

The Three “R’s” of Basic Training:
Relaxed, Rhythmic and Round.

Relaxed, rhythmic and contact are typically the first three ingredients of training a horse mentioned in the training scale utilized by dressage riders. I remember when this training scale was first introduced to me: I thought, “How will I ever remember any of this?” So to simplify, I came up with calling the third item on the Training Scale “round” instead of using the word contact. Thus, I call the three basic training ideas relaxed, rhythmic and round. By using three words that begin with the same letter R, I think it is easier to remember. Just like, the three R’s of our childhood - a**R**ithmetic, **R**eading and w**R**iting. (Talk about confusing us kids back then?) However, using the three R’s to remember the first three ingredients of basic training to train a horse makes it so much easier.

The first, *relaxation*, just makes sense because you cannot train a horse that is not relaxed. You will never have the horse’s mind if he is not relaxed: To train the horse you will need his attention in order to gain access to his body. If your horse is not relaxed, turn him out, change the environment, do whatever is needed to get his mind relaxed so you can have his attention and thus, his body. And/or vice versa, get his body relaxed so you can then access his mind! There is no doubt the two, body and mind, work in unison.

The next step is *rhythm*. Establishing rhythm, as far as training a horse, could take months to develop. You may need to start on the lunge line, or you may already be under saddle. One minute your horse is rushing down the long side, the next minute it is relaxed on a circle. The goal is to have the horse keep the same rhythm throughout his training session: a *relaxed* rhythm. As a rider, you want to be in the position that you ask the horse to go forward, not ask the horse to slow down at every corner. “Rhythm, rhythm, rhythm.” is one of the mantra’s during each training session at Coventry.

Of course, being capable of establishing rhythm requires skill and equestrian tact from the rider. It is a fine balancing act to drive the horse and receive his forward motion through the seat and between the leg and hand that results in a relaxed rhythm. So, if you are a ‘developing’ rider, it is best if you let a ‘finished’ rider establish good basics with your horse. Otherwise, hopefully you already have a horse with good basic training.

Once you have a relaxed rhythm where you ask the horse to go forward and it works responsively between your aids, you can then go to the next step which is Contact or, as I say going *Round*. The word contact is typically referred to as contact with the bit. However, a rider does have other areas of contact, such as the leg in contact with the horse's barrel and the seat being in contact with the horse's back. Such is the term three points of contact seat, leg and hand. In jumping position the 'two points' of contact are leg and hand. Nevertheless, the term contact in this article refers to contact with the bit.

So now with a horse that is *relaxed*, and has found his *rhythm*, the rider can now establish contact or *round*. It only makes sense that relaxation and rhythm come first, because 1. if the horse is not relaxed you cannot train him, and 2. the rhythm has to be established before you can have roundness. Just think, if you establish contact with the reins on the horse's mouth before you have rhythm then the horse will just interpret it as a signal to whoa or slow down. If you have a good steady rhythm first then you can work on establishing that roundness without interrupting the rhythm.

A horse that is round and on contact can be interpreted many ways. A round horse is one that steps under the rider's seat, 'coming through,' utilizing its whole top line to arch and round not just its neck but its back from the tail to the poll into the contact with the rein. A horse is to stretch and reach into the the contact. The horse is to move off the rider's leg, come through the rider's seat and arrive at the contact where the reins then guide and harness the forward energy by not interfering with any rhythm as the horse seeks contact. When all this is done harmoniously the horse becomes round and on contact.

Relaxed, rhythmic and round, are the three R's to basic training. **Writing** about it is easier than actually training a horse, no doubt! But, having an intellectual concept of what you are trying to achieve to train a horse helps with the actual development of basic training. As one progresses with training, after a horse is Relaxed, Rhythmic and Round, the next steps are to develop Straightness, then Impulsion onto the pinnacle of all dressage training Collection. Collection, of course, is the culmination of all facets of training coming together over a period of time. As the horse develops in strength and is correctly muscled in order to progress he is at all times remaining Relaxed, Rhythmic and Round.

three photos

1 - relaxed attention rider on the ground horses ears to rider

2 -rhythm not yet round but tracking up

3 - round all three and tracking up

to And, where do we create all this basic training? On the “Training Wheel of Gymnastic Training,” or better known as the twenty meter circle. Schooling your horse on the Training Wheel of Training is the place to establish ‘Positioning,’ ‘Bending’ and more rhythm, rhythm, rhythm while tracking up or, as I like to call it, “whole horse riding!”