



Module 4: Rhythm & Relaxation

Rhythm and relaxation are the bottom two tiers of the German training scale for dressage, followed by contact, which we've already discussed along with rein communication.

In the German language, the word they use for relaxation on the training scale literally translates to “letting go”- I interpret this to mean letting go of tension, both physical and mental. We need them to be relaxed in their body and their mind.

These are two very important concepts to work on with Miniature driving horses in particular, as we are asking them to balance and move a weight that routinely equals their own. They are very capable of doing so, however issues with rhythm and relaxation often are indicators that they aren't quite strong or balanced enough yet for what we're asking them to do.

Rhythm

We'll talk more about rhythm in future modules, when we talk more about improving each gait, but for now, a walk is a four beat gait, and a trot is a two beat. Rhythm is going to be individual to each horse, but what we want to be aware of is consistency in their rhythm.

Rushing, so the rhythm (and the horse) just keep getting faster and faster, is a common issue and one that that many people aren't aware is a concern. After all, who doesn't love to go zooming around with your zippy little driving horse! And you still can, but ruling out rushing due to imbalance or tension is very important.

Try It:

Start at the walk and concentrate on your horse's rhythm. Count when each foot hits the ground 1-2-3-4. Does it stay consistent, without you having to constantly adjust the speed? What about on a corner, does the rhythm speed up?

Next try the trot. Again, count the rhythm: 1-2, 1-2 and see if it stays consistent. Make note of when it speeds up. On a corner? (most likely!) On a downhill? In the “scary” corner of the arena?

If you're having trouble following the rhythm, you're not alone! It's something I really struggled with when I first started focusing on it, and it took some time to begin to get a “feel” for it.

The tool I found most helpful was rhythm beads. Rhythm beads are a necklace with bells (and usually pretty beads or stones!) that goes around your horses neck. The bells allow you – and your horse! – to hear the rhythm of each step and I've found it so helpful! They also give a consistent sound that can be reassuring for nervous

horses, especially if they're heading into a new situation to give them something familiar, and can be helpful if you're driving trails to warn wildlife that you're coming. Also they're pretty!

We'll talk about improving our rhythm consistency throughout future modules; for now, just becoming aware of your horse's rhythm, and when they tend to rush, is our goal.

Try It:

If you're not sure if you're noticing when your horse's rhythm changes, make it a little harder for them and see what happens. Start by driving a great big circle, and very gradually spiral it smaller and smaller. At some point (will vary depending on your horse's strength and balance) you'll notice that their rhythm will either speed up or slow down as they struggle with the more difficult task. When you notice a change in rhythm, that's far enough, go straight out of the circle and let them stretch. (Hint – this is a great exercise for many things, we'll be revisiting it in future modules!)

Another time you're likely to notice a change in rhythm is on a slope.

Being aware of changes in rhythm gives you more information about when your horse is struggling, making you better equipped to help them.

Relaxation

A horse that is carrying tension, either in the body or mind, isn't going to be able to work to their best advantage. A consistent rhythm can be a great indicator of relaxation, and rushing of tension.

Other signs of relaxation

A quiet mouth – a horse that constantly gnashes their teeth or plays with the bit is often showing signs of tension or anxiety. Even horses that are driving bitless can express their discomfort with a situation or task through their mouth. A quiet mouth is important – what could you change to make them more comfortable? Quieter aids? Relying less on rein cues and more on voice and breath cues? A different bit? I never use a tight noseband to try to quiet a mouth, as that is information I want them to be able to express, AND there is a direct physical connection between the horse's tongue (hyoid bone) and the hind limb ... too much restriction of their mouth affects their ability to use their hindquarters.

Lower head carriage – a relaxed head carriage is important, as horse's use their head and neck as part of their balancing system, especially at the walk. When your horse is walking, you should see the head move up and down with each step – if not, you probably have a tense horse, who is holding themselves stiffly on alert. At the trot, the horse should lift the base of their neck, but drop their head. Check reins can cause a lot of tension in the head and neck, even creating poor musculature to result in ewe neck conformation appearance. If you're using a check, ensure that it is not affecting your horse's ability to use their head and neck (ie- it's loose) and strongly consider getting rid of it while your horse learns to carry himself and build the right muscles.

Stretching through their topline – a tense horse is hollow through their back, with their head high. A relaxed horse has lifted their back and lowered their head. You can watch the backstrap – does it sit right on the horse's spine, or is there daylight showing underneath it? If this is a long term way of moving, it could take some time to retrain the muscles and close that gap up. A horse that is able to use their back well is not only going to be

relaxed, they're going to be more comfortable and more able to use their bodies effectively. Back pain is a common unsoundness, and travelling in an "upside down" or hollow manner can also result in hock pain and other issues.

Using their hind end – another symptom of tension can be that they're not able to step well under themselves with their hind feet. Instead of long, flowing strides, you get quick, choppy ones (again, back to rhythm!) Watch to see where the hind feet fall in relation to the print from the front foot. Are they stepping close to the print or is there a big gap? If there's a big gap, your horse is strung out behind themselves, whether because of current tension, or a pattern of movement developed because of tension in the past. It's okay, we can fix it!

And if anyone is thinking "but I want to drive my horse in Single Pleasure, I need his head up!" I promise, we'll get to that. But these basic building blocks are where we need to start, to make sure our horse is using their body to their best advantage, so they'll be able to perform to their potential, and have longevity as a driving horse.

Driver Tension

One of the best ways we can help our horses relax, is to make sure that we are relaxed. Especially if we've had a recent scare, or in new situations, we're bound to be nervous, and it's our job to make every effort not to transmit that to our horses.

First, remember to breathe. It sounds silly, but holding our breath is a common way we react to tension, and it's the quickest way to tell our horse that something is bothering us. Hum, sing, and remember to use breath half halts before each verbal cue. A big sigh will relax both you and your horse, and if you're still struggling, yawn! I promise, both you and your horse will be more chill after a nice big yawn.

Shrug your shoulders up to your ears, then roll them backwards and let them fall. Remember that instead of driving with your hands and relying on our strong gorilla muscles, we should be driving from our core. With elbows slightly forward but against your side, don't move your hands or arms, but instead turn your imaginary belly button flashlight; your horse stay in the light beam, where ever you point it. Use finger wiggles instead of steady pulls to ask for tighter turns.

Give lots of warning for turns or transitions – anything that's going to require a big rebalance on the part of your horse. A breath is always a good way to tell your horse that somethings coming, a finger wiggle on an inside rein to ask them to be ready for a new bend for an upcoming corner, and use verbal cues prior to rein cues.

Try It:

Check these markers of relaxation (head carriage, back position, hind leg engagement) and then try relaxing yourself. Shoulders shrugged high, rolled back. Take a deep slow breath.

Did you notice any difference in your horse's posture?