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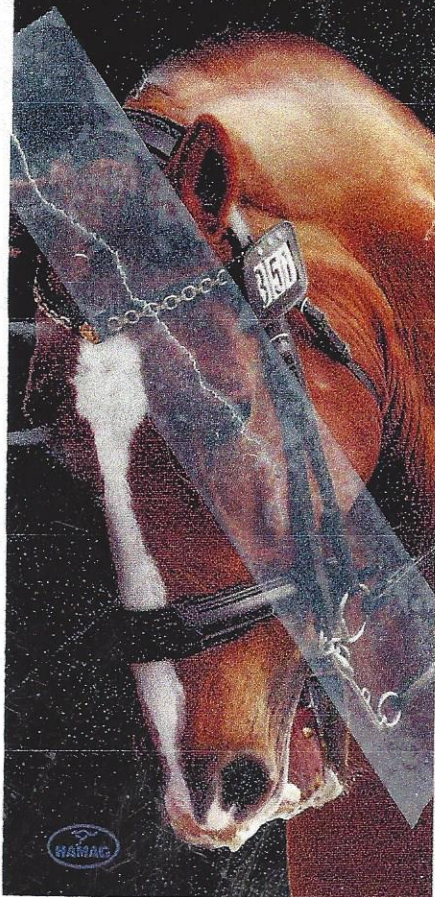
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Q&A

## WHAT I WISH I'D KNOWN THEN

### Understanding Connection

BY FRAN DEARING

Courtesy, Kelly McChesney



As instructors, we all have our favorite analogies to help our students understand connection—when the horse's hind legs are

connected, from his hocks through his body and right into your hands. Mine is to compare it to wearing a pair of running shoes. We've all worn sneakers with loose laces that need to be retied. Although the shoe might not come off your foot when you walk, it is definitely not the feel you want. Now take that same shoe and tighten and snug the laces so that it isn't just on your foot; it's part of your foot. I can't think of a clearer analogy to describe connection. It's an awesome feeling for the rider. You feel weight in your reins in an elastic sense. And, as with any euphoric moment, you don't know it until you feel it, but then it's undeniable.

Sometimes confusion may occur when, rather than achieving correct connection, the horse can be in a false flexion—nose down and evading the contact. Mind you, it may be a seemingly obedient horse, but in actuality he is floating and hovering behind the contact. Your false-flexioned horse may not be resistant but is nevertheless dishonest about true contact. I call these horses "pleasantly disobedient."

To get the pleasantly disobedient horse transformed requires the rider to understand that the energy of the horse must come from back to front. Too often a horse may cheat by initiating his gaits with his front legs. This can happen in any

transition and is particularly noticeable going into the canter. That is, the front end of the horse seems to start the locomotion and then the back end follows. The way to easily identify this scenario is to recognize when the horse gets visibly long in his body. Remember, the goal is always to have a shorter body with longer-reaching neck, not short neck and long body. He pulls to have more room to do these transitions, and by becoming longer his balance is lost. Any hope of true connection (the product of energy and balance) is gone.

Furthermore, getting your pleasantly (or otherwise) disobedient horse to go back-to-front to establish proper connection cannot happen when he is not truly in front of your leg. Asking him to move off this way would be like squeezing a tube of toothpaste in the middle. (Remember, your leg is in the middle of the horse). When you squeeze the toothpaste tube, some goes out the front but some also goes toward the back. With your horse, it's similar. If you use your legs on a horse that is not in front of your leg, you'll get his front legs going, but he'll drag the back ones.

There are many techniques to get the back end of your horse activated and bring the energy into your hands. Therein is the basis of connection. The challenge for the rider should be to discreetly but consistently monitor the horse's way of going. Striving for that honest contact gives way to suppleness and balance, which is every dressage rider's goal.

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