

# Developing your horse's topline

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Too many riders become focused on moving the horse's neck or hindquarters instead of thinking about how the whole horse's body is flowing. It is impossible to create a good topline without the energy being able to flow through the entire horse's body from its poll, through the neck, the withers, through the swinging back muscles, along the loin, croup and down the hamstrings to drive the horse's hindquarters.

There are four very important factors that a rider must consider in order to develop their horse's topline before the work even begins.

Firstly, the horse's diet. Is the horse being fed a high quality feed that will meet the demands of the work and provide the correct amount of protein that is required to build the muscles? Proteins are made up of smaller chemical units called amino acids. These amino acids are essential to build the muscles in the horse. The Dynamik Stallions are all fed on a high quality diet that includes Lucerne chaff, *Hygain Tru Breed* and varying amounts of *Hygain Release* to meet the demands of their work both under saddle and as breeding stallions. Their fibre requirements are met using *Hygain Fibressentials* as well as feeding Lucerne and meadow hay. Hygain provide a free diet analysis program called *Nutrikey* that I recommend to anyone to ensure that their horse's dietary requirements are being met with the help of a professional nutritionist.

The second factor that needs to be considered is your horse's teeth. The Dynamik Stallions have their teeth done every six months by a Master dentist from Equident. If a horse has dental issues including sharp hooks, ramps, incisor slants then these problems can cause head tilts, tension in the Temporomandibular joint, tension in the poll and in turn cause muscle tension. Any underlying dental issues can prevent a horse from developing an even topline.

This leads me to my third point in the check list, the horse's muscles. It is very important to be able to assess and be aware of any problems and sources of pain both skeletal and muscular. If your horse has any source of pain you will find it difficult to develop an even healthy topline on your horse. You need to have a good veterinarian to help you with any issues that may arise and also an equine body worker that you can call upon to help maintain healthy muscle function without tension. The Dynamik Stallions are regularly worked upon by All Creatures Healing and a Veterinary Chiropractor and acupuncturist.

The final part of the check list is the hoof! Well balanced and regularly trimmed or shod hooves are essential for the horse to be able to move correctly and to hold a correct posture. Hooves that are not well balanced can lead to tension in the muscles and pressure on the joints and tendons which will also in turn affect how the topline develops.

*When training your horse,  
 you must focus on the way the  
 horse's body moves in its entirety.*

An important part in developing the topline on my horses is to regularly assess their bodies and be really aware of how they are moving. As part of my training program, I lunge my horses on a Spanish cavesson which is influenced by the work I have done over the past years training with the classical trainer Manolo Mendez. I do not use any side reins or draw reins of any sort to lunge my horses; I only use the Spanish Cavesson and a bamboo cane. This method of lunging takes a lot of patience to master. It takes time and patience to be able to control the horse's body and to be able to make your horse round as well as be able to vary the neck position of the horse with no artificial devices to keep the head in place.

I use the time the horses have on the Spanish Cavesson to watch how all the muscles are moving from the poll through the neck and to see the back muscles swinging. I can use this time to also ensure that the horse's body is in a good position on the circle, making the subtle changes as required with the bamboo cane. This is also the best way to assess what differences there are in the way your horse moves on the left rein compared to the right. Using the Spanish cavesson gives you the best chance to also put the horse in a long and low position to give them a really great stretch through the top line with freedom, which in turn will help to build the topline.

This ground work gives the rider the best chance to visualise a strong, healthy top line and the mechanics involved in developing it. I also use trot poles and cavalettis in some sessions when the stallions are working on the lunge as gymnastic exercises to help build the topline and to create more suppleness in the body.

Then of course comes the riding phase of the topline building. The warmup phase is one of the biggest influences on creating a better topline.

The ability to be able to warm your horse up in a long and low neck position and concentrate on keeping the horse moving without tension from the poll to the tail is the ultimate goal. This really gives the rider the best chance to get the feeling of their horses back swinging and keeping their horse unlocked in the poll and the wither. In my view, the horse that is immediately put in a high frame often has tension and less swing and one can usually see that this type of riding results in horse with poorly developed topline muscles. Of course some horses may not be able to immediately relax into a long and low position but it is important that the horse is put into a stretching type frame for periods of each training session. Once the rider can really get a feel for the swing throughout their horse's body, the rider can become more aware when the tension comes back in horse during different stages of the training session. When the tension comes back, go back to basics and get the soft movement happening again in a lower frame and try to keep this feeling when you put your horse into a higher frame, lateral movement or whatever it is you are doing to lose the soft feeling.

Make sure you start in Gear one! Another mistake of many riders is to immediately start trotting the horse around full throttle, this is not good for the horse mind to achieve relaxation and also not beneficial to the muscles and joints. Once your horse is warmed up and you can feel them moving freely through the body, spend time focusing on playing with the "gears" within the paces. Once your horse's neck has come up into your working frame you must focus on feeling that your horse is still straight and still swinging in the back and that it is not blocked in the withers or poll. When you feel that things are going wrong go back to the basics to fix the issue. Do you need to stretch your horse and get the swing back? Do you need to focus on the straightness again? Do you need to test your horse's reactions to the aids to ensure that you are not constantly kicking and creating more tension?

To me, straightness is the most important thing when working my horses. Without straightness you can cause a lot of problems in the way your horse moves through its body. Test out how straight your horse is moving through using the three quarter line and taking note of how much control you have over your horse's body. You can test the straightness of your horse on the three quarter line by using transitions and aiming for a point at the far end of the arena.

Ensure you can control your horse's shoulders. The key to your dressage training is to be able control the horses shoulders and move the shoulders whenever you need. If you need to correct your horse's straightness then take the shoulders across and the rest of the body will follow. Trying to focus too much on pushing the hindquarters around without having control of the shoulders will only create tension in the horse's body and this is not beneficial to developing your horse's topline.

At the end of the day, developing your horse's topline is all about the basics. The horse must be adjustable and the horse cannot build a healthy topline if there is tension. Make it so that your horse can be easily adjustable in the frame and that you can adjust the gears within the paces without the tension creeping back in. Adjusting the gears within the paces through half halts help engage the horse in the hindquarters so that the energy can cycle through all the way through the body to the horse's poll. The key to building a healthy topline is to have a horse that is healthy and sound in both body and mind.

