

There Is No Tolt in Dressage *But There Is Dressage in Tolt*

By Pamela S. Nolf and Maike Liekweg

Have you ever faced this situation with your Icelandic horse, or any horse for that matter? Riding down the trail, you ask for a side pass (or leg yield for the English riders) and the horse moves beautifully. Fifteen minutes later you ask for the side pass again with what you think are the same aids and the horse doesn't move off your leg or moves in a different direction. So you thump harder with your leg and the results just get worse. So why do your aids work one time and don't work the next?

The effectiveness of your aids have a lot to do with timing and coordination (for example, did you signal that leg yield when the horse was picking up his feet so he had time to react or when the foot was already on the ground and it was too late).

“The horse is a dynamic surface, which rotates and swivels side-to-side and forward and back as the horse moves. Biomechanical research as well as good old experience, shows that the horse's body and the rider's body move in conjunction with each other. As your horse's hip lowers, your same hip also lowers, and not just forward and back, but side-to-side and up and down as well.” (Anderson, p. 18) Check your knowledge on cuing your horse with some questions adapted from the same article. (See answers below.)

1. When the horse is walking, when is the horse's right hind leg moving forward? As the horse's belly moves from side-to side and....
 - a. your left stirrup moves to the left
 - b. your right stirrup moves to the right
 - c. your horse's head moves up
 - d. your horse's tail swishes
2. If you want your horse to move under himself and to the right at a walk, the best time to give the aid is when:
 - a. pushing with your left leg as his left hind leg moves forward
 - b. pushing with your left leg as his left hind leg steps down
 - c. pushing with your right leg as his right hind leg moves forward
 - d. pushing with your right leg as his right hind leg steps down

These were hard and confusing questions but they lead into the question “So why dressage for the average rider?” Have you ever ridden in a trail obstacle course and faced the dreaded open-the-gate-but-don't-let-go-of-the-gate-and -don't-fall -off-your-horse obstacle? You can ride this obstacle several ways: keep pulling on the reins and hoping your horse goes where you want, power the horse through, or apply gentle and subtle aids to finesse your way through the gate. Dressage is a riding discipline that has been developed over 100s of years to help a rider better communicate with her horse with just those subtle aids.

3. The best definition of the French word “dressage” is:
 - a. force
 - b. classic
 - c. costume
 - d. training

As Ruth Schaefer explains, “While dressage at the highest levels is its own riding style, basic dressage training can apply to all riding disciplines. It is a general training of the horse based on gymnastic exercises that enable the horse to use his body in a comfortable, effective way to fulfill the rider's wishes. Whether you ride trail or endurance horses, jumpers, Western or gaited horses, a fundamental understanding of dressage makes it possible to handle any horse safely and easily.” (Schaefer, p. 10)

What does “dressage” have in common with the average Icelandic horse. Probably more

than most people would think. Many trainers of Icelandic horses incorporate basic dressage exercises into their training of the young horse and training the tolt. Several Icelandic owners are taking dressage lessons--not to compete per se--but to better communicate with their horses. The USIHC Quarterly will be publishing some interviews with riders and trainers who are exploring the benefits of dressage for themselves and their horses. The first interview is with Pamela Nolf and Dannelle Haugen. Pamela started to learn how to ride in her late 40's and got her first horse Veigar frá Búðardal (Blessi) at age 50. Dannelle Haugen trains and competes at fourth level dressage and has been advancing Blessi's dressage training for the past year.

Dressage means many things to many people. For the purpose of this article, let's discuss how to define dressage?

Pamela: Dressage in French means training. I like the J. Bryant's definition in The USDF Guide to Dressage. She says that dressage is "*communication*. With dressage, you develop a vocabulary that helps you talk to your horse in terms he can understand so you get his cooperation. The longer you do dressage, the bigger your vocabulary. Eventually you can ask him to do anything--go fast, go slow, put his head up, put his head down, straighten, go crooked, shorten his body, lengthen, piaffe, gallop down a hill, or make a quick roll-back turn in the jumping field." (p. 7) So I got into dressage to better communicate with my horse.

