

You may tölt, but you don't have to!"

By Silke Hembes

Tölt! I carefully approach it – that's why I can allow it during lessons and it may enrich them – always with suppleness as the standard! Suppleness is everything and without it nothing means anything!

Tölt is not more or less important to me than other gaits. But it is a very unstable gait with thousands of variants and therefore – in my eyes – difficult to ride on a horse that is not a natural tölter. I am also not certain whether a horse in tölt is really more collected than in other gaits. I almost think that is not the case. Of course those people who prefer to ride it, like to say so. It feels good to know or believe that one rides a horse in particularly good collection. I do see that the horse in tölt steps far towards the centre of gravity, but it also leaves the other hind leg far behind. The steps are - and that is especially visible in the back – very long. I see actually more pushing power than carrying power. In addition, the tölt has no impulsion, in the sense of striding motion, not upwards motion.

Those horses I saw tölting beautifully – and had the good fortune to ride and feel – did so in a slightly stretched position; they sought the contact to the hand. Before I experienced this myself, I would not have thought that possible at all; according to what we usually get to see.

I have ridden horses where you could not hear or feel anything of the famous 'black&decker' beat: those horses moved like magic carpets. They literally flew beneath me and took me along and did all of this silently. But those were two highly skilled and very well ridden and extremely supple, self-confident, happy horses; neither did they rush off against my hand nor did they have to be

Silke Hembes is a trainer for horses and riders with a focus on 'basics of classical dressage'. Her lessons have a practical simplicity, are without dogma but still sophisticated because she forces her students to feel, something that other types of schooling make most students systematically avoid. But everything she asks her students to do always has the horses' wellbeing in mind, and a clear communication between horse and rider. Her students come to her with horses of all breeds and from all disciplines. The Icelandic horses in her lessons vary from finely ridden pleasure horses to well trained sport horses of all levels and talents. Silke Hembes has been contemplating tölt for more than seven years and managed to keep her curiosity about and feelings for the gait and her independent perspective fresh and clear, and unimpeded by the established teachings of gaited horse training.
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forced to go forwards; thus horses that are kept and ridden well. In order to tölt these horses I did not have to support them with my hands. We walked and increased the reach until the beat shifted to a slightly more lateral direction. Up to that moment I sat in walk in the normal 9:3 rhythm of the pelvis.

Once I sensed the shift, I locked my pelvis, the horse raised itself slightly but noticeably, my hand lifted slightly with the horse and I kept my contact with the horse's mouth – but a contact maintained by the horse when I offered my hand – no pulling backwards at all. And suddenly there was tölt.

And depending on how I embraced the horse with my legs and stretched my chest and neck while slightly rounding the loin area of my back, and followed, i.e. kept contact, with my hands, the more tölt there was! WOW! It was not necessary to twist my legs backwards from the hips. That would not have been possible in any case since I rode these horses with just a bareback pad and no saddle.

THAT was genius – and only then did I know why somebody wants to tölt desperately. What we usually get to see, I don't find particularly desirable – not for the rider and not for the horse.

I then asked Uwe Brenner* whether THAT feeling I got to experience on his horses was normal and something everybody got to experience who wants to ride tölt? To me it seemed similar to accomplishing – under direction - a perfectly flowing piaffe on a perfectly balanced and schooled, very strong horse.

Many people rave about a piaffe and aspire to it. But only very, very rarely do we get to see a good piaffe and it is even rarer that we have the opportunity as riders to experience one ourselves. I count myself in this. Twice in my life I experienced a truly flying tölt and just as often – twice to be exact – a really good piaffe.

And I wish to experience both again. But the path there, the preparation, the minute details which may lead to the gift of such highlights – THAT is the goal.

And that is the concept that really matters! I prefer to not do piaffe than produce a bad caricature. I would prefer to not tölt than to force something with massive action that is just similar in beat.

But I can try to approach my goal in a dialogue with my horse with well thought out and sensitive training; to approach it with curiosity from all sides.

But – if your horse offers you tölt in the meantime and enjoys it, then accept it! As long as you

don't squeeze it out of the horse, it is allowed to move a few rounds in less than optimal carriage and enjoy moving freely!

It may even trot at wild speed with sagging back once in a while because it escaped a bit in its eagerness – as long as you are able to enjoy the speed as well and can slow down again quietly and without pulling. The horse won't break that easily!

It will break if you dictate a frame continually or over and over with force or even violence that does not allow release. That applies to any gait that did not derive from a sensible structure of balance and strength beneath the rider.

A supple and small, comfortable, slightly shifted 'piggy pace' should be less harmful for the horse than a forced, artificially stylized extreme tölt in absolute elevation and absolute tenseness instead of positive tension.

You may try anything as long as you talk to your horse about it and do it together. Do not use your horse like a string puppet under the pretext of dressage – for the wellbeing of the horse.

You may try anything and it doesn't matter if it doesn't work or goes south halfway through, as long as you don't punish your horse and scrutinize everything analytically: what just happened and why did it not work?



Before gait distribution, expression and talent, Silke Hembes sees respect for the individual and cooperation in suppleness.

And every time you notice that you and your horse are approaching even the idea of your goals, you praise extensively and enjoy the feeling.

And don't attempt to force the exercise when you notice that you are losing it. When you felt something once, you will recognize it again – be it tölt, a swinging trot, the beginnings of collection, the suppleness of your horse. Let it dissolve and try again. And when an attempt went especially well,

pack it in for the day! Do something completely different. And when it was REALLY good, stop practicing in the arena/sand ring/oval track, go for a little relaxed walk, tell your horse how wonderful it is and release it to pasture or paddock, or brush it extensively if it enjoys that. Do something nice; tell it 'thank you'!

Always compare riding to a couples dance. You don't have to be a world champion dancer to get enjoyment out of it. But it will definitely be frustrating if your partner tries to pull you into complicated patterns you are not familiar with; and potentially doing so without being really competent himself and trying to overcome this lack of skill by forcefully yanking you about! Try, be happy, enjoy yourself and be aware when your horse benefits from an exercise. Learn to recognize the point where MORE action in the sense of kilos of pulling force or pressure is required to maintain the exercise or to expand on it. THAT is the point BEFORE you need to stop. Hone your feeling of pushing and carrying power, learn to recognize when your horse really lowers its haunches and starts to lift you up – and when it starts to sag in the middle.

I believe, that a non-specialized trainer can and may look at gaited horses and tölt differently than a specialized trainer. I also believe that a different perspective could be pretty liberating for Icelandic horse riders once in a while, for example the idea of not having to tölt.

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