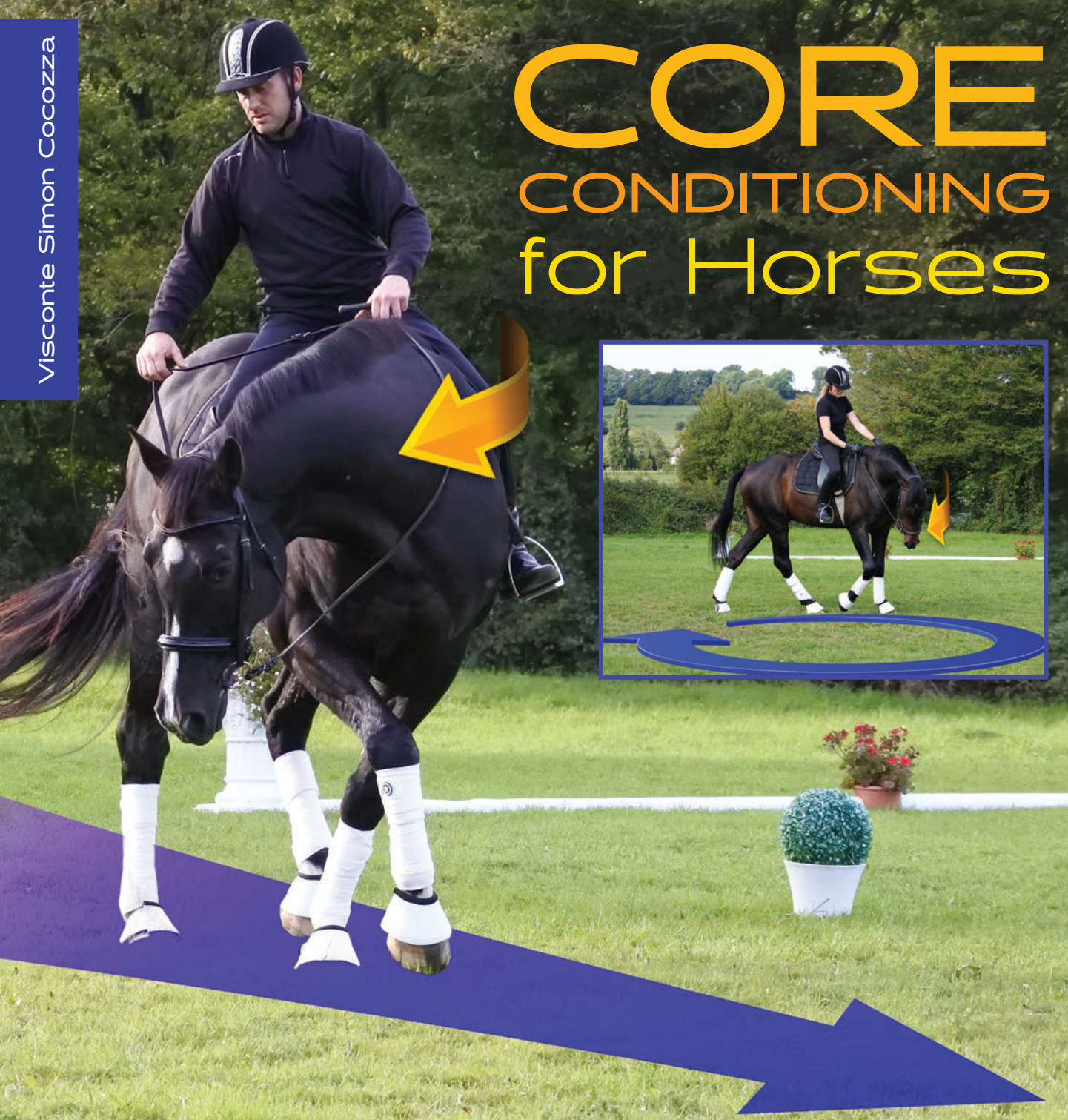


Visconte Simon Cocozza

CORE CONDITIONING for Horses



YOGA-INSPIRED WARM-UP TECHNIQUES
Increase Suppleness, Improve Bend, and Unlock Optimal Movement

