

Hands-On Horseman

Training, Gear, Health & Management Tips for Today's Horseman

Jack Brainard performs a basic Western dressage move—the shoulders in—with two students, Donna Weisberg, seen immediately behind Brainard, and Brenda Hilgenkamp.



● LESSONS FROM LEGENDS

Old is New Again

With the Western Dressage Association of America, Jack Brainard is incorporating age-old methods to reshape the way Western riders approach training.

Story by KATE BRADLEY • *Photography by* ROSS HECOX

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Close contact with the horse, using hands and feet, is essential to completing dressage-like movements, Brainard says. Riders in Western dressage use Western tack, and ride with two hands in both a snaffle and shanked bit.

JACK BRAINARD SAW A VIDEO of a Western rider doing dressage movements while he was attending the 2007 Road to the Horse competition, and in that moment the Texas horseman was captivated by the control, discipline and beauty displayed. The recently formed Western Dressage Association of America is the product of Brainard partnering with the California horseman seen in the video, Eitan Beth-Halcomy.

Brainard and Beth-Halcomy are using classic dressage movements to create a better Western horse and educate a better Western rider.

“Historically, people have been trying to improve horsemanship and looking for new ways to teach horses to make better movements for centuries,” Brainard says. “Western dressage is absolutely nothing new. We are just using Old World techniques and cues to teach our Western horse.”

Brainard is no stranger to what it takes to train a competitive, successful Western horse. He has been a reining and roping horse trainer for more than 60 years, is a multi-association-accredited judge, and is known for helping to organize the National Reining Horse Association in 1966 and the Stock Horse of Texas program in 1998.

Through the years, Brainard’s goal has remained constant—to help people ride better horses.

“Western dressage is based on not too-heavily working the horse,” he explains. “Use discretion on the amount of force you use on a horse, because the more work or force, the more apt the horse is to develop unsoundness. In Western dressage, we try to do things one step at a time and not stress the horse.”

This approach is one that has hit a nerve in the heart of grassroots riders—those who want to enjoy their horses but also ride a well-trained mount. The association’s goal is to broaden people’s horizons to let them know there is a softer, quieter way to train a horse.

“I think that Western dressage teaches you to school a horse by degrees,” Brainard explains. “You bring a horse along

in progression, starting from scratch. I've found that I've used a degree of dressage training for a long time. I started with Monte Foreman when we worked on lead changes and collection in the early days.

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The borrowed movements may seem familiar to many who have studied Western horsemanship. From the lead change to the spin, and the sidepass to the lope departure, many advanced Western movements are derived from classical dressage.

"In dressage, we want collection at all times," Brainard says. "In Western dressage, we know that collection will help us to control the movement. We know that if we control the parts of the horse, we control direction and movement."

The five principles each Western dressage student learns to master are **collection, straightness, control of the front end, control of the hind end and canter departures**. First and foremost is collection, which Brainard defines as the state of the horse in which the forehead is relieved by the load transfer to the engaged hindquarters.

1. Collection

"Collection is taking the load off the horse and carrying equal weight on the front end and back end," he says. "Collection is obtained primarily through the use of the hands and

the legs. The [rider's] legs control collection."

Brainard stresses that each horse is an individual, so obtaining collection is not a cut-and-dried formula, but something riders must learn to feel through the use of their hands and legs. One way riders connect with their horses in Western dressage is by keeping close contact with the bridle.

2. Straightness

"You absolutely must have a degree of contact with your horse," he stresses. "You want the horse to move forward in a calm and quiet manner while still in the bridle, which Western riders often find difficult. Western riders have learned to just pitch the horse slack. With the dressage-type horse, we are going to be using our aids more—hands, seat and legs."

Using these aids helps to better attain straightness with the horse—or the ability to have the horse's hind leg travel in the same plane as the front leg—and enables the rider to better control the direction of the horse's movement.

3. Control of the Front End

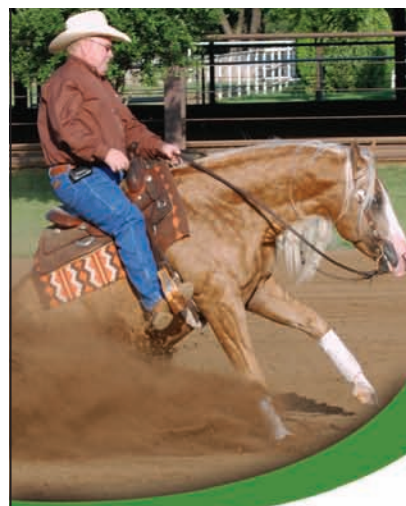
The basics of sending the horse right or left are the essence of the third principle, control of the front end.

4. Control of the Hind End

Hind-end control is easily defined, but not as easily obtained. Pushing the horse right or left using the rider's legs sounds easy, but Brainard says that controlled hindquarter movements, similar to a reining spin, are an advanced skill.

5. Canter Departures

Finally, achieving a correct canter departure is key to learning advanced movements. "A horse absolutely must have a canter departure because I am going to advance to lead changes later on," Brainard says of the last principle. "I want a horse to strike off, from any gait, in a correct lead in only one stride. The horse should not be trotting into a lope; the transition must be immediate."



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These principles are the driving force behind the Western Dressage Association of America's goal of creating a better horse that will go forward, calmly and quietly. The Western performance horse is fully capable of doing advanced classical dressage movements and does so without realizing it every day, Brainard says.

“Due to my age and being in the horse business all my life, I haven't missed a thing in the last 80 years. I have seen all kinds of trends.”

“We want a horse that can do far more than a classical dressage horse,” he emphasizes. “They ride in a square little pen, and we go to the pasture with ours. I think the future of Western dressage is unlimited.”





Finally having found a method of training that helps ensure both horse and rider longevity through training by degrees, Brainard is leading the charge to reinvigorate the grassroots rider. Though the WDAA presently does not have formal competitions, the plan is to have levels tests that benefit all riders.

“Due to my age and being in the horse business all my life, I haven't missed a thing in the last 80 years,” says Brainard, 91. “I have seen all kinds of trends. This will carry on because no one has found a better way to train a horse, and we are using training methods that have been around hundreds of years.

“If they do find a better way, someone will find out that people were doing that same thing a thousand years ago, too. Just like bridle bits, someone will come up with a ‘new’ one, but research will find that same bit used hundreds of years ago.”

For more information on the Western Dressage Association of America, visit westerndressageassociation.org.


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