Dannelle: I think it is also important to know that the aids work because they are based on biomechanical principles. I love what Lendon Gray says, "...traditional dressage aids are not something dreamed up long ago by some dead maestro who said 'let's do things this way', rather they comprised a language which, biomechanical, the horse would understand from day one." Lendon goes on to explain that asking with inside leg at girth stimulates intercostal nerve to cause horse to lift through back; leg aid applied behind girth causes slight rotation of thoracolumbar column away from source of stimulus causing horse to bend. (Gray, p. 14) You don't really have to know the exact biomechanics behind the request but it helps to realize the aids work for a reason.

Let's move on from the text book definitions and talk about why did you personally become interested in dressage?

Pamela: As a child, I always wanted a pony for Christmas. Santa never brought me a pony so at age 50 I went and got my own pony--an Icelandic horse named Veigar frá Búðardal or Blessi. I had had a few riding lessons and really thought I was an intermediate rider. Blessi quickly let me know that I had no idea what I was doing. All I knew how to do was pull on the reins and Blessi can go in any direction he wants with his nose pulled to either knee. He would always take me through the tricky stuff on the trail--cross the creek, walk through the ditch, and then we would get into a pulling contest over whether to go left or right on the trail. It became apparent within the first few months of getting Blessi that I need lessons on how to ride better. I went to a local English riding instructor for help.

Was that successful?

Pamela: Yes and no. I started learning about leg aids and how to use my seat to better communicate with Blessi. However, that first English riding instructor, who trained warm bloods almost exclusively, said that Blessi was basically untrainable. She could not get him to accept the bit, which is the beginning of the classical dressage training pyramid so she could not begin his training.

Did you accept that opinion of Blessi being untrainable in dressage?

Pamela: For a few years....I wanted to trail ride and I only rode Blessi at a walk. Any speed faster than a walk scared me so I took enough lessons to more frequently win the “go left, go right” battle and let the matter drop. When I moved from the east coast to the Pacific Northwest, I was lucky enough to board at a stable out of which Svanny Stefansdautir worked. I told her I wanted to learn how to ride a tolt and she said I had to learn to ride his trot first--Blessi has a big, bold trot and that is his first choice of gait. So I spent four miserable months learning to ride that trot and develop enough confidence to stop, or mostly stop, hyperventilating. Svanny trained Blessi on lateral movements such as shoulder in, turn on the haunches, etc. I am several years behind Blessi in training levels. And the weird thing is, the more “dressage” we did and the more I learned how to use my seat and legs, I won more arguments on the trail and fewer “discussions” came up.

And have you and Blessi continued with your dressage training?

Pamela: Well, Svanny moved out of the area and I broke my ankle which took almost a year and three surgeries to correct. After a year and half hiatus from lessons, I found Dannelle Haugen, a local dressage instructor who was willing to work with me and Blessi.

Dannelle, what is your background in dressage?

Dannelle: I have a USDF [United States Dressage Federation] bronze medal and apprenticed with a USDF certified instructor for two years. Although I work with a lot of Arabs, I train horses of all breeds from Irish warm bloods to paints to quarter horses. I compete at fourth level.

Pamela: Actually Dannelle is being a bit modest, she and her Arabs went to the Nationals in September and placed in the top three in XXXX and top 10 in XXXX.

How much gaited horse experience do you have?

Danelle: I worked on saddle training a young paso fino and learned a little bit about the gaits but Blessi is the first gaited horse I have ever worked with extensively. And he is the first Icelandic I worked with. Blessi is very willing and intelligent and he likes to learn. He’s fairly talented. And he is just so darn cute!

Britta Schöffmann in her book Dressage Training Customized discusses how to develop schooling programs for a horse based on breed and confirmation. She has a whole section on training Hafflingers which share many of the same, shall we say, confirmational challenges as the Icelandics--”powerful neck, stout body, muscular hindquarters, and short, strong legs.” Do you have to adapt your training methods to the way the Icelandic is built?

Dannelle: Oh yes, we had to do more lateral work at the beginning to get Blessi's inside hind leg to step squarely underneath his body. If he is not carrying weight on his hind end, he can't be collected and will trot on the forehand--definitely a no no in classical dressage. He also needed to build up his muscles so he can have active legs that step under his body at the trot--it's what creates that spring or bounce in the trot. We work on shoulder in and other suppling exercises.

