

Module 9: Impulsion & Collection



Impulsion, Straightness, and Collection are the top of the training scale pyramid, and everything we've worked on to this point has been working towards these goals. We covered Straightness in depth in the last module, so this one we'll discuss the other two.

Impulsion means the energy in every step. It means the horse is working in a healthy posture, where they're able to recycle the energy from each step and work underneath themselves, in good balance and with lots of strength and energy.

Collection is the very peak of the pyramid. It means that the horse has successfully build enough strength, and is so balanced in their movement, that they are carrying more weight on their hind end than the front, and they are able to lift and power from their hindquarter, shortening their body, and their stride, and elevating their front end. And they can do so in "self carriage" which means that they're not being held there by strong contact, auxiliary reins or gimmicks.

Collection is the ultimate goal of building an equine athlete, and it's never something that is "complete" as your horse can always be getting stronger, more supple, more engaged. Continuing work on the other exercises in this course will help to improve your horse's impulsion and collection, through continuing to improve their strength and balance.

Beware of False Collection

The hallmark of true collection is that they are carrying their weight on their hindquarters. This means you'll see their hind limbs working well underneath their body, with the haunches lowering and lifting the front end, allowing for light, free movement, elevated head and neck carriage, and a near vertical head carriage.

The trouble is, that – as is common throughout this journey – we get focused on the front end of the horse, and forget that our driving horses power comes from behind.

False Collection is the term for when a horse has been pulled in to a false frame, with their head elevated and forced onto the vertical, and their front feet flinging out in front of them, either due to positioning or other gimmicks, but with a hollow back and their hind legs trailing out behind their body.

Unfortunately, this is a very common posture in the show ring, a result of the prevalence of tight overchecks, use of draw reins in training, and a focus on fancy front end motion and headsets.

While this way of moving might be easier to create, with the use of force and devices, and it might even be rewarded in the showring, when the judge only has a few short moments to evaluate the horse, the risks to your horse far outweigh the benefits of this sort of shortcut.

Horses that travel in false collection tend to develop hock issues, back issues (check the sway backs on many of the "pleasure driving" champions you see – even young horses!), ewe necks, and breathing issues, as their head

is forced into an unnatural position which restricts their airway. Horses that travel in false collection are as good as they're ever going to get and can only break down from here.

Horses that travel in true collection are comfortable, strong and get better and better every day. Their hind legs are working well underneath them, in good balance and making full use of their strong – and getting stronger every day! – hindquarter muscles. They have strong topline, and backs that are working like a strong bridge, to support the entire structure of the horse. Their necks elevate from the base, with an arched crest and the head balanced comfortably in a near vertical position, with an open throatlatch allowing for full use of their airway. And their front end movement is light and expressive, with the potential to just get better and better as they continue to gain strength.

Building Impulsion

Some horses naturally have a lot of energy, but remember that for it to be impulsion, it has to be rhythmic, relaxed and balanced – no rushing, with good bend and working well underneath themselves.

Other horses lack impulsion because they lack energy and aren't working efficiently, instead moving along without purpose and again, without rhythm.

All the previous topics and exercises covered already be helping build impulsion, working on rhythm, strengthening the hind end and working on balance and bend. And continuing to work at those exercises will improve impulsion along with everything else!

But there are some exercises you can do that will specifically improve impulsion – and collection, as they work hand in hand.

Try It:

Quick transitions are a great way to improve impulsion AND collection, as they further ask the horse to work off of their hindquarters and lighten their front end.

They also add energy, so they're great for lower energy horses, and can be used judiciously with a high energy horse as well, to help them focus their enthusiasm in a productive way.

You can do them as quick as every 3 strides, so as soon as you get into the new gait you're immediately changing to the next one.

Try walk-trot-walk, and halt-trot-halt, and after 7-10 transitions, ask for a lengthened or extended trot.

Or mix it up and do random transitions so your horse never knows what's coming – they'll get to like the game, and get more and more balanced as they're "ready for anything". Don't forget to ask them to back as well as forward and halt transitions!

Lengthened or Extended Trot

The "big" trot also works hand in hand with impulsion and collection, as it also relies on a strong hindquarter and balanced horse to be truly effective.

You want to see the horse's stride lengthen, as they drive from behind and power forward. You'll need to support them into the lengthening, to allow them to continue to work in balance instead of getting strung out.

Try It:

Begin by driving a small circle, as small as your horse is currently capable without losing their bend and rhythm. Build the energy, encourage them for more, but don't let the energy escape out the front, catch it with your contact and recycle it. Picture the energy going around and around, from your horses head and circling to the hind legs and back again.

When you are at peak energy – before your horse gets frustrated or discouraged, usually 3-5 circles – shoot them out and across the diagonal (if you're in an arena) in a straight line. Use your belly button flashlight to "lift" your horse. Support them into the lengthen with your hands, allowing them to go forward and lengthen their stride and their frame, but still supporting them, helping them use their impulsion and keep their hind legs underneath them.

At first, you'll probably only get a few strides of truth lengthening before they'll get strung out and rushy again. That's great though! And you will love the feeling when you get those strides. Start bringing them back to a smaller trot before they lose their balance and "reloading" in the next corner, to shorten back into a collected trot and rebuild the impulsion to try it again.

While all the work you do on transitions and bending will inherently improve your horse's impulsion and ability to collect, we can tweak some of the earlier exercises to make them even more focused on these skills.

Try it:

In the same deep serpentine exercise from Module 8, we can add some transitions and lengthening

On the straightaway, try adding a halt transition in the middle of the trot. Now you have the bending of the half circle, a trot-halt-trot transition, into a bend the opposite way.

Next, try lengthening on the straightaway. Now you can use the half circle to build impulsion, lengthen for a few strides, but be sure and rebalance and get ready to shorten your strides and change the bend for the next half circle.

Then, mix it up! Alternate halt transition and lengthening on each loop of the serpentine.

Activate your horse's hind end, build strength, balance and maneuverability, all while tackling a fun challenge with your horse.

Check in every so often with earlier exercises and see how your horse has grown. As they get stronger and stronger and begin collection and lengthening work, can you see a bigger difference when you count strides between the cones?

What other exercises could you try/modify/add to? Be creative and combine the skills to help your horse continue to grow!