

LOSSELASSENHEIT

Find out how adding loosening exercises to your daily training will improve your horse's gaits and his enjoyment of the work.

By Sabine Schut-Kery with Louisa Zai

Photos by Barbara Bella Photography



Sabine Schut-Kery rides Sanceo, a 5-year-old Hanoverian stallion (by San Remo) owned by Alice and Mike Womble-Heitman of Horsegate Ranch. Sanceo came to Sabine as a 2½-year-old and is now training at the First and Second Levels. In February, he won the Markel Insurance Open High Point award at the Mid-Winter CDI show in Los Angeles.

Looseness is an elementary concept in dressage. It is at the foundation of dressage training, and it encompasses basic ideals like relaxation and suppleness. And yet, despite its simplicity, looseness is one of

the most difficult qualities to preserve in a dressage horse as he advances through the levels. In this article I will try to clarify what looseness is, how to recognize it and how to create it. I have also included some of my favorite exercises to encourage looseness in the advancing dressage horse.

In Germany, we use the expression *Losgelassenheit*, which translates literally to mean "looselettingness." I prefer this word because it helps explain that the looseness is not just physical, but that the horse also lets go in his mind. In *Losgelassenheit*, the horse works for his rider in a state that is both mentally and physically free from tension or constraint.

Signs of *Losgelassenheit* are easy to recognize. The horse carries the bit in a slightly foamy but quiet mouth; his ears are relaxed and tipped forward or turned slightly toward the rider; his tail swings in rhythm with his footsteps. He looks happy, content and comfortable in his work.

The most important sign of *Losgelassenheit* is how the horse works through his back. This may not be as easy to recognize at first, but it is critical to learn. The horse is connected through his topline by a long ligament, the nuchal ligament, which runs from his poll to his tail. When the horse lowers his haunches while reaching forward with his poll, this ligament is pulled taut. When the horse's back is hollow, this ligament sags. When the horse lowers his hindquarters and keeps his neck long, the ligament becomes tensioned like a bow, and thus it helps to lift the middle of the horse's body, namely the withers and back. This lift frees the horse to defy gravity a bit more, and he is thus able to move in a fluid and effortless manner.

Riding a horse who is working in *Losgelassenheit* is an unforgettable feeling, but it is still easy to be lulled into

At Home with Sabine Schut-Kery

A horse-crazy child, Sabine grew up in Germany with its horse-rich history and a proven system in place to give aspiring equestrians a solid foundation in the basics. When it came time to choose a career, she already knew she wanted to become a *Bereiter* (German certification for professional riders). Her education included a three-year internship with Jan Bemelmans, now dressage coach for the Spanish team.

In 1998, Sabine accepted a job in the United States as head trainer for Proud Meadows Friesians in Texas. She trained the farm's stallions for both competition and exhibition. Along the way, she earned her U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) bronze, silver and gold medals on Friesians she trained herself. She took the Friesian stallion Jorrit to Grand Prix. Awards include USDF Horse of the Year (HOY) sixth-place finish for the Grand Prix Freestyle and USDF HOY at Prix St. Georges. With the Friesian stallion Tinus she won three USDF HOY titles, including Fourth Level and Prix St. Georges in the same year. Tinus also finished his career with a sixth-place ranking in the USDF HOY Grand Prix Freestyle. Both stallions won the German National Federation's (FN) Golden Horse Award for outstanding accomplishments in dressage.

In 2006, Sabine and her husband, Kristian Kery, moved to California to pursue their careers. They became U.S. citizens in 2008. Kristian, originally from Hungary, is a professional stunt man with special equestrian skills. He is an experienced horseman who benefitted from the European traditions of dressage and show jumping. Sabine respects his eye and honest input on her horses' progress. Kristian occasionally helps her with the young horses. "I prefer to start my young horses myself," Sabine says, "so when I get a rambunctious one, it comes in really handy to have a stunt man in the household." Kristian has worked in movies such as "Iron Man," "The Expendables" and "Kingdom of Heaven," where he doubled for actor Orlando Bloom.

Sabine's training business is now located at El Campeon Farms (sabineschut.com). Riding Cacique, a Holsteiner stallion owned by Mike and Alice Womble-Heitman, she won the 2009 Region 7 USDF Championship at Prix St. Georges and the 2010 USDF HOY award at Intermediaire I. Also in 2010, the pair earned a spot on the USEF Developing Horse list. Sabine continues her education with Olympians Christine Traurig and Sue Blinks.



Marie Kelley

Schut-Kery has performed exhibitions at many venues, including Dressage at Devon and FEI World Cup Finals, with Granito III, an 11-year-old, PRE stallion owned by Kathleen Kearney. Here she performs with dancer Ana Ayromlou.

Stretching Forward & Down



To improve *Losgelassenheit*, you can use stretching forward and downward both as a test and as a tool.

1. Begin with your horse working in self-carriage in a steady rhythm and connection.

2. Ease the reins out to him, inviting him to seek the bit. In this photo, he is beginning the stretch by reaching nicely forward through his neck and into the outside rein. (It looks like I have lost the connection momentarily on the inside rein.)



