

Directory of dressage sessions

We thought it would be interesting to draw up as exhaustive a “directory” as possible of the training sessions commonly used to prepare eventing horses. Better understanding, shared terminology, facilitating understanding of training and planning sheets, and above all clarifying what we hope will be many discussions, are the objectives of this fact sheet. Each session corresponds to a particular objective and is presented in terms of its content and duration, but also according to the metabolisms involved and the estimated recovery time between each session of the same type.

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Technical level 



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What you need to know before you start

A metabolic contribution suited to each type of session

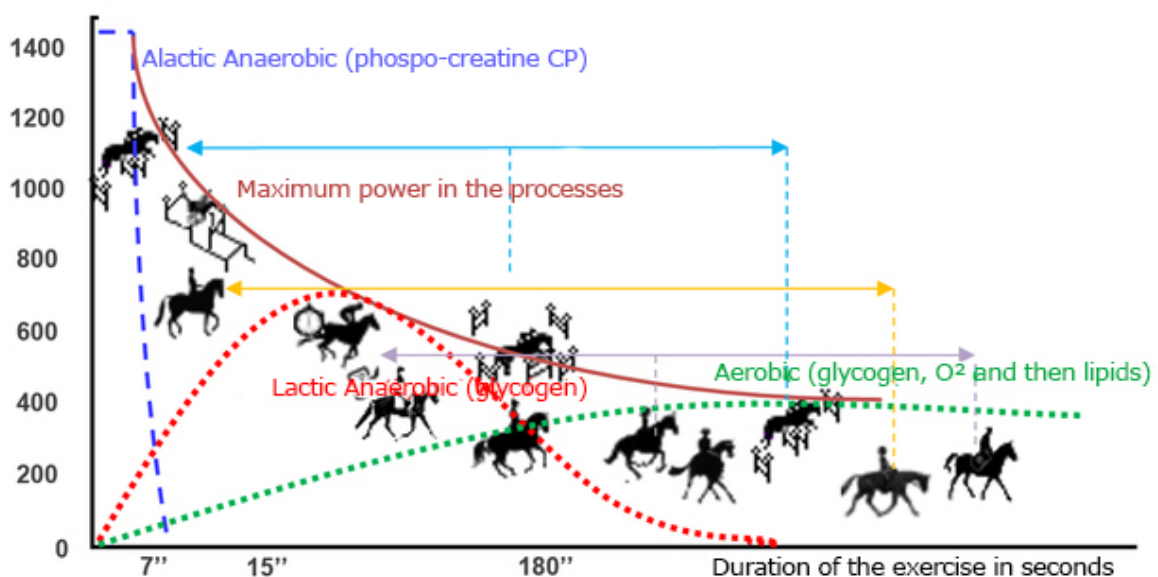
The form, intensity, duration, recovery times and demands on the muscles... depending on the type of session, determine the metabolic contribution for each of them. Ideally, it is on the basis of these demands that the programme and then the plan should be developed, according to the objectives set. The duration of the sessions should be adjusted according to:

- The age of the horse
- Its level of training
- The period in the programme

The sequence of sessions during periods, cycles and microcycles according to the characteristics of each rider/horse combination will result from this. All of these parameters make it possible to define training loads (energy expenditure, oxygen consumption and type of recovery required).

Shorter and therefore more intensive activities (e.g. cavaletti jumps or obstacles with full or semi-full recovery) mainly place demands on the anaerobic alactic metabolism; while an often less intensive and rather "long" trotting session will only work the aerobic metabolism. In show obstacle sequences, with repeated sequences and little intermediate rest, the anaerobic lactic metabolism will be dominant, as in a muscle strengthening session.

Strength of the exercise



Graph 1: Example of metabolic contribution at work according to exercise intensity and duration. Obstacles (blue arrow), dressage (orange arrow), cantering (purple arrow)

For each session, we define:

