

Winter Projects

By Anne Cizadlo

Now that winter is upon us and the show season has diminished, many riders ask me what they should concentrate on for the upcoming months in preparation for next season. There are a series of options that would benefit horses and riders who are either competitive or riding just for the education of riding.

First, set a goal for you and your horse. What types of things do you want to achieve before next spring? Are there specific competitions or team shows or a certain level of proficiency that you would like to achieve by next year? Now is the time to get out a piece of paper and a pen, and map out that track. Perhaps the path won't quite go according to the plan, but mapping out the specifics is one method of directing your training for the next several months. It's too easy to drift around aimlessly and then wonder why those canter departs are still rough in the spring!

Start by being specific about what you are planning on doing, such as **Riding Second Level in the Adult Team Championship show in August of next year.** Then work backwards from your goal, defining the pieces that you need to get there. For example, perhaps you and your horse will need to master the canter-to-walk transition, and improve the medium trot, both of which require a more solid base of consistent collection than you already have.

Next, plan some methods by which you can improve on that goal by working the details. Winter is a wonderful time to perfect the details, such as riding correctly through all the corners. Especially since we are primarily stuck in indoor arenas, make use of this opportunity to perfect the details, like the corners, or very accurate turns on and off the center line. Exercises such as trot, SQUARE halt, and trot transitions work on perfecting the details while not making your horse excessively sweaty in the cold winter. The simple, but necessary, transitions are wonderful half-hour projects for winter when it's too cold to ride for much longer than that.

Next, winter is a perfect time to try more advanced moves without the fear of confusing your horse right before a competition. Does that shoulder-in and haunches-in feel pretty good today? Try a half-pass. Try it in the canter. Maybe it wasn't perfect, but the flaws you found were probably also apparent in the preceding shoulder-in or haunches-in. Back up to the shoulder-in, try it with more energy or collection and see if the half-pass doesn't improve. This is a perfect opportunity to play with movements that are a little advanced, to challenge you and your horse. Use these challenges to find the holes in the more simple exercises rather than to stress your horse out!

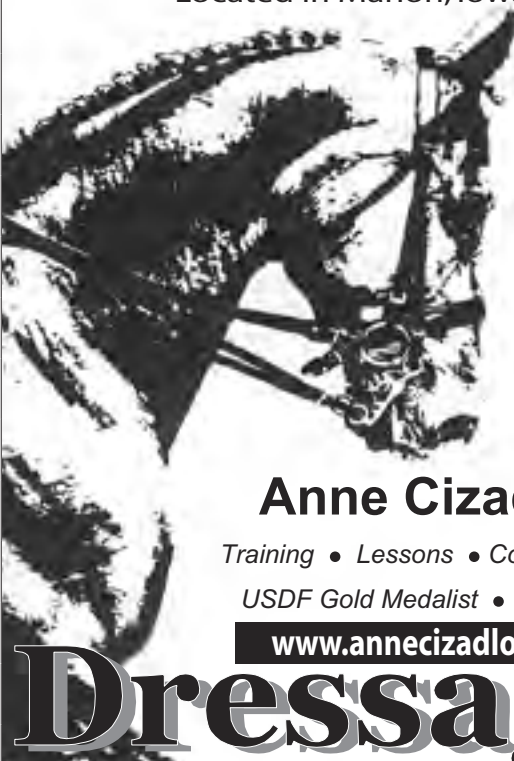
Lastly, to break the monotony of having to ride indoors for months, experiment with some cross training such as cavalletti. Small trot or canter grids can liven up a mundane serpentine and perhaps even help your horse to build some extra topline muscle when lifting up his feet. Lunging horses over cavalletti can even be beneficial to their muscles on days when it's just plain cold.

Winter is the perfect time to go back over some of the training books or articles that you have been saving all summer and try to get a better understanding of what the exercises are attempting to create in your horse. Audit some clinics if you are able. Work on your own understanding and education so that those lessons next summer make better sense to you and stick in your mind! Dressage is a tough sport, physically and mentally, and winter is a perfect time to fill in the gaps of understanding that were glossed over in the swirl of activity last summer!



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Dressage