3. He continues to stretch down while maintaining his rhythm, balance, bend and contact to the rider's hands. Ideally, the rider should sit vertically while asking the horse to stretch so as not to disturb the balance (my shoulders should be back more). Sanceo shows good balance and scope.

thinking you have it when you don't. Relaxation is an important feature, but it is not the only quality. It takes a good effort for the horse to engage his haunches (to tension the nuchal ligament), and he will not be able to do it if you are just poking along. The horse must be receptive to the rider's aids.

Lightness is one of the greatest ideals in dressage, but not all lightness is ideal. If the horse drops his head down or shortens his neck, he may give the rider a light feeling in the reins, but it is incorrect. Remember, the horse must lengthen his neck and engage his haunches to lift his back. When the horse's back is up and swinging, it feels easy to sit and move with the horse. When the horse's back sags, the rider will feel perched on top of the horse and the gaits will not feel comfortable.

Stretching. So you think your horse

is relaxed, his back feels like it is up and swinging, and you have a good connection in the reins. But how can you be absolutely sure you have *Losgelassenheit*? Ask your horse to stretch forward and downward. If you ease the reins forward, what happens? Ideally, he will stretch his neck forward first, then downward. Not much else should change. His tempo and balance should remain consistent, and if he was bent, the bend should stay in place. If you have mirrors, watch to make sure that he stretches forward then down. Most dressage riders are familiar with the forward and downward stretch, which is introduced to us all in the U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF) Training Level tests, but it is so important to remember that this stretch should be available at any time, no matter what level your horse is working.

If your horse lost his balance, rushed off or dropped his neck, you unfortunately did not have *Losgelassenheit*. The good news is that this is a quality that can be created and improved. I am going to share some of my favorite exercises and patterns for developing *Losgelassenheit*, but first let's review the prerequisites:

A good seat. A rider must be balanced and have a cohesive and elastic seat in order to foster *Losgelassenheit* in a horse. The rider must have a strong enough core to be able to dictate the rhythm she wants. The rider must be able to stay vertical to resist manipulations from the horse.

A correct tempo. *Losgelassenheit* is on the second tier of the training pyramid, but a consistent rhythm comes first. I tell my students never to accept the wrong tempo from a horse. Some

horses like to go fast and choppy in the gaits, while others force their riders to beg for more with constant leg aids. Classically, we are taught to go with the horse's movement, but that is only true if the horse is moving in a correct tempo. The rider chooses the tempo, not the horse. Through consistent training the horse can learn to work in a steady tempo (see "How to Keep a Steady Tempo," p. 52).

Be a good trainer. If your horse comes above the bit or just goes flat and on his forehead, ask yourself if you kept riding. The stretch is not break time for you or your horse. You have to maintain the tempo with your seat, keep an elastic contact with the bit, keep the bend with your leg and stay balanced in the saddle.

Your horse also will fall flat if you have taught him to lean on the bit for

support. Stretching forward and down is a tool for your training but not the end goal. Train your horse to seek the bit, but also teach him to work in self-carriage and to carry his own neck.

If your horse rushes off, ask yourself if you have been in the habit of rating his speed with the reins.

If he drops his neck down or curls behind the bit, you are going to have to retrain him to stretch into the contact and carry his neck. Ask him to stretch forward frequently, but only to the limit where he can maintain a connection, then bring him back up again. As he becomes more stable, you can gradually increase the stretch. Carry your hands in a steady position and be careful not to take backward with the reins. As soon as the horse understands the stretching forward and downward exercise, I like to alternate frequently between inviting

him to stretch forward and down and then bringing him back up into the bridle. As your horse's scope grows, his gaits will blossom.

Trot Leg Yield for Flexibility

I like this pattern for developing flexibility in a horse. Bending loosens the horse's body just as side stretches do for us. When the horse is properly bent, he contracts the inside muscles of his body and stretches the outside of his body. The feeling of having a horse connected from the inside leg to the outside rein is a by-product of proper bend.

When teaching, I often encounter students who have the wrong idea about the outside rein. The outside rein does not hold back or restrict the horse. When a horse is properly bent, the outside of his body reaches forward and around a wider radius. The outside rein functions as a channel for the horse and helps to keep his neck aligned with his body. This exercise helps the horse and rider find the proper feeling for the ideal inside-leg-to-outside-rein connection (see photos, page 52).

1. Start at trot on a 10-meter half circle to the centerline.

2. Leg yield to the quarterline.

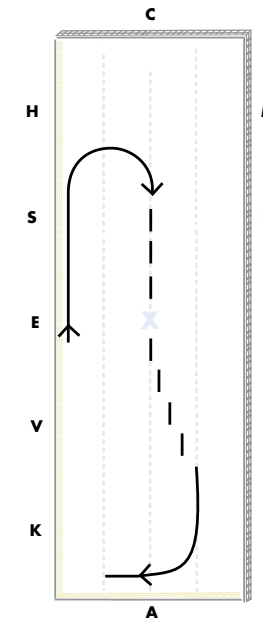
3. When the quarterline is reached, straighten the horse and proceed in shoulder-fore to the short side.