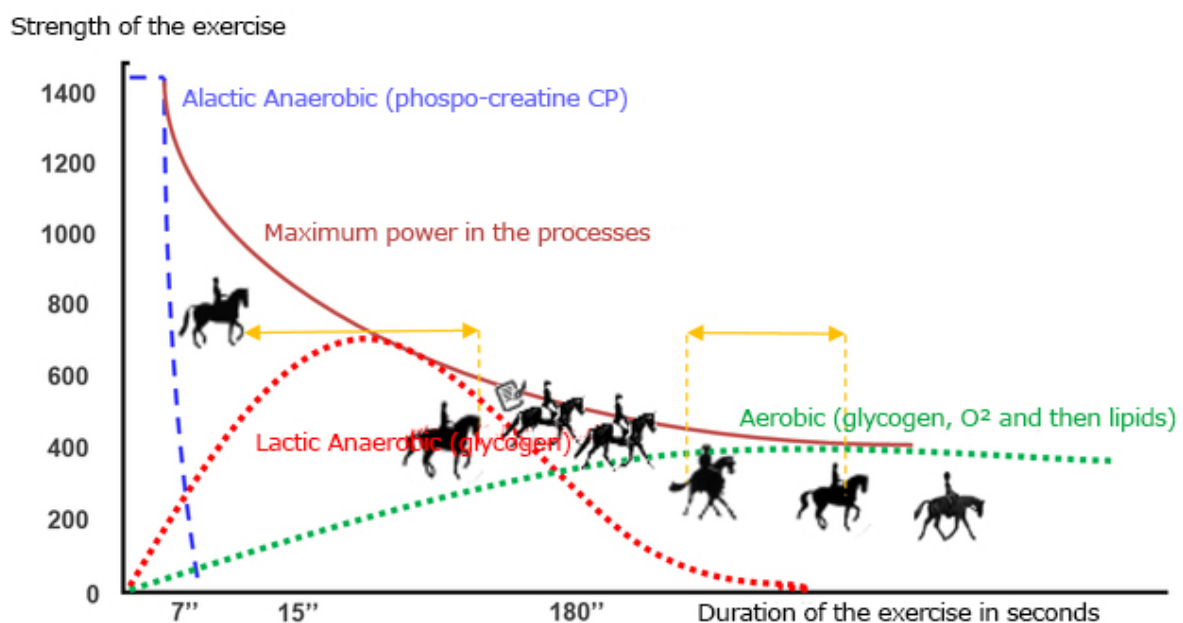
- An **average time** excluding warm up and recovery;

- The **necessary intensity** of the session, i.e. the demand or power (%VO2 max, amount of force or maximum height depending on the discipline);
- The **necessary recovery time** after the session: this value, which is generally defined according to experience, is key, alongside the metabolic contribution, and is indispensable for defining the amount of work and the sequence of sessions;
- The **main metabolic contribution**, remembering that this may, for equal work, evolve according to the period, duration, intensity and with a different management of recovery.

Directory of dressage sessions

More than the straightforward "work on the flat", a dressage session must develop one or more physical or technical dominant features that must be defined. To clarify, and although it is possible to hold mixed sessions, this chapter will set out for each objective the main components of each "typical" session

For each of these, and although this will differ in intensity, the number of repetitions or the form of the recovery according to the period where it is placed, we have summarised their relative role in a graph, according to their metabolic dominance.



Graph 2: Metabolic contribution at work according to the intensity and duration of the exercise - From left to right: from the cavaletti session to muscle strengthening according to the number of series or duration of recovery, warm up, continuation, mec

Stretching sessions on the flat

Using relatively long and extended bases¹ (attitudes, (such as its nose slightly stretching forward)), with a horse that develops its natural locomotion without the constraint of carrying out school figures, and with a view to improving the natural qualities of the gait. Trainers are looking for signs that a horse is developing.

Halter work with a long leadrope, adopting a horizontal and extended frame can replace mounted work.

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| Average length of the session | 20 to 40 minutes |
| Required session intensity ² | 40% |
| Recovery time required after the session | 6 to 12 h |
| Dominant metabolic contribution | Aerobic |



1 - Bases: This refers to the amplitude of the strides, which has an effect on the attitude.

2 – Required session intensity: demands or power (%VO₂ max or amount of strength)

“Technical” dressage sessions

The horse performs movements that are in the process of being learned. The session focuses more on the horse's understanding of what is being asked of it, the horse is considered as physically able to perform the movement.

Using preparatory work or figures the horse adopts an attitude favourable to performing the movement. During this learning phase, there are frequent breaks to reward it and to recover in order to maintain a high quality of achievement and concentration; working times are short and usually at low speed. This session should not cause fatigue or contraction.

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| Average length of the session | 30 minutes | Series of repetitions from 30 seconds to 1 minute |
| Required session intensity | 60% | 12 to 24 h |
| Recovery time required after the session | 24 to 48 h | |
| Dominant metabolic contribution | Aerobic | Depending on the type of session and the period |

Note: Apart from learning new movements, technical work can become anaerobic lactic over a short and intense session with reduced recovery times. This type of session plays a role during competition periods for example.

“Mechanisation” dressage sessions

The horse works on the movements in isolation or discovers new figures (half-pass, change of leg...). Maintaining the quality of the gait remains an ongoing concern when carrying out the exercise; the trainer is looking for ease of execution of the series of figures and the ability to repeat them several times.

