

## UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF TEMPO IN ACHIEVING RELAXATION FOR THE HORSE

by Lynne Sprinsky

*who gratefully acknowledges learning this exercise from her esteemed teacher, Susan Terrall of Rutherfordton, NC.*

The first rung on the training ladder, according to the Old Masters, is “relaxation.” This brief article explains why the correct *tempo* is so important to achieving relaxation for the horse.

### ***Do the following exercise:***

1. Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart.
2. Bend over at the waist, letting your arms dangle in front of you, and keeping a reasonably flat back (not arched or bowed), so that your trunk and legs form a 90-degree angle to one another. Let your head hang comfortably.
3. Begin swinging your arms back and forth, one arm forward while the other is back, and bringing the forward arm up so that the upper arm brushes past your ear.
4. Adjust the speed at which you are doing this so that you achieve a virtually effortless momentum.

***You will find that this “tempo” is very relaxing, and takes no conscious work at all. The swinging takes care of itself, and you may find your trunk bobbing very slightly as a result.***

5. Now speed the tempo up a fraction. Note the result: your back gets a bit tense, and the effortless-ness disappears.
6. Now slow the tempo down a bit. Note the result: your back gets a bit tense, and the effortless-ness disappears.

The horse, because he has “a leg at each corner” and we have only two, is better at disguising his tension than we, but it is nevertheless present. Each horse has his OWN tempo, especially at trot work, at which he can both relax and achieve seemingly effortless locomotion. A slight change in this tempo, either faster or slower, even if only *fractionally* so, results in the addition of tension to his muscles, and affects his ability to offer that harmonious oneness with his rider that all dressage riders seek.

Therefore, it is vitally important that every rider discover the correct tempo for every horse they ride. This is probably best done on the longe line, where, given time and relaxing circumstances, most horses will eventually adopt it on their own. If your horse is particularly tense or hurried when you try this, you can help by making the circle smaller, using your voice in a soothing way (say “E-e-e-e-easy” with a descending tone, or the equivalent), and give gentle half halts on the line. When they have worked for some time in this slower tempo, they will naturally offer a lowering and stretching forward of the head and neck, just as humans, when they are totally relaxed (maybe even sleepy!) will allow their necks to come forward so that their chins are closer to their chests. (The chin-to-chest phenomenon is NOT shared by the horse, however, due to his differing anatomy).

The caring rider will take care to memorize the correct tempo for each horse under his/her care, perhaps even using a metronome to determine the exact beats per minute. For riders just learning to discern changes in tempo, the use of a metronome (small electronic versions are available at any music store for about \$30 US) can be very helpful. These devices emit a soft beep in time with the beat, allowing a rider to pre-set the desired tempo and then time the rise and sit of the trot to those beeps. In this way, minute variations become more easily discernable, and the rider can help the horse return to the proper tempo by maintaining the rise and sit *in* that tempo. The horse, being a creature who naturally seeks harmony and balance with his environment, will soon conform to the tempo set by the rider. Learning to regulate the trot tempo with one’s seat takes a bit of practice, of course. It seems to help some people to think of ‘dwelling’ a bit longer in the saddle during the *sit* phase of the rising trot, or to envision one’s buttocks as a pair of soft, fluffy pillows that settle slowly into the saddle. Thinking to oneself, “S-i-i-i-i-i-i-it – rise, s-i-i-i-i-i-i-it- rise” while posting can also help slow the tempo.