Because of his shorter neck, he needs to work harder to stretch into contact with the bit so that he can use his topline and raise his back. If you aren't careful, you can engage the muscles under the neck which will lead to improper muscle development. We do a lot of stretching exercises.

Training a collected canter was also a bit of a challenge since Blessi has a flatter canter. At first, he was a bit out of condition and when we worked for a collected canter, he would canter in the front and do a weird tolt-like movement with his back legs. With additional conditioning, he has developed a cute, collected canter. We can improve that canter even more as we continue with training.

Pamela: I've noticed that Blessi's dressage training has really helped improve his tolt. Dressage develops the rear end of the horse, which helps with self carriage. Blessi is more likely to volunteer the tolt and maintain it for longer periods of time. That's a really nice bonus.

Do Icelandics have any confirmational strengths in relation to dressage?

Dannelle: I have only worked with one Icelandic so the readers are going to have judge what is specific to Blessi's confirmation and what is specific to the Icelandic breed. Blessi has a nice, short back which helps him to carry himself better and he can get his hocks underneath himself to help with collection. I also like the way he can move his shoulders. He has nice reach forward and a big stride. He moves a bit like a warm blood when I get him collected. He also has a lot of power from that nice, round butt. Blessi has good confirmation in general. It is easier for any horse to learn basic dressage when they are put together correctly. However, most horses can benefit from basic dressage lessons.

Icelandics tend to be have a unique, independent personality. How has this impacted your training methods?

Dannelle: Blessi has a really good work ethic. He really seems to like to learn. He is very willing but easily bored. I can't drill him on the same exercise over and over. For example, we can only practice leg yields down the rail twice and then we need to switch to leg yields in circle, leg yields in a figure eight. If I keep drilling Blessi on an exercise, he becomes upset and resistant. I absolutely love working with Blessi. It is a challenge for me to come up with something different to keep him thinking and engaged. Personally, I love working with all breeds and types of horses and their unique challenges. Blessi is also the steadiest, most reliable trail horse I have ever ridden--nothing seems to scare him.

What difference does it make in dressage that the Icelandic tolt?

Dannelle: Blessi is an intelligent horse. He often uses the tolt as an evasion to get out of movements that are difficult for him or he tolt when he is confused about what is being asked of him. If he gets tired of being collected, he will offer the tolt. Since tolt is one of the signature gaits of the Icelandic, we don't want to discourage the tolt or punish the tolt. I have had to learn ways to better communicate that "no Blessi, we want to trot now." If we are trotting down the rail and he tolt, I will turn his nose to the wall which causes encourages the trot. And you never know when he might lose some points for tolt in a dressage class. During a dressage class, you will lose points for an "impure trot."

Pamela: I love the tolt in dressage. When I get upset or out of balance during a trotting exercise, Blessi switches into the tolt until I regain my confidence. Now that I am better at posting the trot, I am working harder to let him know that I really want a trot not a tolt. Sometimes tolt can be a nice evasion for me also. And I love when the dressage instructor is asking me to do a lot of posting. Keeping a centered riding position, I can usually cue a tolt by tilting my pelvis back by about half an inch. When Blessi starts tolt, I just tell my instructor, "What can I say, Blessi is Icelandic?" Oops, I shouldn't have confessed that.

Dannelle: (Laughs). Yes, we'll discuss that during our next lesson.

Speaking of dressage shows, have you ever competed with an Icelandic in dressage?

Pamela: I had what seemed to be the great idea of having Danelle ride Blessi in his first dressage show. Then I would know how high a score he could achieve and I would have a goal to work for. Well, my plan backfired because Dannelle and Blessi set the bar so high.

Dannelle: We took Blessi to two local dressage shows in August and September. We had no idea what the judges would think of this "pony" with a thick neck, round body, and short legs competing against the more traditional warm bloods, Arabs, and mixed breeds. We competed in Introductory Test A and B, which is walk and trot, and Training Level 1, which is walk, trot, and canter. Dressage levels go from Introductory, Training, First, Second, Third, Fourth, and Prix St. George.

Much to our surprise, Blessi took blue ribbons in all four classes with scores ranging from 66.0 to 72.0. These are high scores at the local level. The 72.0 was the third highest score of the day; the highest was 72.8. And Blessi did throw in some tolt. Riding a gaited horse in dressage is like driving a five speed car, instead of an automatic; there are a lot more gaits to work with.

