

## **Step One: Free Forward Reactivity**

*By David Donnelly, French Light Dressage*

In Part 1 of this series, we introduced the idea of a French Training Scale to help illustrate the approaches to Baucherist methods. We also compared those approaches with the German Training Scale.

Today we will talk about step 1 in the French Training Scale (FTS), Free Forward Reactivity and why it's the first important step in developing your horse through the training process.

When we talk about Free Forward Reactivity, we are describing NOT how fast a horse is moving in any given gait but how quickly, easily, and completely he responds to the forward cues from the leg, seat, voice, whip, or spur. Response time is the key here. The horse should move forward immediately when applied, and with enthusiasm. Keep in mind, every horse has different abilities in this area.

When first establishing Free Forward Reactivity, the concept here is to firmly instill that the horse responds forward *freely and quickly* to a light touch of the leg under saddle or the chirp of the voice when longeing for example. This is one of THE most basic principles in the French method toward establishing Lightness.

In the process of teaching a horse to respond quickly, we must never nag by continually applying a cue with no results (this includes longing). If a clear, understandable cue has been given and it is ignored or the reaction is delayed in any way, a much stronger cue that the horse will respond to will follow.

Think of it like this. Imagine that there is a 0 to 10 scale for forward cues. 0 is no cue at all and 10 is the most aggressive cue one can give with a dressage whip or spur. In this imaginary scale, we MUST commit to ourselves, and I love the word "commit", to only accepting a "1" strength cue in our daily work. This seems like common sense but lack of this, is a mistake I see over and over again in work.

When first teaching a horse to respond quickly to a "1", we must deliver a much stronger cue like a "7" if the "1" is ignored more than 2 times. When you deliver the "7" and the horse overreacts and canters off in a way you did not expect, do not punish his reaction, but praise it instead! Pet the horse while it is still in motion, and stop it slowly and gently. The horse gave us more than we wanted of just what we wanted, a quick forward reaction! If we believe ourselves to be good enough riders to train a dressage horse surely we can handle the horse "scooting off" during this process.

Then, we ask again for the horse to move off from the "1" strength cue. If this time the horse shows some of the same overreaction to the much lighter cue we will praise him even more. The key here is to be consistent in the training process, and leave out

any and all grey areas like continuous nagging cues. We want to either deliver a "1" or a "7" depending on the horse's reaction time.

Also, keep in mind, that a very strong "7" cue is a lot and was just an example. Every horse's sensitivity level is different. For example, my PRE/TB cross is very hot and sensitive. He will react from a "5". On the other side of the scale, like most Friesians, in the beginning these horses may need a stronger cue, like a "7". While we have to be brave enough to handle the possible over reaction, we must know our horse and be safe when applying a strong cue!

At this training moment, it is also very important to have little or no contact with the reins or lounge line, and do not attempt to ask for Ramener, posture or "frame" in the horse. We do not want to deliver conflicting aids. We are communicating to the horse that a forward reaction is rewarded when the aids (or cues) completely disappear, including contact with the reins. *This is another key concept in the French system.* We are teaching them that free forward movement is pleasant, rewarding and easy! I enjoy seeing horses become enthusiastic about their work when they learn that forward motion is good, fun, and non-confrontational. Again, we are seeking Lightness in our horse, and right now, we are establishing lightness to the leg.

In the end, this process is teaching the horse quite specifically to respond to the smallest nuance of leg or voice, and he learns very quickly that he will be rewarded! Be consistent. Be committed to this process of "1" or "7". And your horse very quickly learns to stay focused on you, waiting for the next command. Once this understanding is established, you'll hardly ever need stronger cues and your horse will be much happier with soft, gentle cues, waiting for what will be asked next of him.

I have found that in many, many cases, the root of stalled training in horses under saddle is the lack of of step 1 in the French Training Scale. They have been dulled down from continued pressure of the hand and leg, often used at the same time. This not only dulls the horse, but also causes training confusion from the pressure of "go" with the leg and "stop" with the hand utilized in the same moment.

That is not to say that these cannot be combined in advance training but from a fundamental standpoint I want a horse to respond from the lightest of forward cues at all times. This not only establishes habit and focus in the horse, we as the rider no longer need to nag our horse for more engine when it counts! And for more advanced horses, it also cultivates our ability to "allow" our horses to move forward, rather than "make" them move forward. As this seed takes root in the horse's mind we move towards a happy athlete who is enthusiastic and rewarded for work! We are diving a little into the concept of "hand without leg, and leg without hand" which is a huge concept and worthy of an article on its own.

I would like to also mention that with young horses, establishing Free, Forward, Reactivity is fundamental in their gymnastic lunging program before they are ever

backed. The same concept described above absolutely applies, and once a young horse is backed, they should not be allowed to go dull. If they ever do, as with any horse at any level, we stop our work immediately and re-establish (or remind them) to refocus on step 1. Do not "push" through this or any other training problem for that matter. And this is another concept in the French system called Position Proceeds Action I hope to talk about in a later article.

It is important to note that sensitivity and forward responsiveness don't always go hand in hand. I typically associate sensitivity with the "mind" and responsiveness has to do with their natural physical reaction time. If we are working a young horse that wants to go too fast we must gently tone that horse down. However in my experience, these types of horses are few and far between. And sometimes, the stronger cue needed to animate a phlegmatic horse creates tension or anxiety in the horse. Any tension resulting from correcting and improving reaction time must be eliminated and directly relates to the second step in the FTS -The 3 R's, Rhythm, Regularity, and Relaxation.

In our next part of the series, we will discuss some of the key points of the 3 R's. Please feel free to reach out with any questions and thank you for reading!