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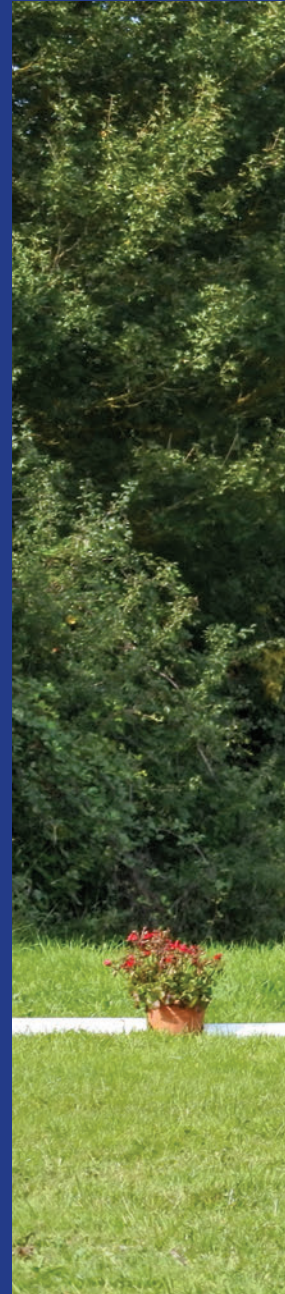
/ 6.24 / *Forward, Down, and Out* allows the back to find its full unrestricted freedom. ▶

Exercise 3

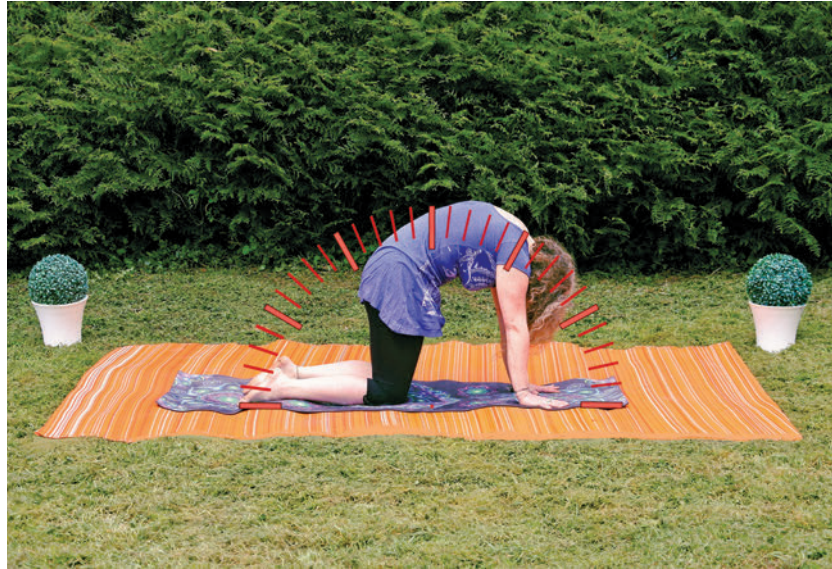
🐱 / **The Cat Pose**

👉 / **Forward, Down, and Out (FDO)**

The *Cat Pose* is a wonderful, natural, full-spine stretch for humans, of course inspired by our purring house guests. It gives complete liberation through the whole length of your back and luckily proves just as beneficial for our equine friends as it does for us. This exercise for horses—called *Forward, Down, and Out*—takes the longitudinal stretching of the back to its most comfortable position for the horse—that of grazing—and aims to complete the release started by Exercise 1: Core Release Volte in Long-and-Low (fig. 6.24).







/ 6.25 / The yoga Cat Pose stretches the human back in a way that gently releases tight muscle and stiff areas. ▶

🐱 / The Cat Pose

The *Cat Pose* is performed on all fours and involves arching your back and lowering your head, just like a cat stretches. This vertical rounding of the back helps realign, release, and mobilize the human back from the pelvis to neck (fig. 6.25).

This pose helps a human to:

- Gain flexibility in the spine.
- Strengthen wrists and shoulders.
- Tone the abdomen.
- Improve digestion.
- Relax the mind and relieve stress.
- Improve blood circulation to the brain and organs.

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■ ■ Core Conditioning for Horses

The Cat Pose promotes overall durability of the spinal column. It can play a significant role in correcting an individual's posture while relieving tension in the lower back. "The yoga Cat Pose is a movement that combines forward bends with back arches, giving your back the complete movement it needs," explains Indian yoga teacher Shirin Mehdi. "Your vertebrae become mobile, releasing all the tension trapped in the cervical, thoracic, and lumbar areas."

🌀 / Forward, Down, and Out

Forward, Down, and Out is so natural, it happens on its own. This stretching exercise is so named because of its relationship to the Head-and-Neck position we discussed on p. 132—it is the horse's grazing position, after all.



◀ / 6.26 / *By gradually allowing Wardance to stretch down in trot d'école, his back is put under a natural traction, lifting and separating the thoracic vertebrae.*

“Because of its multiple advantages, the work with the low neck constitutes one of the basic exercises of the physical preparation of the horse,” wrote Dr. Jean-Marie Denoix in *Biomechanics and Physical Training of the Horse*.

