

## Gina Duran

is a U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) bronze, silver and gold medalist as well as a Certified Instructor through Second Level. She has won numerous national awards and is a popular clinician. She trains out of Greenville Equestrian Center in Livermore, California ([topline-training.com](http://topline-training.com)).



Debbie Hansen

## Motivate a Lazy Horse

Many of us adult amateurs cannot afford quality horses, so we work with what we have. These horses are often hard to get moving really forward. What strategies will help us motivate our lazy horses?

Name withheld by request

### GINA DURAN

You don't have to have an expensive horse to do dressage well. Before I give you techniques to motivate your horse, however, first look into the following:

1. Have your veterinarian check your horse's health, soundness and overall physical fitness. This includes doing a blood test and making sure there are no back or respiratory problems.

2. Ask yourself some questions to see if you are contributing to the problem. Do you have fear when riding? Are you timid or soft spoken when you ride? Do you ride with tension in your body? Are your legs gripping? Or, are you a rather loose rider with lots of movement in your body? Are you a quick thinker or a quick-to-react type of personality, or are you a more laid-back, easy-going type?

A fearful rider tends to distrust a forward-going horse and stops him from moving forward without realizing it.

A timid or easy-going rider may ask for forwardness but doesn't really ask with conviction.

A tense rider can easily slow a horse

from the tension in her body; horses are very sensitive to this.

Gripping legs do not breathe with the horse's movement. They inadvertently tell him to "stop" or "slow down."

A rider's too-loose body can be "chatty" to the horse. It's like excessive background noise to the horse, preventing him from being able to hear what you are trying to tell him.

A slow-reacting rider generally responds softly and slowly by nature, which doesn't help to motivate the lazier horse. In general, the quick thinker and quick reactor is a great match for the slower type of horse.

Offer your horse more variety in your daily program. If you have access to trails, take him on trail rides if he is safe. This is a fun activity for him and helps to improve his physical fitness. Ask your instructor if there are other riders who might be interested in riding in a group lesson. Horses are herd animals and usually enjoy riding with other horses. Put him behind the other horses. It might help his natural horsey urge to move up in the line (but only if it's safe to do). Engage your horse's natural curiosity by playing ball with him if your environment allows it. Once you have addressed your horse's physical and mental health, it's time to get to dressage.

**Engagement—in all its forms—is the trick to motivating a lazy horse.** This means engagement of the mind (focus and attention), engagement of the body (suppleness and throughness) and engagement of the hindquarters, specifically. (The hindquarters need to be active, willing to carry more weight and ready to move off). **Here is a great exercise I use to achieve this:**

1. At the trot, just before coming into the corner, I transition to walk.

2. I bend my horse into the corner with my inside leg. I use the inside rein to position him to the inside while feel-

ing for a connection on the outside rein.

3. When I feel an improved connection on the outside rein, I use my outside leg (sometimes both legs) to trot out of the corner.

4. When trotting on, think of trotting your horse out to the contact. There shouldn't be too many walk steps; the procedure must happen rather quickly. The corner serves as a natural wall, helping you with the transition.

When you and your horse are familiar with this exercise, try this **variation:**

1. Just before coming into the corner, ask for walk, but immediately "change your mind" and stay in trot.

2. Just as when riding trot-walk-trot transitions, bend him through the corner and trot out into the contact.

3. After the corner, use the long side or diagonal to send him forward. Feel how, during the first few strides, he will be more engaged. While straight lines usually invite a horse to go more forward, a lazy horse often falls on his forehand halfway down the long side. In this case, ride a 10-meter circle in the middle of the long side or diagonal to rebalance him.

4. Repeat at the next corner.

Alternately using the corners to collect the horse and the long sides to send him forward creates more forwardness.

Also, ride frequent transitions within and between gaits. When riding the transitions, your first goal is to activate your horse, rather than riding perfect transitions. Once he is more forward, start to refine your transitions and focus more on their quality.

Think on the quick side. When trotting and asking for walk, get the walk. But, as soon as you do, think *I want trot right now*. Don't let your horse loll in the transition. When cantering and asking for walk, get the walk. But, as soon as you do, be thinking about your canter aids, and strike immediately back up to canter. This way, he starts looking for

commands and becomes more attentive and focused. Change the program. Try not to stay in one gait or one pattern too long. Keep him wanting and looking for what's to come next.