



## Is rising trot really rising to the challenge – And is sitting trot only for couch potatoes?

by Silke Hembes

Does rising trot make the rider lighter? Does it make trotting easier for the rider? Easier for the horse? Is rising trot necessary or does it sometimes make schooling the horse more difficult? Is it possible to use posting on one or the other diagonal in certain instances as an aid to achieve specific goals? Many questions – trainer Silke Hembes gives the answers for Tölt.Knoten:

Up front some basic facts about trot

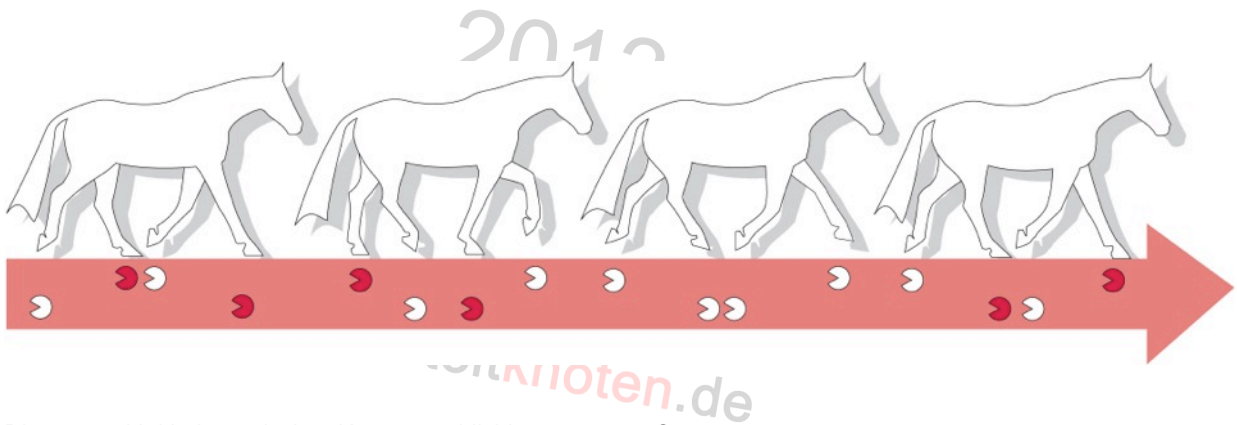


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As everybody knows trot is a two beat gait in four phases: diagonal – suspension – diagonal – suspension

These 'facts' have been taught and preached for generations and still an astonishing number of horses trots without suspension and that often not badly. For many horses an actual suspension does not happen until they extend their reach, push more from behind and they begin to 'float' within this extended gait until the next diagonal touches the ground powerfully and with far reach under the centre of gravity, thus



generating the push for the next 'flight phase'. In quiet tempo trot quite often the hind foot strikes the ground while the front foot on the same side breaks over (see photo above). At a

quiet working tempo the horse can track with its hind feet into the prints of the front feet. Photos show well whether a horse carries more with the hind quarters or travels more on the forehand: the diagonal foot that carries more is closer to the ground.

### **Collection in trot and suspension?**

When it comes to piaffe, the most collected trot in place, with a minimal or even without forward movement, equestrians in general cannot agree whether there is a phase of suspension, whether there ought to be, whether there should be or not at all. In passage – the so called trot of impression - things are clearer and the phase of suspension is readily visible. Suspension is supposed to be more pronounced via a more forceful springing into it, but more upwards with more carrying force, and not extended via more pushing forwards.

### **What does the type of a horse's pastern say about the trot?**

It is often more difficult to sit the trot of horses with shorter pasterns; the shorter the pasterns the smaller the amount of impulsion that can be absorbed. The longer the pasterns the more prone to injury this whole part of the horse's anatomy becomes. A horse like that is easy to sit for the rider though! Examples of horses with such longer pasterns are often found among the more hot blooded breeds, such as Saddlehorses or Arabians. A short and steep pastern is common in powerful breeds that also have a lot of pulling strength, such as Haflingers, Freibergers, Friesians or Welsh Cobs. In Icelandic horses the length and type of pasterns varies immensely according to type; in the future do pay attention whether a horse that is very comfortable to sit may not also have longer pasterns than a horse which feels 'harder'.