With our help the horse gradually discovers that he can move and stretch at the same time (fig. 6.26). Nothing engages the core quite like it, and it is so natural that once we have shown a horse he can do it, he quickly adopts it as a preferred way to self-balance in all gaits (fig. 6.27). This exercise begins with the Long-and-Low Outline from Exercise 1: Core Release Voltes (see p. 159),

This exercise helps the horse to:

/ 6.27 / The most natural posture of all: The horse's body is designed to keep his nose in the grass for the majority of the day. Learning to move slowly like this is a natural skill. ▶





◀ / 6.28 / The full spinal stretch of the Forward, Down, and Out HNP can release all the usual compression points, immediately helping the horse.

- Have a fully supple spine.
- Activate the Thoracic Lift, the Nuchal Lift and the Pelvic Tilt (see the Three Core Powers, p. 44).
- Improve suppleness in all locomotory structures attached to the spine.
- Improve body confidence.
- Reverse dipping in the back.
- Create a smooth and comfortable gait.
- Release all tightness in the back.

The Nuchal and Thoracic Lift actions become noticeable as the horse learns to round his back. The exercise gradually melts tightness at deeper and deeper levels, rounding and stretching the horse a little more in each session (fig. 6.28). “One of the most valuable early lessons in dressage is teaching your horse to stretch down,” agrees FEI dressage trainer Jerry Schwartz. “Not only does it confirm and improve his contact on the bit, it also provides you with a valuable tool for

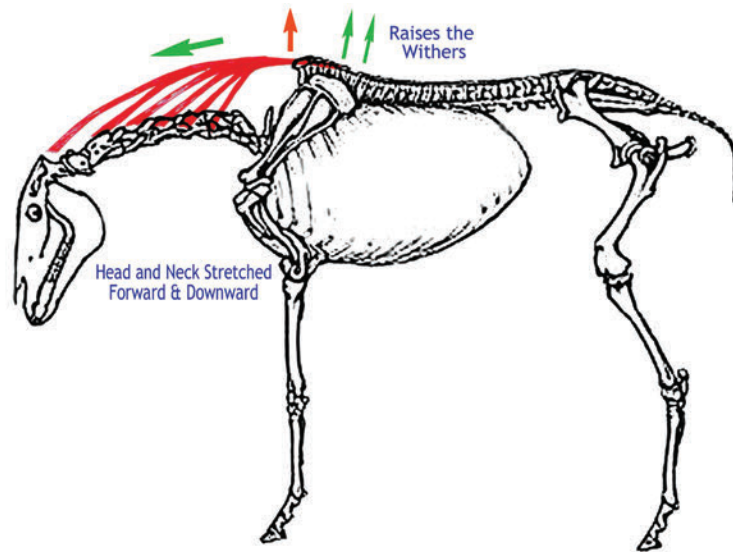
rewarding and relaxing him. It's something you'll use every day in your training no matter what level you're riding so it's all the more important that you don't take any shortcuts teaching your horse to do it."

This exercise helps solve these issues under saddle:

- Hard or unstable mouth.
- Uncomfortable gaits/hollow back.
- High head.
- Stuffy paces.
- Stiff gaits.
- Unhappiness; lack of enthusiasm.

Forward, Down, and Out is also an excellent reward and release between exercises or as a warm-down exercise in itself (see p. 186).

/ 6.29 / *The Nuchal Lift under saddle:*
By activating this Core Power, the horse's body brings itself into balance without any further help from us. ▶



What It Does Inside the Horse

Releasing the spine fully allows all of Mother Nature's physical miracles to come to life, whatever the species. As the horse's body gets longer and the nose can stretch lower, this activates all the horse's most powerful internal geometry in such a way that the core pushes the horse's back upward (fig. 6.29). Once the horse learns that by stretching his topline he can then shorten the "lowline," progress can be made in all gaits and movements because this postural improvement lets him keep himself round. In this way a once uncomfortable horse can be retrained into a very pleasant ride.

Core Score, Level, and Head-and-Neck Position

If your horse has a Core Score of:

- **4–5**, then do this exercise at the **RELEASE LEVEL**.
- **3**, then do this exercise at the **COORDINATION LEVEL**.
- **0–2**, then do this exercise at the **TONE LEVEL**.

- **RELEASE LEVEL** (Free-Walk, Long-and-Low to Forward, Down, and Out HNP): A free-walk on a long rein in Long-and-Low (Exercise 1—see p. 130), with the horse's head left alone to "bob" lower, into Forward, Down, and Out.