Pamela: Yes, I bet Blessi was thinking "They like me, they really like me." And the prizes weren't bad either. Blessi won enough treats to feed the horses at the home stable for a month. If people are interested, they can see video of Danelle and Blessi's rides on Youtube under "Blessi's Got the Blues" and "There's No Tolt in Dressage, Blessi."

What I most loved about Blessi at the dressage shows was his calmness and confidence.

Dannelle and Blessi were practicing in the warm up arena with everyone careening around on some excited horses. Dannelle need to adjust her hair under her helmet. In all the madness she just dropped Blessi's reins and made the adjustment as he continued to calmly walk around the arena with his head lowered. That's what I love about Blessi-- although the blue ribbons are a nice bonus.

Would you recommend dressage lessons for Icelandic horses and their owners?

Pamela: I have to say absolutely. Dressage has helped me better communicate with my horse--I use lighter aids to get better results. I have a better seat and more self confidence. And Blessi tolt better than ever. One of these days, Blessi and I will compete in our first dressage class.

Dannelle: I'd love to have some more Icelandics to train. I have seen videos of Icelandic horses that have better gaits than Blessi so they have even more potential for success in dressage. Plus they are such fun horses to work with.

What would you look for in a dressage instructor?

Pamela: I'll answer that one. Based on personal experience, I'd say that you need to be very selective about the dressage instructor. They don't need to be familiar with gaited horses. However, you need to be very clear with them that tolt is the signature gait of the Icelandic horse and is not to be discouraged or punished. They should also be open to adapting their training methods to the needs of the individual horse rather than try to fit the horse into their standard training regimen. They should appreciate each and every horse regardless of breed for their individual abilities and personality. Oh, and if they are working with Icelandics, they really need to have a sense of humor.

Thanks Dannelle and Pamela. I like to conclude the interview by adapting a quote from Brittia Schöffmann, who was originally talking about the ability of the Haflinger horse in dressage. "A rider that chooses a[n Icelandic] as his mount chooses an equine partner rather than a high level dressage or jumping career. He is usually getting a horse with an uncomplicated character, and a versatile pleasure horse that can also compete at low levels successfully." (Schöffmann, p. 149)

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The following information can go in insert boxes scattered across the article. Please identify Svanny Stefansdautir as the author of the insert material.

Box 1

By Svanhildur Stefánsdóttir
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www.northwesthorses.com

Why is classical dressage good for your Icelandic horse, including the tölt:

It teaches and then exercises the horse and rider in single and combined aids (communication).

Improves balance and discipline

It builds physical strength and increases flexibility

Rider requirements for tölt training:

Balance

Ability to manage the horse.

To recognize tölt and thorough understanding of the gait

Knowledge, preciseness and skills in directing the horse and giving aids

Self consistency

Box 2

By Svanhildur Stefánsdóttir

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Horse requirements for tölt training:

Willingness / forwardness without tension

Understands and responds to aids correctly

Focused and disciplined

Flexible

Tracks straight (tracks up)

Strong and conditioned

Energy

Training levels of tölt:

1-2 Rhythm: clean and correct

1-2 Form under rider, the rhythm often comes with good form

3 Bigger movements (through good rhythm, form, strength)

4 Speed (start with short distances on good surface)

Box 3

Svanhildur Stefánsdóttir

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Some basic exercises:

Half halt: "A momentary increase of collection, or an effect of the aids, which increases the attention and improves the balance of the horse." (Quote from: USDF Glossary of terms)

Backing

One step at a time: The rider asks the horse for one step only then halt. Repeated for a few strides: step, halt, step, halt.....

Turn on forehand: The horse's inside foreleg remains approximately in the same place pivoting while the hind legs describe a circle around the forehand. (Outside front leg pivots around the inside front leg.) The horse is tilted slightly away from the direction of movement.

Turn on hind: The horse's inside hind leg remains approximately in the same place

pivoting, while the front legs describe a circle around the hind. (The outside hind leg pivots around the inside hind leg.) The horse is slightly bent into the direction of movement.

Work on two tracks:

Leg yielding: The horse is positioned straight with a slight tilt away from the direction of movement. The inside front and hind leg pass and cross in front of the outside legs.

