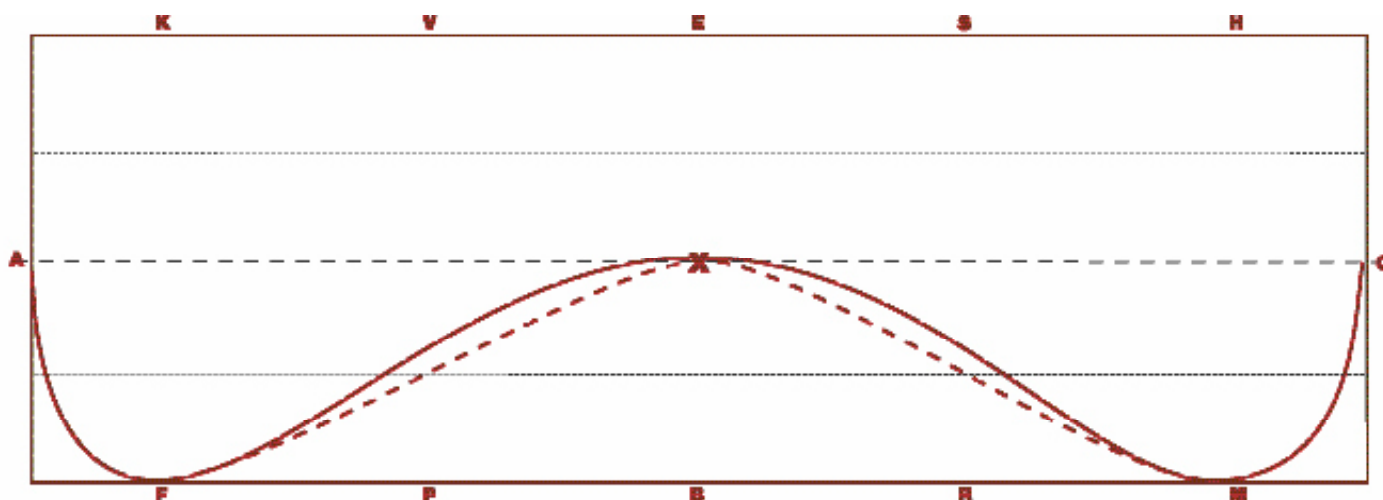


Dressage Test Tune-Up

Training Test 4 Serpentine

You'll nail it if you're soft, relaxed and going somewhere, says this Virginia trainer and competitor.

By Lauren Sprieser
Photos by Charles Mann



Here's a diagram of the serpentine in Training Level Test 4. The dotted line shows how the movement is written, and the solid line shows how I ride it.

The F to X to M Serpentine



1 I'm preparing for the serpentine by riding my mom's 6-year-old Dutch Harness Horse, Victorious ("Midgey"), deep into the corner. He has a clear left bend, but I'm keeping him upright and between my two reins and two legs because I want—and the judge wants to see—Midgey turning like a horse and NOT like a motorcycle.

2 Instead of aiming straight toward X and H across the full diagonal as I leave the rail, I am a little more toward S, for a short diagonal line that will bring us a bit early onto the centerline. As I cross the quarterline, I begin to change the bend by straightening Midgey for a stride and then ...

3 ... smoothly developing the right bend. Again, with my eyes, my focus and my inside leg and seat, I'm making sure that Midgey stays upright and doesn't collapse to the right or fall in and alter the line of travel. The line we're on has not changed—only the bend has changed.

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The Test: Training Level Test 4

The Level: Training is the level of choice for a green horse or green rider. If your horse is green, you want to show that he has a foundation of relaxation, suppleness and rideability that you can build on. If you're the green one, you want to project quiet consideration and tact, and above all, quite frankly, the ability to whoa, go and steer!

The Movement: The one-loop trot serpentine from M to X to F on the right hand and later, from F to X to M on the left hand.

The Challenge: On paper, this looks like a simple, flowing movement, but there's a LOT more to it than meets the

eye. The Directive Ideas on the test say that the focus of the movement is the "quality of trot and changes of bending." In other words, the judge wants to see a rhythmic, unhurried but energetic trot and smooth, clear, balanced changes of bend on a straight line, independent of your horse's line of travel.

By this, the fourth test of the level, the judge is also looking for increased sophistication in steering, with a greater emphasis on accuracy and precision. It's pretty easy to make a 20-meter circle with two or three points of reference on the rail. With this serpentine, once you leave the corner, you're out in the open, with little or no point of reference at all. If your horse likes to lean on the rail for support,

or he isn't balanced coming out of the corner, you're going to have trouble.