So if you are on the rail tracking right, make a 10-meter half circle from S to I. Then leg yield to the left onto the quarterline. When you reach the quarterline (approximately between P and V), proceed to the short side in shoulder-fore and track right when you reach the rail.

The Canter Leg Yield

The canter leg yield is one of my favorite canter exercises for aligning a horse and getting him to work more over his back. In canter, a lot of horses prefer to carry their haunches slightly in with the weight tipped on the forehead. This

Leg Yield for Flexibility



I like this pattern for developing flexibility in a horse. Bending loosens the horse's body just as side stretches do for us. **1. Start at trot on a 10-meter half circle to the centerline. 2. Leg yield to the quarterline.**

exercise will give you tools to straighten your horse and engage his hind legs. I call it a leg yield only because it follows a forward-sideways pattern similar to

the trot leg yield at First Level. It is actually different from a trot leg yield in that the horse does not cross his legs. Also, in a traditional leg yield, you ask

for flexion only in the poll. For this canter exercise, it is really important to bend your horse throughout his body.

1. As with the traditional trot leg

3. As you reach the quarterline, straighten the horse and proceed straight ahead in a shoulder-fore position to the short side (see diagram above).

yield, you can turn down the centerline or quarterline.

2. Ask your horse to move toward the rail in a forward and sideways direction.

At first, I introduce this exercise by working from the quarterline so the horse has only a short distance to travel to reach the rail. Eventually, I work up

to moving from the centerline to the rail. So if you are cantering on the left lead, you turn down the quarterline after passing A. Make sure your horse is aligned parallel to the long side, and then ask him to move forward and sideways to the right toward R. In this exercise, you are moving away from the direction of the bend, so keep your horse bent left even as you ask him to move to the right.

Ride the movement in a stair-step pattern, alternating between a few forward and then sideways strides. This helps both you and your horse recognize the importance of the channeling aids. Concentrate on bending him through his rib cage and around your leg and developing a stable inside-leg-to-outside-rein connection. You'll know the exercise is working well when your horse feels as if he is growing taller and as he responds to your inside leg aid by engaging his hind legs.

Troubleshooting: The exercise is not correct if your horse feels like he is bowling sideways, falling to the rail or being pulled to the rail as if by a magnet. Teach him to control his momentum by realigning him with a forward stride or two after each sideways jump.

If your horse gets strung out and breaks into trot, quietly restore the canter and repeat the exercise, asking for smaller sideways jumps while sustaining the forward energy.

Use these patterns, but don't feel bound to them. They are meant to give you direction but you can vary them, depending on your horse and what he needs at the moment.

You have only to review the training scale to discover that *Losgelassenheit* has been selected as one of the six most important qualities to develop in our dressage horses. Unfortunately, it is an easy step to neglect, but if you give it its due, you will be rewarded with a happily performing horse that is a pleasure to ride and to behold. 🐾



How to Keep a Steady Tempo

How can you dictate the correct tempo to your horse? First, the rider must know in her mind what the ideal tempo is, and then she must be strong enough in her core to maintain it with her seat and hips. Before the horse can deviate from this ideal, the rider must already be recreating it. If you have a horse that ignores your seat, work first on tuning up his responsiveness to your aids.

Responsiveness. Transitions are great tools for improving responsiveness with horses that are dull as well as for horses that want to rush. Focus on the quality. I begin with simple trot-walk transitions

before going on to more difficult ones.

Teach the horse to respond to your aids for an up transition as soon as you give a light aid. For example, at walk ask for a transition to trot. Think of your leg aids on a scale of intensity from 1 to 10. Start with the aid to trot at 1 because you want to be as quiet as possible. If you get no response, ask again. If you still don't get a response, go to the number necessary to get the right response to your third request. It is important to find out where on the scale you have to go to make an impression and get the desired response. Every horse is different. Eventually he learns that if he responds to a 1, for example, he can avoid a 3. Horses learn

by repetition, so be consistent and stay on top of your game.

Balance. Avoid riding downward transitions with legs off the horse and hands on. This puts your horse on his forehead. I make sure I teach the horse to perform all transitions in balance and from my seat/core, not from my hands. To do this, my leg and seat stay connected to the horse during downward transitions. I sit in a vertical position, keeping my seat correctly balanced, and with my body weight in the saddle, I don't allow myself to be pushed forward.

Bend is your friend! Remember this expression if you have a horse that rushes. Avoid straight lines and instead

work him on curved lines and circles. Avoid relying on the reins to slow him down (or hold him back) because the reins can have the unwanted side effect of shortening the neck and blocking the energy. Riding bending lines allows you to apply your legs while the geometry slows your horse down.

When you aid your horse to bend, make sure you are asking him to yield from your leg generously through his rib cage into the outside rein. Beware of trying to create bend with the inside rein as he will bend his neck instead of his body. Correct bend is uniform through the horse's body. Ride accurate figures as they will help you form your horse correctly.