### **Back activity during trot**

Another reason why a horse might be soft and easier to sit or not is how actively it uses its back. A horse's back does not just move up and down during trot, but does it alternately from side to side. This fact makes it somewhat more sophisticated to smoothly sit a swinging trot. If a horse is ridden well and swings well, with a motion that moves powerfully from back to front through its whole body, an experienced rider can sit this well: the horse carries him along with the movement. A beginner is usually somewhat overwhelmed by such movement. He gets tossed upwards in the saddle and ends up with clamping knees and a hollow back. If his body awareness is good and he has a good sense of movement, he will tilt his pelvis and cushion the horse's up and down movements with a more or less rounded lumbar spine. This does not

look particularly elegant but is quite comfortable, especially when riding bareback.

### “Leg movers” in trot?

A horse that does not swing in its back is relatively comfortable if it trots quietly. The rider does not get overly pommeeled since the horse just remains rigid in its back. Only the horse’s limbs work to move it forward in trot; the back really does not move at all. The diagonal feet can be quite irregular and there usually is no phase of suspension. When one of these ‘leg movers’ holds its head prettily on or



Clearly visible the broken diagonal in a completely tense horse.

just behind the vertical, the Rider gets to freeze in beauty and win many a ribbon. These days in order to win a horse does not necessarily have to have an active hind quarter during an extended trot, and even the beat does not have to be completely regular at all times. Walk seems to automatically get lost somewhere on the way to the Grand Prix or other ‘high class competitions’. The front feet though have to ‘strut’ spectacularly and overall we’re o.k. when the halt and greet only lasts for half a second. For more information about the term ‘leg mover’, please read Dr. Gerd Heuschmann’s highly recommendable book “Tug of War”.

### Why is it customary to begin by learning how to post the trot?

For most riding coaches it is simply easier to yell at their student, ‘up – down – up – down’ instead of explaining how he can find his way into the rhythm of the alternately up-swinging motion of the horse’s back, and getting to sit smoothly without disturbing the horse. One should not even blame many of these coaches. When we look at the FN guidelines for riding and driving and read the instructions for sitting trot, which to this day refer to Wilhelm Müseler, we find them described as a forward-backward-tilting-raising motion of the pelvis. This motion is uncomfortable and difficult to perform, especially for a beginner and the beginning attempts are not nice for the horse. A coach will therefore often prefer to teach the student the posting trot first, ‘up – down – up – down’, until he has that somewhat figured out. Compared to the ‘marriage movement’ supported in the FN guidelines the mindless posting trot is the gentler alternative for horse and rider!

### So how does one sit the trot correctly?

Contrary to the so called Müseler seat that is still preached in the guidelines, the German Equestrian Federation (FN) has been discovering educators like Prof. Eckart Meyners during the last years. He was one of the first specialized kinesiologists to explain easily and clearly how a rider can find into the alternatingly lowering and rising movement of the horse's back when his pelvis is relaxed and erect. Feldenkrais already used a clock face to illustrate directions within a body's movements. The erect pelvis moves on a line between '9 and 3' during trot, alternating between rising and falling. If the rider manages to let the horse carry him along in this motion while keeping his upper body erect and his seat relaxed, he can sit the trot!



Here you can see clearly that the rider's left foot is lower than the right while the horse's left leg is lifted. The rider has a relaxed seat and gets carried in a left right motion by the horse.

### The supple rider

The movement that reaches from the horse to the rider via the interface 'seat' is accepted by the rider and flows supply through his body. But where does it go? There are several possibilities and methods to let a horse's movements and impulse travel through the rider; either supply flowing and in harmony with the horse, or disrupting the rhythm and against the motion of the horse.

### Low heels

When the horse's back dips and rises in an alternating rhythm the rider's heels sink automatically, following the horse's lowering pelvis. The whole foot would normally go down but since the toes are held by the stirrups only the heels will actually dip alternatingly, softly from the ankle joint. When the length of the stirrup leathers is properly adjusted the toes remain relaxed, the feet rest in the stirrups and allow the heels to softly sink in an alternating rhythm.