What's more, the judge not only wants to see you create a clear bend on a straight line, but go from one bend to another and back again with smoothness and no major drama, hauling on the reins or loss of balance for you or your horse. For the first serpentine on the right hand, for example, you want to show a clear right bend in the corner at M, a smooth transition to a clear left bend as you cross the quarterline, an even, poll-to-tail left bend at X, then a smooth and seamless transition back to a clear right bend as you cross the quarterline approaching F. Clear and smooth, smooth, smooth without any major hiccups!



4 Because of our shorter F-to-S diagonal line, we arrive on the centerline a stride or two before X, which allows me to accurately hit X and show the judge at C a few strides of right bend over X, so it's very clear that I have changed the bend.

5 And that's just what we're doing as we cross X and one or two strides beyond, begin to think about turning off the centerline and heading to a point on the rail that's just a little bit to the right of M so that Midgey will be straight on the rail when my body passes M. He's still in a right bend, but again, I've made sure that he's not careening over to the right. He's upright as we change the line of travel.

6 Crossing the quarterline, I've straightened Midgey and I'm about to start developing my left bend—using my left leg to help him bend, but making sure with my position, focus and aids that he doesn't take that as a signal to leg-yield (or fall over) to the right.

What We'll Do: If you've ridden this movement and haven't scored so well, you may have received such comments as "Needs better bending," "Needs clearer positioning," "Unbalanced," "Not enough change of bend shown," "Overshot X" or "Must touch X." In this article, I'll help you eliminate those problems as I talk you through the F to X to M movement that begins on the left rein. But first, let's answer the big question ...

SITTING OR POSTING?

All the Training Level tests now say, "Trot work may be ridden sitting or rising." I tell my students that you can always tell the professionals from the amateurs at the shows because the pros are posting! Remember, the goal of horse-showing is to show the best horse that you have.

And the overall purpose at Training Level is to confirm that your horse's muscles are supple and loose and that he moves freely forward in a clear and steady rhythm while accepting contact with the bit. If your horse is like 90 percent of Training Level horses, he has a better chance of doing that when you're posting, because it's easier for him to balance and move when your weight is on his back only half the time. When you post on the correct diagonal—rising as your horse's inside hind leg is coming forward—you allow that leg more freedom and room to swing from hip to toe. And that swing not only encourages the relaxation and suppleness that you want, it gymnasticizes your horse, builds strength, improves his balance and, eventually, helps in collection.

Posting doesn't just help your horse,

however. If you're a green rider, sitting trot may still be a bit of a weakness. And you NEVER want to attempt something in the show ring that is not 100-percent successful at home. The powers that be know that you're learning, and that's one reason they changed the rule to allow posting at Training Level—so you could still get into the show ring even though you might not be able to sit perfectly. There's a great line in the *US Pony Club Handbook* to the effect that dressage tests are designed to evaluate a horse that is constantly changing. In my opinion, they're designed that way for riders, too.

NOW LET'S RIDE THE MOVEMENT

One of the tricks to nailing this serpentine is to NOT ride it exactly as



7 I complete our return to the left bend as we approach the rail. And by aiming a bit to the right of M, I've made sure that Midgy will be straight on the rail as I pass M ...



8 ... and ride the corner. I've shown the judge a smooth, obedient, relaxed serpentine with good balance and clear, unflustered changes of bend. I've fulfilled the object of the movement: to demonstrate my horse's ability to bend and change his bend on a straight line, independent of his line of travel.

written—two perfectly straight diagonal lines with a sharp corner at X. In the first place, your horse has four legs and can't really make an almost right-angle turn. In the second, the judge wants to see clear changes of bend on straight lines, not corners. To really show off the movement, ride the figure as more of a smooth "flat tire" kind of shape, with three or four straight strides where you're riding directly toward or away from the judge on the centerline over X. (See the diagram on Page 46.)

If you're going to have trouble, it will be around X, but the place to set up so you DON'T have trouble isn't three strides before the letter. It's in the corner before you even start the movement. Prepare by clearly positioning your horse with a left bend in the corner before F,

opening your inside left rein away from his body, sitting a little bit more in your left seat bone and stirrup and using your inside left leg to push his inside hind into your outside right rein (Photo 1). Lighten your right seat bone and bring your right rein closer in to his shoulder. Whether he tends to fall to the outside or lean to the inside, focus on feeling that he's balanced between both legs and reins as he bends through the corner by stretching and making the outside of his body longer. That—not making the inside of his body shorter—is what correct bend is all about.

Approaching F, look up and ahead on the track you want to follow, not straight across the diagonal to H, but more toward S. Maintain the left bend as you leave the rail and ride with a soft

curve to the quarterline. As you cross the quarterline (Photo 2), straighten—remember, your horse can't go from one bend to the other without at least a moment of straightness—then smoothly establish a right bend (Photo 3) using your new inside right leg to push your horse's right hind into your new outside left rein and develop an even right bend from poll to tail.

