

# The Education of Toti

A yearlong series that follows the training and development of a young stallion.

## Training Journal #1



### Who is Toti?

Totil Hit is a beautiful young Warmblood stallion I have known since his birth in 2012 at Dogwood Sport Horses in Georgia. He is by the one-and-only Totilas, who is one of my favorite dressage horses of all time (followed by Valegro and Damon Hill).

While I was giving clinics at the World Equestrian Games in 2010, I got a chance to watch Totilas in training. This is when Totilas had his greatest and saddest day, as his historical partnership with Edward Gal came to an abrupt end right after the Games when Paul Schockemoehle acquired the stallion.

I have been wishing to train a horse just like Totilas ever since. My wish came true when Sherry Smith, Totil Hit's owner and breeder, asked me to take over his education in October 2014. Our "Toti" had already been successful in breeding classes in hand (at Devon for instance) and it was time for his preparation under saddle and as a breeding stallion.

Toti's dam, Stellar Hit, is by the five- and six-year-old World Champion and leading sire Sandro Hit and is out of the celebrated dam line Wolken-tanz II (Weltmeyer) x Donnerhall x Pik Bube. She has consistently produced great horses for Sherry, and incidentally, Toti's older brother, Quintessential Hit by Quaterback (ridden by Alyssa Pitts), was described by Charlotte Dujardin during a recent clinic in British Columbia as "a very special horse for the future" that "she would really like to take home."

I believe that Toti has a remarkable conformation, with a superb topline, a naturally arched neck coming out from a long and wide set of withers, powerful hindquarters with a long, oblique hip and low-set hocks that will facilitate collection. His back is very strong and this is the area that needs the most work from my point of view, as strength requires relaxation.

Toti's gaits are powerful: the walk is long and fluid but shortens easily in a clear four beat; the trot has a considerable natural suspension and a slow tempo; and the canter has an amazing balance that makes him already look like a Grand Prix horse. The challenge is to make this trot rideable, quicker and more engaged, as suspension tends to stiffen the back and disengage the horse. Think of a deer trotting in a slow, stiff, elegant trot across the road, versus a tiger swinging in all his joints in a nice tempo but not a high suspension.

The Germans frequently mention that they want a "quick hind leg," simply meaning that they want the horse to engage his hind legs under the body, on request, in a tempo faster than the trot they were travelling in. We call this

ent the ongoing education of the three-year-old Warmblood stallion Totil Hit, or "Toti," over a period of one year. From backing to his debut in competition, trainer JP Giacomini will present the techniques he uses for Toti, working in hand, on the lunge and long lines, free jumping and under saddle.

*Editor's note: After receiving numerous requests from our readers to present this type of ongoing training journal for a particular horse, we decided to give it a go. We look forward to hearing your feedback. In the meantime, please enjoy this presentation of one man's road to educating a young horse.*



A recent conformation shot of Totil Hit (Totilas x Sandro Hit) at age three.



“activity,” and the quickening is indispensable to any transition toward collection, from canter departs to the development of piaffe.

It might seem premature to talk about piaffe for a horse that has not been ridden yet, but it is the same concept that will help the horse to trot uphill from the start, to modulate his speed, to be easy to sit and to be light in the bridle. In fact, it is the basic quality of any good riding horse, whether a show jumper, an eventer or a dressage horse. On the other hand, Toti’s canter needs to be made more horizontal and lower in front because it is already too collected by nature and this might go against impulsion.

### Training Goals

My vision of classical dressage training, from start to Grand Prix, follows this general outline:

▶ Obtain general **willingness** to work and behave with humans and horses alike. Good manners are fundamental to all horses, but are particularly important for stallions that will both breed mares and work as show horses.

▶ Develop **responsiveness** to the aids, based on the horse understanding and liking his job. The aids must be in constant diminution in both intensity and frequency. The better the horse understands and accepts our request, the more responsive he becomes.

▶ Give the horse a **symmetry** of posture and biomechanics that aims at his complete uprightness at all time. Balance is first a lateral problem (not a longitudinal problem until the horse is ready for a high degree of collection). This is achieved by a systematic use of lateral gymnastics to develop the **uprightness** of the horse. La Gueriniere codified those exercises and modern trainers like Oliveira and Shumacher have designed very useful training sequences.

▶ Prepare **collection** through the development of the diagonal walk which is the basis of all higher level movements. A horse can learn to move diagonally early on without any compression. This gymnastic has many benefits and is fundamental to develop the swing of the back. The other element of the development of the gaits is the lowering of the croup and the engagement of the hind legs in medium and extended gaits. This is done by the rhythmical use of a “soft” (non-stinging) whip.

