

# Back to the *future*

Stuck in a training rut? **Vikki Hayton** has all the tools you need to escape via drilling the basics

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**J**ENNY FOLMAN and her talented horse Gazdag are an inspiration to anyone who is struggling to reach their dressage goals. Not so long ago they were stuck at medium level, trying and failing to get to grips with flying changes, but Jenny isn't one to give up. She persevered for months and, with the help of a good trainer (step forward Vikki Hayton), she not only mastered changes, but went on to climb through the ranks.

The pair now competes at grand prix, an amazing achievement in itself, but still drill the basics in their training — and this, says Vikki, is what we all should be doing, whatever level we ride at.



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## MEET THE TRAINER



**VIKKI HAYTON** runs College Farm Equestrian Centre and heads up Markham Dressage.

She is a BHS instructor and examiner, a UKCC Level 3 accredited dressage coach, a British Dressage (BD) judge and Northern Region BD chairman. Visit [collegefarm.com](http://collegefarm.com)

## MEET THE RIDER & HORSE



**JENNY FOLMAN**

has owned 15hh for 14 years, having purchased him as an unbacked youngster. The pair competes at grand prix level.

Gazdag finds advanced moves a breeze, but struggles with some of the more basic transition work

# SCHOOLING *solutions*

### WHAT YOU'LL LEARN:

- Easy ways to boost your horse's suppleness and rhythm
- Why it's essential to hone the basics, whatever your level
- Expert tips to help you perfect your transitions

Use your warm up to assess how your horse is thinking and feeling

### TOP TIP

It's your job to encourage your horse 'up and out' in his neck, right from the moment you hop on. "In front of the vertical is OK in the warming up process," explains Vikki. "If he's behind the vertical he'll leave his quarters dragging — and you can't go anywhere from here."

## Exercise 1 SMOOTHLY DOES IT

At 18, Gazdag is still in fantastic shape, but, as Vikki explains, a good warm up is important for all horses, whatever their age. It gives them time to loosen up, and it gives you a chance to assess how your horse is thinking and feeling — especially if he's older and starting to stiffen up a little.

### How to ride it

- 1 Start by going smoothly up and down through the gears.
- 2 Find the pace, or paces, in which your horse finds it easiest to warm up.
- 3 Energetic types might warm up better in trot; others will prefer time in walk.
- 4 Your warm up is individual, so develop a loose plan that suits your horse and can be tweaked on the day depending on how you're feeling and where you are.
- 5 Whatever the pace, focus on staying in a nice even rhythm.
- 6 Use this time to test your horse's reaction to your aids: even though he's warming up, he should still be reactive and forward.
- 7 This is a good time to focus on your position, too. Are you sitting in balance, with an even weight through both reins and both stirrups?
- 8 Finally, a quick check of where your head's at, quite literally...
- 9 Are you looking up through your horse's ears? If you're looking down, he will assume your focus is on him — and he'll check for danger. He's looking to you for guidance, so look up, breathe and take control.

Lots of canter-to-trot transitions on a circle are a real test of a horse's balance







Train your horse to wait so that you can position him correctly for a change of gear

## EXERCISE 2

### A CHANGE OF GEAR

Once Jenny and Gazdag are warmed up and ready to go, Vikki is keen to start work on an area the pair tend to struggle with. Changes, be they simple or flying, have always been a sticking point for them. And, as Vikki explains, this is a great example of why it's vital to drill the basics and focus on the Scales of Training in every schooling session, whether you're competing at grand prix or teaching a young horse to move smoothly from walk to trot.

#### How to ride it

- 1 To start, ride a 20m circle.
- 2 Circle in walk, trot and canter, on both reins.
- 3 Next, ride a canter to trot transition, still on a circle.
- 4 Ride a few steps of trot, then move up to canter again.
- 5 Repeat this exercise on both reins, but aim for quality not quantity: one great transition is more beneficial than five not so great ones.