### **When the stirrups are too long**

When the stirrup leathers are too long the rider presses the balls of his feet down and his toes 'reach' for the stirrups or – while spreading wide – try to fixate them (photo to the right).

Even when this is successful the heels can no longer dip down because the balls of the feet push down, thus moving the heels upwards and locking the ankle joint.



### **Flailing legs**

They are the least of all problems. When the horse's motion that moves the rider's body from his buttocks and up, cannot leave the rider again, his body will start to move up independently and no longer flows in harmony with the horse.

Both bodies then start to operate against each other; fluidity and balance are lost. If the rider's ankle joint is fixed the motion can no longer flow through the low heels or calves that touch the horse's barrel in rhythm with the horse's gait and the lower legs begin to move.

Fluttering legs are a visible sign of a rider's stiffness.

### **The flapping seat**

If the seat is already stiff above the ankle joint, because the rider's bottom is tense, the result is a 'flapping' or 'bouncing' seat.

This resulted in the charming expression of 'pepper crusher' given to some dressage riders at shows.

This is even more interesting since one would think that riders ready for shows are also able to sit. And they can: in very deep saddles with thick kneerolls.

If the rider manages to sit with the aid of such a saddle, despite his tense bottom, without bouncing in the saddle or flapping his lower legs, the stiff motion will find another route.

Clamping knees are useful in two point position and jumping and helpful in a crisis situation.

When the horse is relaxed and supple though the same is a seat fault!



A rider who is stabilized by the saddle, with a pushing seat and clamping knees,

### The pecking chicken

I repeat: if the rider does not accept the horse's movements correctly at the interface between the two of them, there will be no harmonious mutual movement. If the rider does not accept the movement as supply and relaxed as the horse, there will be dissonance in the motion. If the rider manages, not to let this stiffness out via his leg or seat, the motion will travel along his spine upwards and he will start to bob his head: either by rhythmically lifting and lowering his neck, and bringing the chin closer to or further away from the neck or by jutting the chin forward and back.

Since the 80s more and more horses with incredible trot potential began to appear in the show rings. But the rider has to be able to sit this amount of impulsion. At that time riding stables still taught a good seat by having the rider practice on the longe line to sit in a way as to make it look as close as possible to the ideal described in the primers.

Many a student was talented enough to find the motion of the horse, even while sitting in an artificially tense position, trying to keep his heels low and his shoulders back. If practice on the longe line lasts long enough a student has the chance to eventually acquire a passable seat. If the student's body awareness is not quite as well developed, a higher base tension remains which allows the rider to remain seated in the prescribed position despite the horse's bounces. This was mainly achieved with a tightly pressed knee - which explains why the 'closed knee' was deemed so important – and a pushing seat which is only possible if the rider takes his upper body back and pushes his sit bones, aided by his own body weight, via pressure to the horse's lumbar spine and into the saddle.

This used to be interpreted as using 'back aids'. Since the rider thus sits against the motion of

the horse and not in it, it will have consequences depending on the horse's personality: a laid back horse will slow down, a hot horse will shoot forward. Pressure and tension that are generated at the horse-rider interface have to be released somewhere. Therefore, 'fad riding' developed at some school barns: suddenly a lot of horses had so much impulsion that the rider had to lean back and nod his head.

And since it is desirable to have a horse with a lot of impulsion, it became 'en vogue' for the rider to nod his head. On the other hand, this way the horse was saved from the worst possible seat fault, resulting from a completely tense rider.

### **The hammering hands**

If the rider tenses his whole body to remain 'still' on the horse, he also blocks his hands.

The body is rigid and so are the hands. The horse moves, the hands do not. A stiff hand is always a hard hand that jerks the reins in the horse's mouth and against the fluid motion of its body. Unfortunately, this happens when the rider tries to keep his hands 'still'.

When you look at all of these issues that can occur when a novice rider who is not all that balanced yet, tries to sit the trot, posting the trot seems – for the horse's benefit if nothing else - a better alternative.

Via standing up and sitting down while posting the trot the horse's impulsion can be readily absorbed by the rider if there is a lot of impulsion.

### **Trot without impulsion**

Trot without impulsion at slow speed is – as mentioned before – quite comfortable for the rider. He sits reasonably quiet on a tight back.

