

Building the Back of Your Horse

"Riding the Rainbow"

1. Why do I need to develop my horse's back? What is a topline?

The goal of dressage and any good riding is to have the horse able to achieve and maintain **self-carriage** (meaning the horse can carry himself without leaning on the bit and the rider's hands). This also means he must be able to move himself to be under the rider and support the rider without losing his balance. Imagine carrying a young child on your shoulders and running and dancing! You could probably do this a little if you held onto something sturdy with your hands, but once you let go... Your back must have the muscles it needs to form a strong core along with your abdominal muscles to be successful. That way you have a strong yet flexible pillar to carry the load without the crutch of leaning on something.

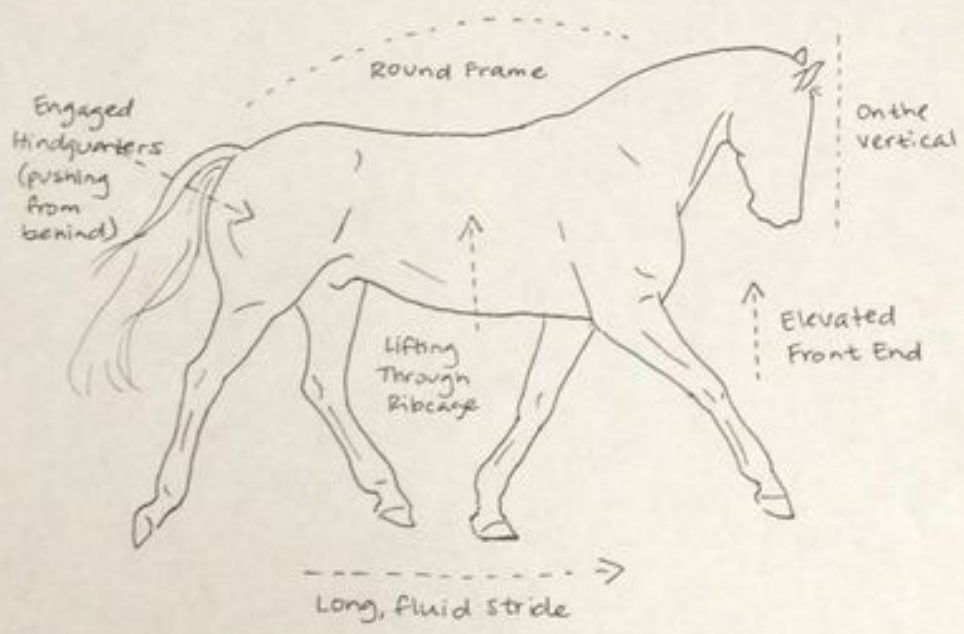
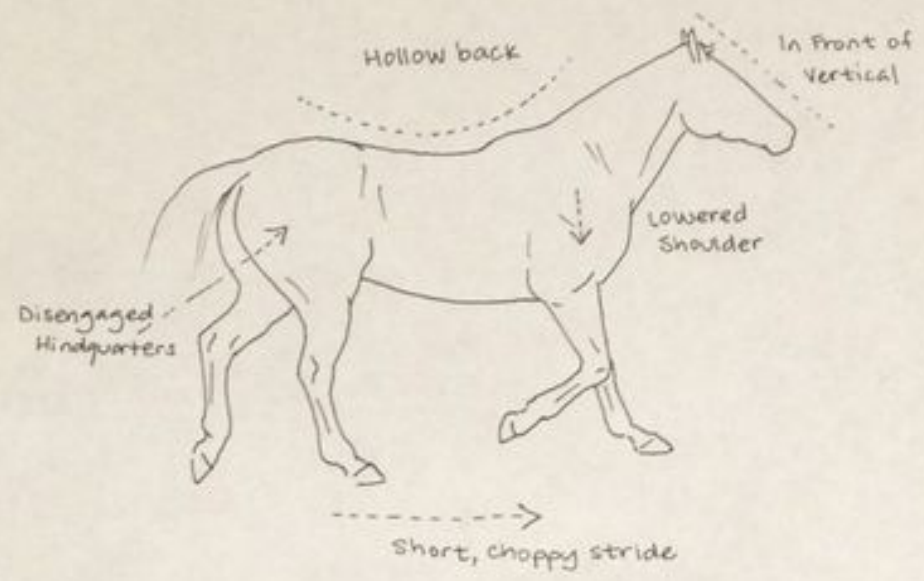
Handout p.2 — Hollow vs Round Frame