Shoulder fore and Shoulder in: Shoulder fore is the same as shoulder in except to a lesser degree. Horse is slightly bent around the rider's inside leg away from the direction of movement. The horse's inside legs pass and cross in front of the outside legs. When ridden correctly the horse must engage the inside hind leg.

Generally work on two tracks starts with these exercises. There are several more exercises on two tracks.

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Dressage Tips from the Novice Rider

Pre-signals: Preparing for Effective Riding Aids

By Pamela Nolf and Blessi

Riding aids are used in both Western and English riding for similar results. A pre-signal is a cue given before an aid that lets your horse know that you are going to ask something specific of him. You aren't asking the horse to do anything but you are giving him an alert or pay attention signal. Let's look at some examples.

Up/Down Transitions on the Longe Line

If you use a longe line to exercise your horse, you can signal a change in speed--either up or down--by gently shaking the longe line before you give the verbal and/or longe whip cue. The motion is more of a shivering---strong enough to send a signal down the longe line to pay attention but not so strong that the horse has to move his head to respond. To teach this pre-signal, shiver the longe line and then immediately give the command to trot. Do the same when you ask the horse to transition back to a walk. After multiple tries, the horse will learn that the shiver means you will be issuing a command.

Blessi Side Bar: An inadvertent result of teaching a pre-signal is that the horse may decide that the pre-signal is the command. When I was first teaching this cue to Blessi, he determined that the "longe line shiver" always meant an immediate down transition; verbal "good boys," the same thing. I had to do a lot of quick and varied up and down transitions to disabuse him of his self-serving interpretation of this pre-signal.

Trot/Gait to Walk Transition

Your breathing can be used as a pre-signal to help with a down transition. Breathing out slowly can be a pre-signal that you are asking for a down transition. As Julie Goodnight, a noted clinician, explains, "When you exhale, you kick back and relax... Often breathing out--or sighing--releases stress and tension. In the same way, it tells your horse it's time to slow down, too" (M. Anderson, p. 27). The sequence is breath out slowly then ask for the down transition. Consistency is key with these pre-signals.

Blessi Side Bar: In the arena, Blessi has gotten so sensitive to this pre-signal (or so eager to stop working) that he stops with no aids other than just letting out a deep breath (sometimes a really, really deep breath). I have never corrected his interpretation because it is rather cute to show how my pony stops with no apparent aids except possibly my blue face. He will also stop when I take my feet out of the stirrups--I think he is anticipating the ultimate reward--the dismount.

Walk to Trot/Gait Transition

Changing your breathing can also be a pre-signal for an up transition. A strong, definite inhale fills your lungs with air and moves you slightly forward. "Inhaling is like saying, 'Okay, get ready to move with me,'" Julie Goodnight points out. (M. Anderson, p. 27).

Blessi Side Bar: When I was learning to trot, I was really scared at going at any speed over a walk. I usually froze up and stopped breathing when asking for an up transition. In fact, even though I was asking for a trot by squeezing with my legs, I was also pulling back on the reins and using the reins to balance myself. I spent many weeks confusing poor Blessi who didn't know how to interpret my conflicting signals. At one point, Svanny Stefansdautir my instructor had me hold the reins loosely, grab mane to balance myself, and then ask for a trot. Thank goodness Icelandics have really long mane.

Clarification for Gaited Riders: Be careful when asking for an up transition that you do not inhale and lean forward since leaning forward is usually a request for a trot versus a tolt--at least as far as working with Icelandics.

Trot to Stop Transition

I just learned this pre-signal last week during a riding lesson with Jill Seely, local dressage instructor, at Clover Valley Riding Center, Port Orchard. If you want to stop your horse in a four square and balanced way, try this approach. As you are posting the trot, stop posting and sit the trot for two or three strides and then ask for the stop.

Blessi Side Bar: This pre-signal works really well with the both the nicely trained lesson horse named Lady from Clover Valley and with the not-so-advanced Blessi. My balance is still just a bit off and Blessi will not stop as four square as lady. However, we are both getting better.

Anderson, M. (January 2008). "Making Smooth Transitions". *Perfect Horse*, vol. 12, no. 12, pp. 26-37.