As the speed increases though the tight back turns into a launching pad since the motion is no longer fluid, but rather bumpy. There are many leg movers with weak backs that still accommodate the rider o.k.; as they speed up they push backwards and their backs sag.

That is quite easy to sit. The horse's back does not swing but sags a little bit at the end of each phase of suspension. What is difficult to avoid for the rider here is the horse moving above the bit during the movement while its back sags or is even inverted and its neck pushed forward in order to find its balance. This is the logical frame for a horse ridden in this manner: Cause and effect 1:1. The 'lifting', the logical effect of a leg moving horse is then often corrected by the attempt to position the horse deeply.

Voilà, the rollkur, or hyperflexion or ldr (low-deep-round), however you would like to call it.

## How do you avoid all of these problems?



Pommel 12 – cantle 6. By dividing the saddle according to the face of a clock we can clearly describe where the horse moves us.

The first order of business has to be the aforementioned seat training which allows the rider to find his seat 'into' the horse's movements; and this before coach and student manage to escape into posting trot and before the student learns to sit the trot properly. Once the inexperienced rider who therefore does not have a very relaxed seat, has learned to avoid the concussions of the trot by posting, it becomes that much more difficult to find back to sitting within the horse's trot movement. Every body creates muscle memory with practice. False movements that feel good are of course saved faster than correct movements that require intense training. Once a memory is

'hard wired' because it works well it is not easy to modify, expand or to replace it.

The body of a rider, who learned first to post the trot, will try to avoid the concussions inherent in seated trot by pressure on the stirrups, clenching the knees and lifting the seat from the saddle; and this without conscious desire from the rider. In order to correct a movement pattern or to exchange it for a new one, many, many repetitions are necessary to 'train' the body. 'The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak'.

A riding student who cannot yet sit the trot will try to translate his coach's



Properly seated trot – left picture: 9 o'clock in trot – right picture: 3 o'clock in trot.



request or command to 'sit' by attempting to fixate his body in the saddle more and more and will accordingly only tense up more and more. When a student learns in walk how to find into the swinging motion of the hind end motor and to be carried along by the horse, he has the chance in trot to 'act' actively, instead of passively 'reacting' to the concussions of trot by clamping down tight. The symmetrically swinging motion of the hind quarter occurs in walk in the same rhythm as it does in trot. If a rider had the opportunity to feel in walk the alternate rising and lowering of the horse's back, he has no need to 'hunt' for it somehow in trot. A movement pattern the body could learn quietly in walk has a better chance to be recallable in trot. Especially, if the riders knows exactly what is happening in his body and why!

### **So, why post the trot in the first place?**

Principally speaking, posting trot is not really necessary. We have also not been doing it for very long. When fox hunting in England began to more and more favour light horses with large reach since they were faster than the baroque horses so popular before as fun rides at court, trotting became of course more and more uncomfortable. The rider's core has to be able to create a lot of positive tension and his seat has to remain relaxed, in order for him to sit an extended trot with significant suspension well for a period of time. Not that it would be impossible but it requires a well trained and conditioned rider body, which is rare enough even these days. Even in the past not everybody who enjoyed going fox hunting was that well trained. For that reason alone – the rider's comfort – rising trot was developed. And of course there is no question that a horse in forward going trot would prefer a posting rider who cushions potential seat weaknesses with knee and ankle in the stirrups, to one who drops into its back with every step. Therefore the rising trot can be a comfortable alternative and add variety for the horse as well as the rider, if the horse trots with a clean beat and the rider posts the trot consciously and in balance.

### **When the rider rises 'lightly' in trot, is he really lighter during the phases of the gait?**

The rising trot, due to its origins also known as English trot, does of course nothing to change the rider's weight. A rider weighing 70 kg burdens his horse with 70 kg at all times, no matter whether he sits straight, stands upright or does a headstand. The weight on the horse remains the same, but is not always felt at the same location. Depending on the level of collection the same 70 kg may be carried more by the forehead or less so. The more bend in all joints of the hind end and relative elevation in the horse, the more weight is carried by the hind end.