The same is true for the horse, though the dynamics are somewhat different. The load is applied squarely on the **center portion of the horse's spine**. Imagine a clothes line between two posts. When you hang a weight in the middle, the line will drop down in the middle — a swayback clothes line! If you have a strong pole between two posts, it will stay straight and effortlessly support the load without bending. The back of the horse is composed of bone and ligaments that **are able to bend longitudinally**...so it is of vital importance that the muscles that run alongside the spine and from the spine to the abdomen are strong enough to prevent it from bending downward under a load, i.e. becoming "hollow." With a hollow back posture, the horse is much less flexible and less able to carry a load. The goal is to have the horse use his strong back and abdominal muscles to lift his back up despite the rider's weight and to become effortlessly more athletic in his movement.

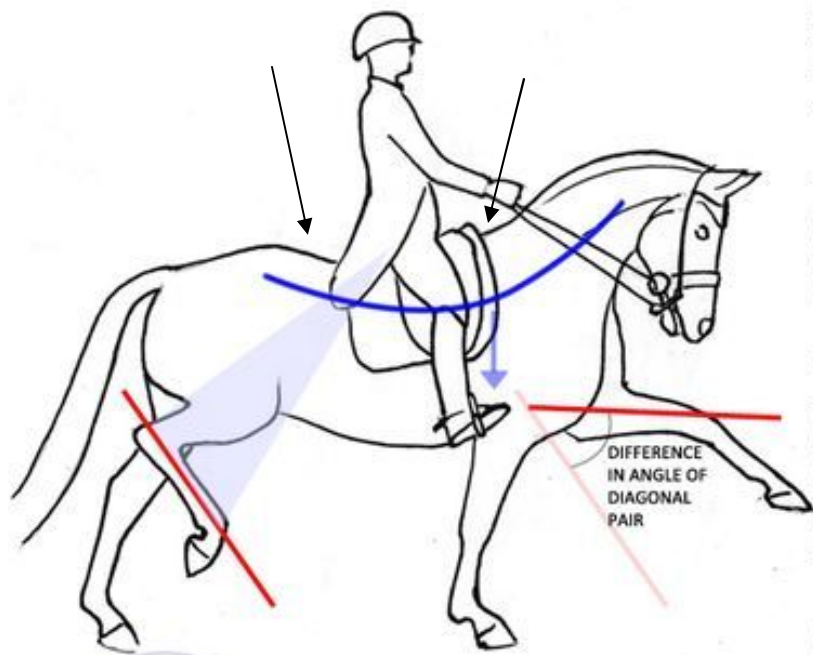
VIDEO — "Developing Your Horse's Back: the Biomechanics of Engagement" — Padma Video

<https://youtu.be/hokqRs9Gbrl>

HOLLOW VS. ROUND FRAME



Parallel Diagonals The Proof of Correct Training

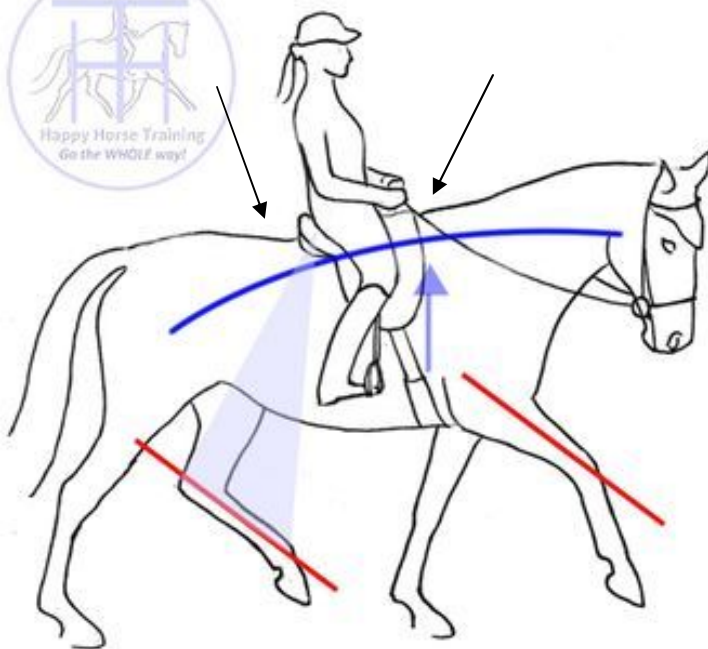


Disunited diagonal pairs, showing more than 45 degrees difference in the angle of the trajectory.