At this point, you may or may not choose to change your posting diagonal. That is a choice that very much depends on you and your horse. There is no rule that says you have to be on a particular diagonal or that you have to change it. If changing helps you time your aids and encourage your horse's inside hind to step more underneath his body, go ahead and change. But

if your horse isn't so comfortable in the trot, and the act of changing your diagonal might upset him, skip it!

Now IS the time to change your focus and look toward C as you arrive on the centerline about two or three strides from X (Photo 4). Put C right between your horse's ears and, maintaining the right bend, ride three or four strides straight on the centerline over X toward C. As you do, think ahead and look toward M—or a bit to the right of M—then turn off the centerline and ride there (Photo 5). At about the quarterline, straighten for a stride or so (Photo 6) and once again establish a left bend (Photo 7) using your new inside left leg to push your horse's left hind into your new outside right rein. Arrive on the rail, ride the corner (Photo 8) and off you go!

Some Showmanship Tips

■ Horses are “handed,” just the way people are, and one of the goals of dressage is to make a horse equally rideable both ways. But in a Training Level test, if your horse is just a little tougher to bend to the left, say, spend as little time bent that way as possible. To make the F to X to M serpentine, change the bend right on or slightly before the quarterline so you’re bent right—his easier way—as long as possible. For the M to X to F serpentine, change the bend a bit later, again, so you’re bent left as little as possible.

■ Try to do as little as possible with your reins, especially if your horse is green or young. Come Third and Fourth Levels, you’re going to be far more interactive with your rein aids, but at Training Level—the foundation of everything—your seat is in charge, not as a “driving” aid but as an organizing aid. When you want to bend or go right, put a bit more weight in your right seat bone. When you want to bend or go left, put more weight in your left seat bone.

■ Remember that dressage has a lot more in common with hunters than you might think. When all is said and done, at Training Level the judge is going to pick the horse that looks the most like something she’d take home for her grandmother to ride. Even if you change the bend two strides late, she won’t care as long as

the movement as a whole seems soft and easy and you and your horse look like you’re having a great time!

■ Practice at home! Practice quietness and tact. (The greatest compliment any dressage rider can hear is “How’d you do that?”) If your horse is super-sensitive, for example, you may discover that you don’t need much outside leg and shouldn’t practically fall off on the inside trying to steer him with your seat bones. And that’s why you practice—to learn how little you can do to get maximum results, because the goal of riding is to have your horse work harder than you do.

■ Avoid always doing the entire movement. Keep your horse listening, balanced and off autopilot by going from M to X, then riding straight down the centerline to A. Go from X to the quarterline and then ride straight. Or go from quarterline to quarterline and then straight.

■ Always, always make sure that the stuff you’re doing is good stuff. Don’t practice bad stuff. If it’s bad, fix it. Don’t keep going and hoping it will get better. Make it good at home, and when you get into the show ring, all you have to do is think about breathing, sitting up straight and where you’re going, because you’ve worked your horse in the right way, every day up to that point. 🐾

An FEI Rider With Training-Level Cred



“I tell my students that I understand Training Level so much better now that I’ve shown FEI,” says Lauren Sprieser. “And let me tell you, Training Level tests are HARD! You’re basically scored on an entire 60-meter side of the arena and then some—that’s a long distance in which to screw up. At Fourth Level, you get scored on half a 10-meter circle, and at Grand Prix, it can be a score for a single transition.”

Lauren’s start in the sport was less than auspicious, but it paid big dividends. “My first horse show was a USDF regional youth team championship when I was 11 years old. I got a 39 percent at Intro Test A. Nine years later, I was showing Grand Prix! Now I’m in a position to give back. I’m a big believer in youth programs and Pony Club.” As good as her word, Lauren coaches kids, does clinics for Pony Club and judges Pony Club dressage rallies.

For the past year, Lauren has headquartered out of her parents’ 135-acre, 12-stall Clearwater Farm in Marshall, Virginia. “It’s my parents’ dream,” she says. “My mom is your rank-and-file amateur rider, and a year ago, when she and my dad wanted to retire, they offered

to build a world-class facility and have me run it. I thought for about two seconds before saying ‘yes.’” Today, the barn is full, although most of Lauren’s teaching business is made up of trailer-in clients.

Lauren’s top horse is Clairvoya, a 10-year-old Hanoverian mare. They were invited to the 2008 USEF National Intermediaire I Championship, but, says Lauren with a shrug, “We just couldn’t afford to go.” She and Clairvoya are on the USET Developing Rider list, and Lauren hopes to qualify for the 2009 Brentina Cup. She also has a “dynamite” 7-year-old Westfalen mare, Ellegria, the 2007 USDF Region 1 Second Level Champion. “Ella” sat out 2008 to get confirmed at Prix St. Georges. Lauren’s mom bought this month’s demo horse, Victorious, a 6-year-old Dutch Harness Horse, as a resale project, but “If he proves himself, he might be the nicest of the bunch. He is a darling.”