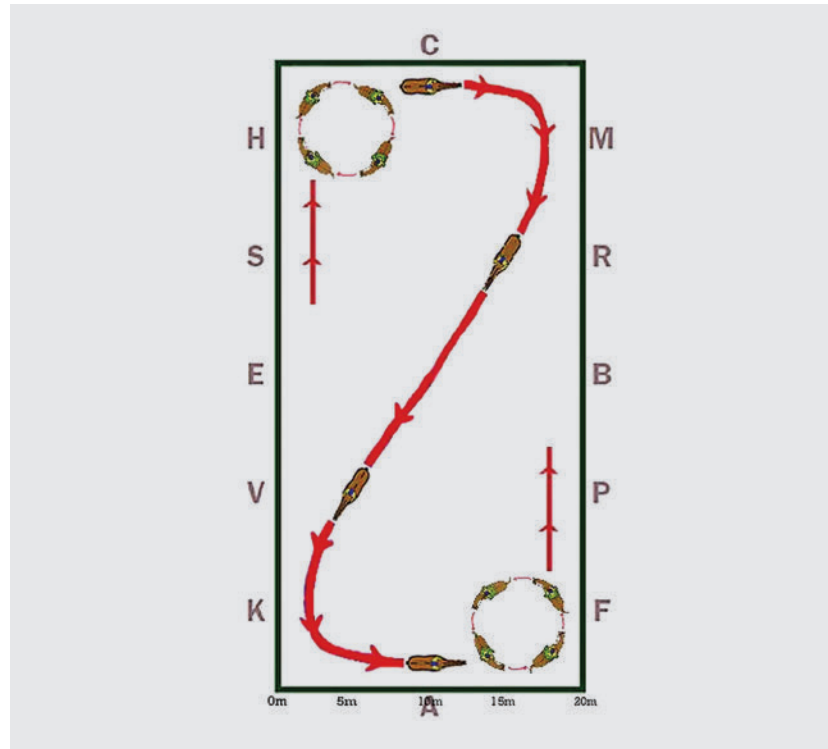
- **COORDINATION LEVEL** (*Trot d'École*, Long-and-Low, to Forward, Down, and Out HNP): In a light and unhurried rising (posting) *trot d'école* in Long-and-Low, simply offer a more downward hand to invite Forward, Down, and Out.

- **TONE LEVEL** (*Petit Galop*, Forward, Down, and Out HNP):
After feeling the Core Release in Tone Level of Exercise 1 (p. 163), allow the horse's head to lower itself from Long-and-Low downward into Forward, Down, and Out.

How to Do It

OVERVIEW: For this exercise you set the horse up well, then let him stretch into it (fig. 6.30). Speed and progress are entirely the choice of the horse. You are there to help him discover how free and balanced he can be (because *you* read a book about it!)

/ 6.30 / Forward, Down, and Out floor plan: After releasing the core, use the whole arena to allow the horse to discover how to use his body without too many distractions. ▶



- **STEP /1/** After achieving a Long-and-Low HNP in a Core Release Volte (Exercise 1, p. 156), ride straight away from the volte and allow the reins to slip through your fingers to offer room for the horse's head to stretch as far Forward, Down, and Out as the horse wishes. Steer with a light, guiding contact and always keep a slight inside bend, giving you the option of returning to a volte if the horse loses balance, speeds up, or raises his head too high.
- **STEP /2/** As the horse becomes more balanced while in Forward, Down, and Out HNP, begin to ask for other exercises in your Warm-Up Plan while remaining in FDO (as low as the horse feels comfortable) for very deep core suppling.

Common Problems and Solutions

- ***No Core Release into Forward, Down, and Out and the horse won't stretch down.***

Practice Core Release Voltes until the horse releases in the core and drops into Long-and-Low. While learning to stretch in this way, it is normal for the horse to raise and lower his head frequently between Long-and-Low, Forward, Down, and Out, and perhaps others. This is normal and is indicative of the horse “trying out” different stretches to find his balance. As long as the trend is mostly lowering, stretching, and sticking out the nose—however stiffly—the exercise is working.

“Through stretching the muscles of [the horse's] neck, it will elongate and his back will lift as much as anatomically possible,” explains FEI dressage judge and author Christoph Hess. “This process will do your

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\\ Rosie Hope ///

Rosie Hope



*“Stretching the back allows the body
the space it needs to explore its full range
of motion, increasing its functionality
to perform and enhance movement patterns.”*

“

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horse good and he will enjoy it. This is his natural position, which you can observe while watching him graze. With consistent practice you create the opportunity for your horse to seek for himself this ‘wellness frame’ more and more.”

Core Score Zero Goal

A 0 Core Score horse in Forward, Down, and Out gives the rider an incredible feeling. When developed to the Tone Level, a horse will be able to walk, trot, canter, and make all the transitions in between with his nose staying voluntarily at coronet level and in front of the vertical. It will look and feel effortless. Then, bringing the head and neck into a Competition Outline HNP is easy. This is the foundation of a sublime ride. ■

END OF EXERCISE 3

The Cat Pose / Forward, Down, and Out (FDO)