▶ Once the horse is supple and collected in normal gaits, it is time to develop his **expressiveness** (which used to be called “brilliance” in older times). Only the symmetry of movement and posture creates a perfect cadence in relaxation, which is the pre-condition for the evenness of the gaits. For horses not born with naturally extravagant trots, it is necessary to teach them passage once all the lateral work is fluid and use this cadence to develop the trot further.

The great problem of today’s methodology is that the expressiveness of the gaits has become synonymous to the price of the horse and the high scores in Young Horse classes. Not only does this idea end up laming a lot of good horses, but it gives no opportunity to more moderate horses

who are very trainable. These tend to be discarded because of their less flamboyant trots. I have also come to believe that the systematic use of enormous strides early on in the trot work is responsible for the small number of horses achieving a classical piaffe, even at the international level.

The ongoing goal of training must be to produce a *horse happy to work, light to “invisible” aids, supple in every joint of his body, absorbing the impulsion coming from the rider through the roundness of the topline and expressing it through the fluid movement of his legs. A fluid cadence that still possesses some flexibility of tempo, allowing the horse to perform any kind of transition, constitutes, with the lightness to the aids and the roundness of the topline, the true poetry of dressage.*

### Who’s in Charge?

When Toti arrived and entered our barn full of stallions, he had to insist on demonstrating his belief in his genetic superiority to all horses. This translated into a lot of bellowing



**Top:** Rein back with the head lifted. This position temporarily replaces the weight on the hind legs, flexing them and elevating the front legs’ movement. Is very beneficial for the horse’s behavior as well as for his balance, even if the diagonalization is lost for a few strides. **Bottom:** Rein back with the head in normal position. The horse is diagonal and starting to round in his topline. The reinback is the specific gymnastic of the horse’s back.





**Halt by pressing the Endostick across the chest. This technique lets you teach the horse to stop from any stable contact on any part of his body associated with WHOA! We can see that Toti halted in balance (vertical front legs, first priority), though he is not engaged at this stage.**

and front leg high strikes, a behavior that is not acceptable because of its potential danger for the handler. Establishing an immediate hierarchy was necessary.

A young dominant horse is accustomed, since birth, to demand his way through all opposition by using his weight forward from the hind legs onto the front legs, bracing his feet as a means of imposing his power and pushing his head and chest through (the other horses). Conversely a submissive horse will back off in the presence of a higher-ranked horse.

The training principle is the same: if the handler asks the horse to lift his head as high as necessary, the action shifts the weight onto the hind legs (by the compression of the back from the front). The bracing of the front feet AND hind feet diminishes and the horse backs up. The mechanical leverage of the lifted head and neck onto the back greatly reinforces the meager strength of the handler. It convinces the horse that the human can back him off, just as effectively as any superior horse would do by usual intimidation.

This simple method establishes leadership very naturally and avoids creating a vacuum of authority that could lead very quickly to a conflict, either open or latent. Stallions who are unsure of who is in charge easily become aggressive.

As I already explained in the general principles of training, the horse will back with lighter and lighter aids as he gains understanding of the idea and will eventually no longer need to have his head raised. He will mirror the steps of his handler, learning to walk at the same speed as the handler, stopping as soon as the handler stops and says "whoa" softly. The psychological effect of this initial backing up exercise is profound and will affect all the subsequent training. The beauty of this simple approach is that the human is dominant but remains benevolent and encouraging (as opposed to equine dominance, which can be brutal). For every correct step he made (forward, backward or halting), Toti was lavishly rewarded and quickly

understood the social code established at my barn for all horses. This is why we have no accidents and stallions can stand in the cross ties next to other studs or even mares.

The same principle applied to entering into the grooming bays: all horses learn very quickly to "park" themselves backing up in the cross ties. The young ones imitate the old ones. Once it is explained to them, stallions also learn to look the other way and ignore the stallion standing next to them.

Toti used to have a habit of kicking nervously (while being showered, for instance). He never kicked directly at anybody, just as an expression of excitement, but it is still a habit to discourage. That was done quickly by a stern voice threat and a raising of his head. We do all our own feet trimming and horses must be totally safe, regardless of who stands near them.

Threats at feeding time are also strongly discouraged. Toti wanted to rush to his grain past the handler and put his head in the bucket, so he was made to remember that he was eating "by permission" of whoever brought him his grain. A horse protective of his food can become dangerous in no time.

