise for any inconvenience our mistake has caused.

The following series of photographs illustrates some of the techniques mentioned in the article 'Work In Hand' in the April issue. David Pincus will be expanding on these techniques in much greater detail in his forthcoming book, in which he traces the history of this type of training, and emphasises its uses in all stages of the horse's development.



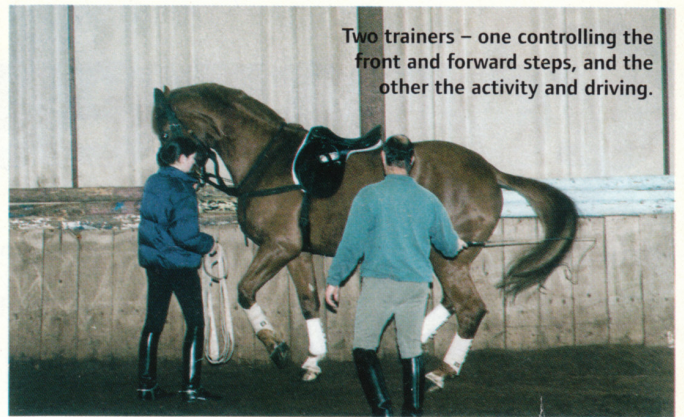
Developing self-carriage between two whips



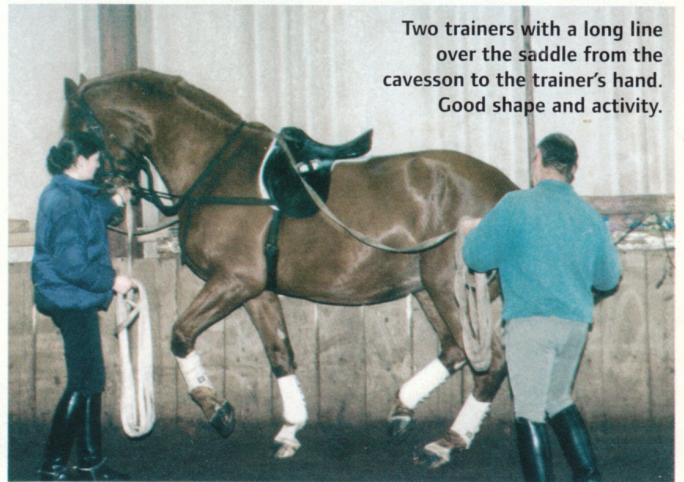
Moving forward from piaffe in elevated trot



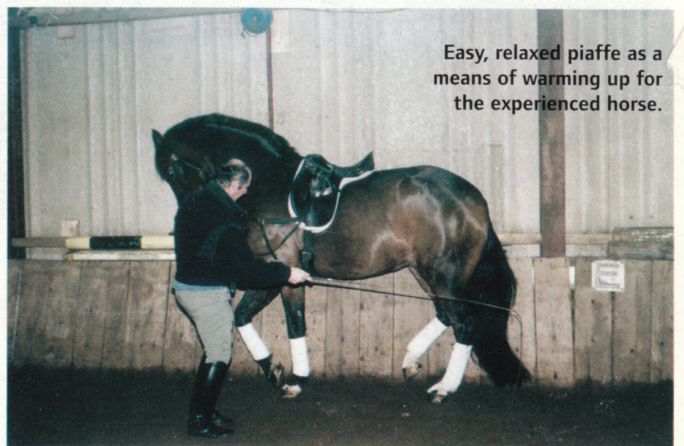
Activating the airborne leg to develop "push"



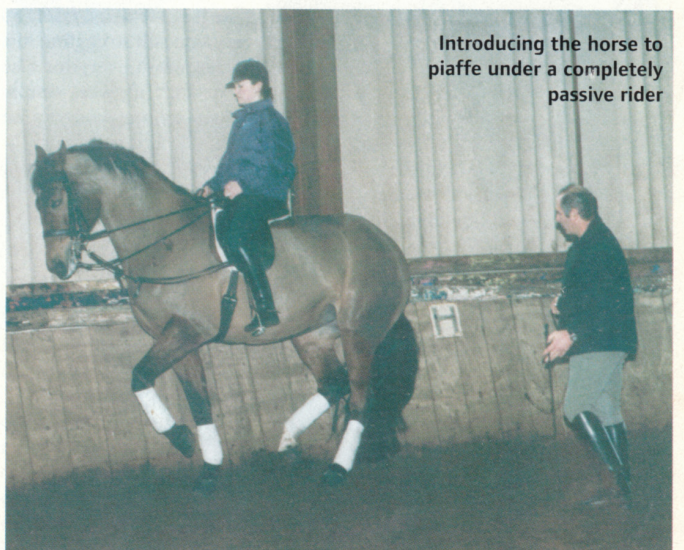
Two trainers – one controlling the front and forward steps, and the other the activity and driving.



Two trainers with a long line over the saddle from the cavesson to the trainer's hand. Good shape and activity.



Easy, relaxed piaffe as a means of warming up for the experienced horse.



Introducing the horse to piaffe under a completely passive rider