This spreading of the diagonal pairs is only possible when the horse's back is dropped.

The hind leg does not reach forward to support the lifting of the horse's back, and the rider sits on the compressed vertebrae of the hollow thoracic spine.

Despite appearances, the horse is on the forehand.



In correct postural engagement, the diagonal pairs (identified by the angle of the hindleg cannon bone and the forearm of the front leg) are absolutely parallel, at all points in the stride.

This is a sign of the unity provided by the postural ring, connecting the haunches and the forehand, and allowing the energy to flow freely from back to front.

The hindleg reaches under to support the lifting of the horse's spine under the rider.



When you develop those muscles through the proper exercises, the horse develops a “good topline.” You can see for yourself where the muscles thicken and become larger. The view of the entire “topline” from the poll to the tail can give you a clue as to whether the horse will have an easy time carrying his human, or a difficult time. He will only be able to perform at the highest level of his conformation, if he finds it easy to carry his human passenger!

VIDEO — “Recognizing Topline Development” — Art2Ride

<https://youtu.be/QLn5rs1ln8Q>

2. The benefits of a strong back — for humans and horses.

It’s pretty obvious that without a strong core (abdominal & back muscles) a ballet dancer can’t dance...and a horse can’t either. With a strong back, the horse is able to lift the weight of not only the rider, but the front of his body as well. Since a horse usually places 60% of his weight on his forehand, and only 40% on the hindquarters, he often can look downhill, and is **unable to move quickly and stay graceful**. Yes, a cutting quarter horse can push his body quickly back and forth with his forehand, but he certainly doesn’t resemble a fluid dancer or acrobat, where the movement is smooth and controlled. The smooth, slow, controlled movements of dressage take even more strength, and especially from the hind end taking MORE of the weight of the horse. This lightens up the front of the horse so that it can move in a way that a stallion will often show himself off to his mares. Elevated in the front, with a beautifully arched neck, with pure gaits, and the ability to do some pretty amazing leaping about! — the final goal of dressage training.

3. How do I go about building my horse's back strength? What kind of training can I do?

Multiple ways to build the back...

LIFTING THE BACK FROM THE GROUND

This is something that Kim Barhaug taught us how to do at the Massage Clinic earlier this year. You scratch with some upward pressure the lowest point on the horse's belly with your fingers & fingernails, thus causing the horse to lift his abdomen to get away from the irritation. You can watch the back lift in this exercise, or get someone to do it while you watch. You will be amazed at how far the back lifts up to get away from that "pressure." If you do this a few times while you are saddling up, it will help stretch and develop those muscles. This lifting of the back is what you're after!

The first video showed another way to "tuck" the horse's rear end under himself, which also lifts the back. Be sure your horse won't kick you! In this video you can see the amazing advantage to the dorsal spinal processes of the horse's spine when it lifts its back, especially in the area where the saddle sits. They spread out much more than in a neutral stance and so are not in danger of rubbing together — a primary cause of "kissing spine" disease...often found in horses ridden hollow for their whole lives!

LUNGING YOUR HORSE TO DEVELOP BACK MUSCLES

Lunging your horse in a stretching frame at walk/trot/& canter can be one of the best ways to build your horse's back without endless riding. It should be paired in a program that uses both the lunging and riding to develop the muscles for more collected work.

[Refer to Handout p.6 — The Vienna & Chambon side reins](#)

RIDING YOUR HORSE TO DEVELOP BACK MUSCLES

Riding long and low — the STRETCH. This video shows you how the rider can get the horse to stretch his neck down and out which lifts his back, and allows the hind legs to take bigger strides, and for the hind legs to land further under the horse's body. Besides building the correct back and neck muscles that you saw in the video on the topline, it promotes balance, rhythm and relaxation — all of which are the foundation of the dressage pyramid. The pre-requisites to more advanced work.