Philippe Karl shows this clearly with graphics in his book 'Twisted Truths of Modern Dressage'. A rider who smartly posts the trot within the movement will not cause balance problems for his horse and his weight will feel relatively constant.

A rider on the other hand, who gets behind the movement and rises too late, will right away be thrown back down into the saddle by the horse's motion. This may be compared to a surfer who does not quite catch the crest of a wave to surf it but is too late and 'drops down' behind it. The physical forces that let such a clumsy rider land thusly in the saddle will definitely be stronger than the live weight of 70 kg would indicate, and will be very uncomfortable for the horse.

A rider who rises too soon and gets in front of the movement, will also be uncomfortable for the horse since he will drive it out of balance and onto its forehand. The horse will try to balance itself again and will try to run faster to get back underneath the burden. This may be compared to a person carrying another on his shoulders who leans forward and then leans back. The carrier – in order not to fall - has to move into the direction of his burden's movements - that is back under the actual carried weight - and that quickly. A horse with four legs is obviously better suited to compensate this imbalance than a person with just two legs. But still the comparison explains why our seat directly influences the horse's relative elevation and the distribution of weight between fore- and hind end. The examples above illustrate already how the rider can use the nuances in timing and movement of the up and down during the rising trot and influence the horse's speed as well as its frame of movement.

### **Motivate lazy horses to more impulsion**

When I ride a healthy horse that seems a bit slow today, and I want to motivate it to be more forward, I can rise energetically and early when the inner hind foot breaks over and thus support that leg (and its diagonal front counterpart) to swing forward with more energy. The sitting that follows happens only very briefly and lightly. The saddle is only touched momentarily – consciously not with the full rider weight – and then I already concentrate fully on a joyous rising up with an inner image of expanse and the idea of forwardness. The sitting down is here just a peripheral idea which allows the next lifting up with the idea of 'forward!'. Your joyous and fresh idea of forward will transfer to your horse.

Be sure though to not rise before the relevant hoof breaks over since that would throw you as the rider backwards as soon as the foot lifts off. In order to judge correctly when to rise up exactly, the rider has to be fully aware where each foot is at any time. Use this kind of

motivation only briefly in the beginning and then go back to a quiet trot rhythm by going along with the horse's natural rhythm for your posting. All this can be learned if I take the time in walk to feel what happens underneath me and to look at gait sequences and movements on paper as well as in nature.

There are of course very talented riders who do not need to do that. They feel all of what I am describing without having to analyse it. Most people though – and I count myself among them – have to learn it slowly piece by piece: by watching, feeling, listening and thinking it through.

### **Calm down hot horses**

A rushing horse can also be influenced actively in its speed via the way the rider posts the trot. If I prefer a calmer tempo to the one offered by my horse, I concentrate on the sitting down part and minimize the rising phase. This means I don't rise until the horse moves me up with the hind end motor and do it as shallowly as possible and sit down again as quickly as possible. The rising part of this posting trot is therefore limited to a short lifting of the seat out of the saddle, followed by an immediate sitting down. The rider's concentration is fully focused on the sitting phase. It is stretched as much as possible and will eventually lead to the horse collecting itself more and more. In the beginning it can take longer until the horse reduces its tempo but after a while it will react faster and faster. Use a lot of praise from the beginning, even if the horse only attempts to comply with your wishes.

### **Suspension phase or support phase?**

In order to use the rising trot actively in either an invigorating or calming fashion, I have to be clear on the phase I want to influence. Before I can use the posting trot as an aid I have to know where either of my horse's hind legs is at any given moment and what it does to me. While sitting the trot and counting the beat I always used to put the stress on the hind leg that was swinging forward at a given time since the back goes down on that side and the rider gets 'deposited' there if he is in the movement. On the left hand and during the support phase the horse lifts itself forward via the left hind leg as support. The rider is placed to the right since the right hind leg swings forward at that moment and therefore sits at 3 o'clock when the horse is on the left hand and the left hind leg is in the support phase. Next the diagonal left hind and right front begin to swing forward into the suspension phase and the rider lets his right hip swing along forward and upward, by rising with the belly button towards 12 o'clock, instead of sitting at 9 o'clock.