## TRAINING KNOW-HOW

Correct schooling starts with the all-important Scales of Training, as Vikki explains. Rhythm, suppleness, contact, impulsion, straightness and collection... they should be at the heart of all you do. If you need a reminder, head to [yourhorse.co.uk](http://yourhorse.co.uk) and search 'Scales of Training'.

- 6 Really concentrate on your canter-trot transition, as this is a move through which many horses struggle to stay in balance.
- 7 Your progressive transitions (from one gait to the next) must be accurate and correct before you progress to indirect changes (across a gait, for example from walk to canter), or changes within the pace.
- 8 Focus on your rhythm and aim to keep your horse soft through his neck throughout each transition. Ensure that your elbows stay 'elastic' as you need to allow your horse to come up and out so there's more space between his jaw and his neck.
- 10 Keep an even weight in each rein.

## Exercise 3

### TROUBLESHOOTING

Gazdag is talented, but he's typical of many athletic horses in finding some advanced moves super easy and the simpler stuff more tricky. He's clever and masks the bits he can't do so well — so Vikki has taken him back to basics today. She wants to see him crack those transitions and stay in a rhythm through the gears.

#### How to ride it

- 1 Be very focused and positive in your attitude and make sure that you have the basics sussed.
- 2 Keep those Scales of Training in mind: whether you're doing a walk-to-trot transition or a flying change, your horse must be supple, straight and in a good rhythm.
- 3 It's very important to train your horse to wait, so that you can position him correctly in order to be able to move up or down the gears correctly.
- 4 If he's sharp and the type who constantly anticipates the next gear change he's likely to fall out of rhythm, so mix things up to keep him guessing.
- 5 Work to your horse's strengths and try to avoid getting into a battle.
- 7 If you feel him getting anxious, let him stretch, relax and reset.

## Exercise 4 BALANCE IS KEY

If, like Gazdag, your horse has bags of ability but struggles to stay consistently balanced through transitions, some simple lateral work exercises can really help.

### How to ride it

- 1** If you feel that your horse is unbalanced, especially through a downward transition, ask for a few steps of shoulder-fore. This will place his hind leg underneath him more, setting him up better for a downward gear change.
- 2** In shoulder-fore your horse will bring his shoulders in off the track while his quarters stay where they are. The angle is about half of what you'd see in shoulder-in.
- 3** To ride it, put a little more weight into your inside leg to encourage bend, keeping your outside leg at the girth to prevent your horse's quarters swinging out.
- 4** Your outside rein supports your horse's outside shoulder. Think 'straight' on this rein and hold it a fraction lower than your inside rein.
- 5** Ask for a little flexion on your inside rein to keep your horse soft through his neck.
- 6** Keep your shoulders parallel with your horse's — you should be in shoulder-fore too, but watch you don't get pushed to the outside of your saddle.

## ALL CHANGE

A simple change in canter — where you canter, walk a few steps, then canter again — will encourage your horse to collect and improve his engagement. We'll have more on this next issue in part two of Jenny's lesson. In the meantime, you can watch a video explaining it at [yourhorse.co.uk](http://yourhorse.co.uk)

In shoulder-fore your horse brings his shoulders in off the track while his quarters stay where they are



Keep every training session positive — and end with a Polo!

## Lessons learned



Vikki says...

- \* Don't despair if your horse struggles with a particular move or exercise. It can take months to work through a problem area, but with perseverance, patience and the help of a good trainer you will get there.
- \* Swot up on the Scales of Training and have these in mind every time you ride.
- \* Remember the basics and make sure that you're getting these right, at whatever level you're training.
- \* Train your horse to wait so that you can set him up for each transition. If he tries to anticipate what you're going to ask for next, mix things up and take him by surprise.
- \* Keep every training session positive and avoid battles. If you feel that your horse getting worried or tense, take things down a notch and let him relax, stretch and reset, then ask again once he's calm. 🐾