

COLLECTION - A MATTER OF ENERGY

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"The difficulty is not in grasping the new ideas, but in escaping the old ones."

John Maynard Keynes

In regards to collection, much nonsense is talked about by dressage riders, trainers and judges. Judges, trainers, and riders bumble about with it, using relatively meaningless dressage catch phrases, which adds to the confusion. We are used to hearing dressage talk, like:

“Engagement”, “Hind legs further under,” “More from behind,” “Hock action,” “More through,” “On the forehand,” etc. It is all pretty much meaningless until decoded and put into context.

Colonel Valdemar Seunig (with whom I rode when I was 16 and he was 85) wrote in one of his books (circa 1940) that there are six trots:

1. The natural trot
2. The working trot
3. The gathered trot
4. The collected trot
5. The medium trot
6. The extended trot

This is a stroke of genius that should make one furiously think. The principle behind these various trots is the generation of energy, storage of energy and release of energy as speed.

What are not on his list are two more trots:

7. The shuffling jog (Western Pleasure)
8. The racing trot (racing Standardbreds)

In the Western Jog almost all the generated energy is released as speed, but very little energy is generated to start with. Similarly, the racing trot has no stored energy, but the key difference is that a tremendous amount of energy is generated and released.

The Natural Trot is more specific to the individual horse. Some horses naturally tribble or sprawl along, pushing backwards with the hind legs trying to catch up to their chests; others naturally bound upwards with power and reach. The Natural Trot has giddy-up, slow up, raise-ability and self-carriage, but not necessarily a fancy dressage headset. It does not necessarily have GOOD carriage yet, but it does not clatter around. Some horses have what could be called ‘Natural Collection.’ They cost more.

The Working Trot is just what it says. It asks the horse to put in the effort to adjust its tempo, speed, balance and do more “work” per mile, per hour or stride. Just as a hypothetical way of thinking, the generated energy is perhaps 30% stored and 70% released as speed. Of course, it is always relative to the horse’s ‘Natural Trot’ – the starting point. Working trot is not a thing or exact pace – it is somewhere along the continuum of the trots that each horse can produce.

The Gathered Trot is somewhere between Working and Collected. The horse puts more effort into each step or stride. For the sake of argument, let’s say that the Gathered Trot stores 40% of the generated energy and releases 60% as speed. To continue in this way of thinking, the Collected Trot stores 75% of the generated energy and 25% is released as speed. Thus the Collected Trot is energetic, but not speedy. The Medium Trot is 50% stored 50% released and extended trot is 25% stored energy and 75% energy released as speed.

A chart to convey this mental exercise:

Type of Trot	Percent Stored	Percent Released
Racing	0	100
Western jog	10	90
Extended	25	75
Working	30	70
Gathered	40	60
Medium	50	50
Collected	75	25

(Note that it does not address the generation of energy, which is what differentiates so distinctly the Racing Trot and Western jog and plays a part in the difference of Gathered and Medium as well)

Canter is similar in principle, but slightly different, because of the asymmetrical non-reciprocating rocking nature of the canter.

But what does all this stored and released energy mean? How is energy stored by the horse?

In one way of thinking, energy is stored by converting speed to 'tallness' without reducing the amount of generated energy. Tallness is achieved when the Thoracic Sling Muscles contract to raise the front of the horse's Thorax. Then the Pectoral Muscles (between the front legs) contract to keep it there. The belly muscles also kick into play. The limbs/hooves push down against the ground (flexing the grounded hind leg), instead of pushing backwards against the ground, and therefore, extending the grounded hind leg in a backwards direction. This pushes the horse relatively upward and is called Ground Reaction Force.

Now HOW to influence this proportion of stored and released energy. In general, we need to have some influences, which include:

Raise-ability (of C-5, base of neck, thorax). This is mainly a function of the reins.

Release-ability (uberstreichen). This tests the horse's use of his own muscles in self-carriage when we release the reins momentarily.

Governability of the tempo, energy, and length of stride. This is mainly a function of the rider's body dynamic combined with raise-ability.

(The first two are addressed with a bit more detail in the last half of a previous article "The Myth of the Pulling Horse" <https://www.facebook.com/notes/osierlea/the-misperception-of-the-pulling-horse/824889057579737>).

The confusion about collection is perpetrated by the training of judges, where would-be judges are told that the words 'collection,' 'collecting' and 'collected' cannot be mentioned by the judge below 2nd level. In fact, it takes 'collecting' to turn a sprawling natural trot into a tidy working trot.