

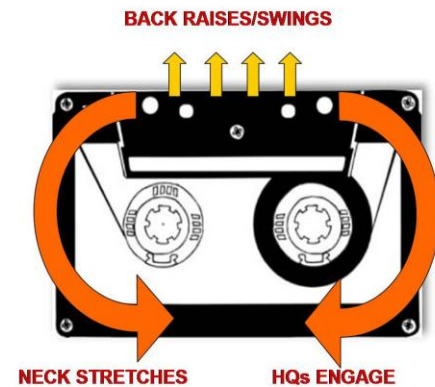
## Dive! Dive! Dive! (Not)

This business of “showing the horse to the ground” or the so-called “stretchy-chewy circle” of the Training and First Level tests is more than a valuable gymnastic. Yes, it is in the tests to serve as proof that flexion at the poll hasn’t been produced at the expense of the horse’s willingness to elongate from withers out to his ears. Yes, it is there to encourage riders to use it in the regular schooling sessions—sometimes in warm-up, sometimes as reward after a period of increased collection, sometimes during the cool down phase.

No, it won’t put your horse on the forehand if you do it correctly.

If you do it incorrectly, it amounts either to some version of cruising around with your horse’s nose poked out, riding him low but curling behind the contact, or getting the neck in the right place but leaving him lazy and unengaged so that the value of the exercise is lost.

Remember before Pandora and iTunes and CDs when people bought things with music on them called cassettes? (Only a few of us geezers recall Eight Tracks and LPs. Heck, I even had music that played on a Victrola at 78 rpm.) Well, if you can find an old cassette, hold it upside down with the tape itself visible on the top. Imagine the left hand sprocket wheel is the horse’s forehand. The right hand one is the horse’s pelvis. Rotate the left one counterclockwise while simultaneously rotating the right one clockwise. Result—you stretch the tape taut or, in this analogy, you bring the horse’s back up. Both ends of the horse need to do their share to produce this effect.



One key to achieving this is to orchestrate a controlled descent of the neck. Picture an old fashioned wishing well—the kind with a crank and an oaken bucket. Toss a brick into the bucket and watch the crank unwind madly and the bucket plunge into the water below. That would be an *uncontrolled* descent—which happens when your horse snatches the reins and dives for the ground when you invite him to stretch. Bad news.

Alternatively, do your horse (and your car) a favor. Make an appointment to get an oil change. Instead of sitting in the lounge watching Fox News or *The View*, observe how your car makes a *controlled* descent when the mechanic hits the button on the hydraulic lift to lower it back to the ground. That’s what you’re looking for. You could say that when your horse is stretching long and low, he’s still supposed to be on the bit. The bit is just farther away from your hands.

Years ago I rode in an invitational Karin Schlueter clinic. She was a German luminary on the international dressage scene in the 1970s. All the queens came with their schoolmasters and their double bridles to do “the tricks,” but Ms. Schlueter wouldn’t let them play until they could ride their horses long and low on a circle and

demonstrate a true connection by making a canter depart without the horse coming apart and hollowing.

Because the stretching exercise is all about the honesty of the connection, it may not necessarily be the first thing you do with your horse when you get on. You may need to spend the first five or ten minutes getting him enough on the aids and between the leg and hand that the horse will make a legitimate stretch. It might even be the second or third segment when you can maintain him long and low, get his back swinging, and prove he's ready for the serious work of the day.

A couple of related thoughts. When you're teaching your horse this concept, it's usually better to accept a partial descent—a bridge between the hindquarters and the bit—that maintains the connection. Then gradually extend the “bridge” by moving the “banks” farther apart. Don't go for an extreme descent right from the start and lose the connection and his back altogether.

Also, keep in mind that the mechanism that allows the stretch downward ought to be alive in all your horse's gathered work, even when he's collected. Keeping him reaching out over his topline even when his poll is the highest point avoids retraction and keeps him freer in his shoulders and looser in his back.

Finally, about that business of it putting him on the forehand . . . Imagine, not a horse grazing conventionally, but a “grass is greener on the other side” kind of guy who insists on nibbling at the grass beyond his paddock's boundaries. He must lift his withers and raise his forehand in order to reach over the fence and stretch towards his chosen snack. That lift and stretch is what you're aiming for under saddle as well.