VIDEO — "Schooling The Young Horse 1: Will and Fuego" — Art2Ride (lunging and riding the stretch)

<https://youtu.be/0sQ7N23wGew>

Here are two (side-rein) aids you can use to encourage your horse to stretch down and out when being lunged.



Vienna
(side-reins)



Chambon
(side-reins)

RIDING OR LUNGING OVER CAVALETTI

As those of us who observed HMDC's Cavaletti Clinic, horses that learn to stay forward, rhythmic, and in proper tempo can lift their front end and take more cadenced and suspended trot steps over the poles. The angulation in the hocks is encouraged to be greater than in a trot over open ground. So in addition to building back muscles, you are also improving your horse's trot gait.

VIDEO — “Cavaletti Training for Horses with Erika Jansson”

<https://youtu.be/r0m2q4bKqbU>

ASKING YOUR HORSE TO BE ACTIVE BEHIND

Using Cavaletti, or just putting your horse in front of your leg in a forward trot will encourage your horse to come “under himself” with his hind legs. I often have to give a squeeze with both legs and if the horse doesn't instantly surge forward (*I give the rein a little so as not to block that*), I smack him a good one with the whip. Next time I give the squeeze, he usually jumps forward into an active trot. It's a little reminder to stay “in front of my leg” AND to pay better attention to what I'm asking.

LIFTING THE BACK FROM THE SADDLE

Your legs and feet can lift the back of the horse when you are in the saddle. Here Will Faerber does an excellent job of showing you how to use your feet and heels to lift the horse's back while you are in the saddle.

VIDEO — Correct leg aids to engage the horse's back — Art2Ride

<https://youtu.be/U5HWhvDV9gw>

WORKING IN COLLECTION

While the stretch can build the horse's back, collected work can too. HOWEVER, and it's a big however, **many riders pull their horses into a frame without engaging the hind end** (*and call it collection*). This results in the horse hollowing his back. In order to raise his head, without his hind legs stepping underneath himself and without a strong, lifted back that is “almost arching” to carry the rider's weight — he simply hollows his back — his only option. He becomes the limp cloth line with something hanging in the middle. Unfortunately, you will see this occasionally at the highest levels of the sport. You can see the hollow behind the saddle and another one in front of the saddle. The horse doesn't move in a flowing harmonious way and his hind legs do not take the longest stride that they could if the back was ‘up’.

Refer to handout p.9

HERE IS THE RAINBOW!! —The Circle of Aids
(this is the cycle of energy that promotes “thoroughness,” where
your aids (seat, leg, and hands), are transmitted to every point on
the horse, and his responses are likewise transmitted to you)

“Disclaimer”

I became a fairly fanatic disciple of Will Faerber and his wonderful stretching methods you saw in the videos to develop the back of a horse. **Over the course of two years I developed my horse Aeroplay’s back with this method to the point that he is now strong enough to handle collection...**

I have to admit that Aeroplay fell in love with the stretch. I could get him active and pushing from behind, and fully into a beautiful stretch, but **he didn’t really want to come up into a more elevated “compacted” frame.** The stretch felt so great to him that he wanted to just stay there.

When I went to ask him to bring up his frame and elevate his front end, he really didn’t want to go there. Of course, Aero is Aero, and he is not that willing a participant in all this stuff. I am in the process of convincing him to continue to bring his hind legs under his body and continue to lift his back, even when his shoulders, head and neck are elevated. *This is a topic for a whole other presentation.*

It is taking a while, but since his back is now so strong...I KNOW he can do it easily. *(I know his back is strong because I can see the development of the correct muscles, AND he is never sore or reactive in his back even after a hard workout)* He’s just being a lazy boy, which is his temperament. I have started to insist that he come up and still stay engaged with his hind legs. His withers are lifting right along with his back and cavaletti are improving the flexing of his hocks and the lowering of his hind end.

It’s really working...and I don’t feel bad at all, because I know his back can handle it!

The Circle of Aids

The back and abdomen are lifted up. The rider's position permits the energy from the horse's core to come through the engagement of the hind legs up into the back, over the poll, into the bit and up the reins to the rider's hand and shoulder and down through her seat and legs into the horse's core. And REPEAT!