### The rider posts on the 'inner hind leg'

The focus for the rising has to be on that side of the rider's pelvis that is being lifted and not – as is the case in sitting trot – on the side that goes down. Please don't panic but the biomechanics of the interaction between horse and rider in trot are just this simple and this complex at the same time. Once the rider is clearly aware of this flow of movements he never has to look again to see the outer front leg swing forward to know that he has to rise now in order to trot on the inner hind leg. The learning process may of course also be reversed: watching, doing, feeling, and then analysing.

### Posting trot on the inner or outer hind leg

The traditional posting trot on the inner hind leg when done on curved lines, helps to activate and train the carrying capacity of the inner hind leg; a valid argument for effective training. Accordingly, it became standard practice in Germany to post on the inner hind leg.

Other nations trot on the outer hind leg along curved lines, with the argument that the inner hind leg already carries more due to the curved lines and that it makes more sense to burden the outer hind leg equally and in balance. This also sounds logical! Both arguments are justified and it follows that the thinking rider should use both methods. Therefore, if I want to specifically train one of the hind legs, for example to straighten the horse or to strengthen one side during a rehabilitation phase, I can do this by consciously posting on that leg, no matter whether it is on the inside or on the outside at any given time.



Posting on the left inner hind leg

On the other hand it also allows me to favour a weaker leg when rehabilitation after an injury may not have progressed enough yet for strength training.



### Posting trot as canter aid

When I ride a horse that has a problem with a right lead canter depart – or that cannot even consider that such a thing might be possible – it can be very helpful to trot this horse on the left diagonal going to the right. If I do this on large sweeping lines, rising energetically and large, and sitting down consciously on the outside hind, say at 7 o'clock, I can communicate to the horse the idea of going forward and to increasingly use its outside hind leg. In other words, I 'wind up the spring' that is supposed to let the horse jump into the correct canter lead. According to the horse's relative elevation its inner shoulder will lift significantly more the more bend there is in the hocks of the outer hind leg during trot.



Open UP and allow the canter jump

Every rider of gaited horses knows this feeling in trot: it is the beginning of a roll! In this case the rider uses it specifically. When I feel the horse sit on the outside and the inner shoulder lifts clearly I offer the horse a gait change to canter by opening my inner hand forward with my outer leg in a supporting passive roll. If the gait change happens I leave it be and praise the horse. If it does not happen, this specific way to trot trains the outer hind leg. If there is

no canter depart I change my seat back and calm down the trot.

This way to prepare the canter is not widely used but is very logical. It saves horse and rider with canter issues the stress of sliding into a pattern of clamping and pushing seat or horses running away in trot or jumping into disunited canter instead of a quietly flowing canter depart. Finding the canter from posting trot is a matter of practice and the only reason people have difficulties in the beginning is the fact that they never did it before and were not even allowed to do it.

Try it! It is an incredibly interesting experience that presents us as riders with many new insights into our flexibility, its limits and the relaxation, flexibility and acceptance of our horses.

**Is posting trot useful for gaited horses in order to find the trot and to stabilize it?**



Supple seat – supple horse

It is often difficult for riders of gaited horses to use posting trot in an effective manner since they often lack properly working diagonals in trot or a distinct suspension. The same is true for some three gaited horses as well. Effective manner in the sense of usefulness for horse and rider.

Young horses of other non-gaited breeds are often brought off balance by being started with posting trot. A rider has to be very supple and sensitive in his seat to aid the horse actively by riding. Especially in the beginning less is often more and it is more important to not interfere with the horse's balance than to achieve a lot quickly.

I always consider it sensible to first learn sitting trot and then use the posting trot as a conscious aid. If I skip the sitting trot I deprive myself of the chance to find into my horse's movement. Only a rider who can sit finely can also trot his horse lightly and make posting trot comfortable for them both.

A rider can only help a horse that does not have a clear two beat trot by posting if he knows exactly when and how to intensify the impulsion. If the rider is not quite sure how to exactly do that, it would make more sense in the beginning to find balance in the horse's naturally offered gait (or broken two beat) than to try to manipulate a beat that is not yet stable.



Maximum support for impulsion by exactly metered positive tension during the rising phase.

More about Silke Hembes [www.silke-hembes.de](http://www.silke-hembes.de)

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