This work can be more or less strenuous, depending on the duration, can cause muscle fatigue, decrease momentum, reduce the tension of the topline and deteriorate the quality of the gait (bounce, regularity, symmetry and pace). It may therefore be followed by a session on long bases (attitudes), whether on the flat, in the ring or over obstacles. Schedule progressively and alternate with less demanding sessions.

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| Average length of the session | 30 minutes | In sequences of 2 to 4 minutes |
| Required session intensity | 70% | |
| Recovery time required after the session | 24 to 48 h | |
| Dominant metabolic contribution | Aerobic | Depending on the type of session and the period |

Note: In the same way, mechanisation work can become anaerobic lactic over a short and intense session with reduced recovery times between sequences of movements. This type of session plays a role during competition periods for example.

“Continuation” dressage sessions

Alternating with movements on long and extended bases (attitudes) to permanently regain the natural qualities of the gait; continuation work focuses on the precision with which movements are carried out and respect for the gait, without seeking the brio of a presentation.

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| Average length of the session | 20 to 30 minutes | In sequences of 3 to 5 minutes |
| Required session intensity | 60% | |
| Recovery time required after the session | 24 h | |
| Dominant metabolic contribution | Aerobic | |

Muscle strengthening sessions on the flat

The rider puts a lot of strain on the muscles when doing the series of specific exercises. Each movement follows on from the previous one: the muscle tensing/muscle releasing phases are increased as much as possible.

For example, by following a shoulder-in with an extension on the circle, or a counter canter with an extension or conversely an extension on a large circle slowing down on a smaller one, on quarter pirouettes and then walking straight ahead.

The session can be predominantly developmental:

- **"Strength"** by demanding balance, support or rhythm, by the number of repetitions interspersed with a more or less complete rest or with a dominant "speed" (starting with a series of pirouettes cantering and return to walking);
- **"Cardio"** in successive repetitions with incomplete recoveries (repetitions of stretching and slowing down, successive lines of changes of leg while moving forward...).

Whatever the objective, the movement must always remain correct, since the aim is to make the muscles work at their useful length for the exercise and to optimise joint movements (a half-pass or a shoulder-in must be supported and cannot be without the release of the shoulder on the fold side, slowing down without an increase in balance and a loss of pace ...).

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| Average length of the session | 45 minutes to 1 hour | For example, 6 sets of 6 repetitions of 15 to 20 sec with recovery 5 to 8 minutes between sets (mostly strength) or 10 sets of 5 to 10 repetitions of 20 to 40 secs (mostly cardio) with recovery 2 to 6 minutes between sets |
| Required session intensity | 80% | |
| Recovery time required after the session | 24 to 48h | |
| Dominant metabolic contribution | Anaerobic | Anaerobic (strength) and aerobic power (cardio) |

The Warm-up

A presentation session where the rider repeats all or part of their test in the spirit of the competition.

Intensity is high, all the more so as the rider can take “risks” and seek the maximum activity compatible with the quality of the gait and figures and the precision of the track.

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| Average length of the session | 25 to 40 minutes | In one or two sequences |
| Required session intensity | 80% | |
| Recovery time required after the session | 24h | |
| Dominant metabolic contribution | Anaerobic | Depending on duration and recovery time |

Mixed sessions

These sessions, too rarely used in horse riding, are nevertheless highly relevant for preparation of the so-called combined or multiple tests, such as those involved in eventing.

The point is to work on the physical as well as mental capacities of the rider and the horse, to combine the qualities of different tests into the same session. The sequence of two or three sequences organised in duration, intensity and recovery time according to the periods, allow a particular theme to be tackled (balance when cantering, galloping for example, etc.).

Here are a few examples of sequences: dressage, obstacle, cantering / dressage, cantering, obstacle / strengthening, obstacle, cantering / cantering, obstacle, etc. The constant aim is for high quality work. It is also important to change the saddle from one sequence to the next.

From a metabolic point of view, the choice of a rather lactic or aerobic workout can also give this type of session a real added value. The important thing is that the objective of the session is defined before riding the horse and does not evolve with the work, without an objective reason for doing so.

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| Average length of the session | 45 minutes to 1 hour |
| Required session intensity ² | 70 to 80% |
| Recovery time required after the session | 24 to 48 h |
| Dominant metabolic contribution | aerobic / lactic anaerobic (capacity) |

Conclusion

The presentation of these types of generic sessions, which can be adapted to other disciplines if necessary, should enable the reader to create varied and progressive cycles and microcycles according to training periods and sequencing. The knowledge of the metabolic contributions of each session and the length of recovery time will allow effective sessions to be followed without harming or cancelling one another out.

The rules that enable the rider to adapt the session to the horse and the objectives, must include an assessment of the training load of each session.

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