### Bridling and Tying

The next issue we addressed was bridling: Toti had a tendency to lean heavily on the handler bringing the bridle from the side and avoid presenting his head by swinging it around, so I used the same backing action as a correction. We think of undesirable or dangerous behavior as a mental activity to be modified by a new understanding of the situation, but we must remember that all equine behaviors are always expressed physically in a very predictable way. A horse that pushes on the handler acts **forward** or **laterally**. The correction must consist of displacing the horse in exactly the opposite direction. Once the physical expression of the resistance is suppressed (or prevented) and the horse is rewarded for adopting a new position or a new direction of movement, he finds this new behavior pleasant because it resolves the previous conflict. Remember that "social peace" is intrinsically rewarding to any herd animal.

When I bridle a horse (or simply put on a halter), I like to do it from the front by offering the horse the opportunity to "enter" the bridle or the halter voluntarily. With Toti, who is a very smart and playful horse, I put the bridle first from the side, holding the bridle with the left hand and opened his mouth with my left thumb by creating a little pressure on the roof of the mouth. The educational component was to say "take your bit" until he got the idea of opening his mouth himself. After that, I placed myself in front of Toti (in the cross tie with a halter on) and I presented the bridle from the front while saying "take the bit" and rewarding him lavishly for doing it. I then slid the bridle over the ears and took it off by saying "give your bit," repeating it several times. It became a game and the issue disappeared. Toti now knows how to open his mouth and relax it instead of clenching his teeth.

At one point, Toti was tied up in his stall and he broke the (leather) head piece of his halter because of exciting activity in




the aisle. This warranted a lesson in tying. I placed him in the aisle and tied him with an old “grippy” lead line woven through a couple of bars of the stall grid. When a horse pulls on this kind of lead line, it slides slowly without offering a full resistance (a little bit like the “Aussie Ring”). This is firm enough to teach the horse not to pull, but it prevents accidents because the sliding of the rope offers a progressive restriction. It gives the horse the time to *think* and stop himself, instead of pulling back violently by a defensive reflex against poll pressure. Next I moved Toti around with gentle indications of the lunge whip. At first, he went to the end of the lead line (three feet), felt the resistance and stopped. After a few passes left and right, he figured out the exact length of the rope and stopped a few inches before he made full contact with the pressure.



**Top:** At the trot, JP has him spiraling in with inside bend on a loose lunge line. **Middle:** Toti stretches down with the low hand to the right at the trot. **Bottom:** JP has Toti canter in a round frame, engaged and head down, on a loose lunge line.

This short training session has many practical applications: it is the first step toward “lightness to the hand.” When we are going to lunge the horse, he needs to accept being pushed forward with progressive degrees of energy without leaning on the line once he reaches the end of it. It is the principle of the “fixed hand” that doesn’t pull but doesn’t give either. The horse goes forward from the energy created by the whip in the direction the line allows, but without fighting it or leaning on it. When he will be ridden, he will have to understand and accept the hand in exactly the same way.

When lunging was invented in the fifteenth century, probably in Italy, it was done around a strong wooden post, so the horse learned very quickly to respect it. It is important to lunge both from a fixed position (the horse yields to a “fixed hand”) and in movement (the horse learns to follow the “giving hand”). In both cases, he seeks and respects the “point of contact” regardless of the direction we send him to. Horses prefer predictable situations—they are the only events they can learn from and develop anticipatory thinking. If a horse is tied to a post and tries to get away from it, his movement will create an increasing pressure that will progress from one ounce to 100 pounds until he has to stop. The one-ounce pressure announces the 100-pound pressure. If the horse rewards himself by an early release (and is reassured and reinforced in his action by a voice reward), he will do it progressively sooner because he anticipates both the increased pressure he wants to avoid and the release/reward he wants to obtain. This is the very principle of the “release of the aids” and their constant diminution due to the horse’s increasing understanding.

In our next installment of Toti’s training journal, we will progress to more serious lunging, saddling and riding, but the basics of good behavior based on collaboration are now installed and the “school of the aids” has already been started. 

**About JP:**

*JP Giacomini’s career spans 50 years, during which he has trained close to 20 Grand Prix horses and worked on thousands of remedial horses of every imaginable breed, both in Europe and in the U.S. He first started colts under the direct supervision of Nuno Oliveira and later at the National Portuguese Stud of Alter Real, where he spent four years. He has produced international winners in all three disciplines and invented a unique training method called “Endotapping,” which is a development of the classical dressage methods he learned in his youth. Besides his client’s horses, JP also focuses on training the Iberian Sport Horses he breeds at his and his wife Shelley’s Baroque Farms USA in Harrodsburg, Kentucky. JP employs his indispensable assistant trainer Cedar Potts, his barn manager Kim Taylor, who has ridden dressage and jumping and practices myofascial work, along with working students coming from the U.S., Europe, South Africa and the Middle East. JP can be reached at [jpgiacomini@gmail.com](mailto:jpgiacomini@gmail.com) or at [www.jpgiacomini.com](http://www.jpgiacomini.com).*