

The more you change direction and bend the horse, the more you improve his suppleness and balance.

Special thanks to Lyn Morgan, owner of The Surrey in Potomac, Maryland, for the riding clothes used in this series. Contact The Surrey at (301) 299-8225.

Special Series: Prepare for Training Level, Test 1

Ride Figures to Create Balance

In Part 3, Lynn gives exercises to control your horse's body position to put him in balance.

By Lynn Palm with Patricia Lasko • Photos by Sharon P. Fibelkorn



If you're like me, you love dressage because it's the basis of all good riding for any discipline. I teach many riders who, despite their fears, have dreams of being able to take their horses to a dressage show one day. I know how intimidating this can be, but take heart. In this multi-part series, I'm going to help you prepare for one of the most basic dressage tests at a show, Training Level, Test 1. I'll demonstrate on the appendix-registered Quarter Horse Indian Harvest. (He is by Indian Artifact, and I own him jointly with Jill Crow of Denver, Colorado.) I love Quarter Horses because of their quiet temperaments and forgiving natures but, of course,

you can follow this program on any horse. Our long-term goal is the same as the "Purpose" of the U.S. Equestrian Federation's (USEF) Training Level, Test 1: "To confirm that the horse's muscles are supple and loose, and that it moves freely forward in a clear and steady rhythm, accepting contact with the bit." This is the beginning of dressage training for any horse.

In my first article in February, we worked on improving your position and balance through longeing. Last month, you learned how to make smooth transitions. Our short-term goal for this month is to continue to work on the horse's balance through bending and straightness. These basic skills require you to become a thinking rider.

The Theory Behind the Lesson

The main objective at this early stage is to control your horse's balance. To do this, you must control his body alignment. You want to align the horse's head, neck, shoulders/front legs, back, barrel, hips/hind legs while riding on both straight and bent lines. When aligned, the horse's hind legs step toward the prints of the front hooves. Your seat and legs control this alignment from the top of the tail to the withers, and the hand aids control the alignment from the withers forward to the poll. More specifically, the right rein controls the right side of the head, neck, right shoulder and front leg; the left rein controls the left side.

In the same way, the rider's right leg aid controls the right side of the back and barrel, the right hip and hind leg; the left leg controls the left side. To ride the horse straight (or keep his body straight along a curved line), channel him between your legs and reins. He is straight on straight lines and has bend in his body on curved lines. With this balance, you can have the qualities you need for Training Level—a steady rhythm, relaxation and smooth transitions. If you grasp the idea of controlling your horse's body alignment, which creates his balance, then you'll be able to

Rein Aids

1. THE OPEN REIN Your open rein positions the horse's head in the direction you are going. Using an open rein also teaches riders not to pull backward or to turn with the inside rein.

2. THE INDIRECT REIN The horse yields or moves away from the pressure of an indirect rein. It also is a turning rein. I teach riders to use their hands and reins to steer sideways, never pulling back.

3. THE "TURN THE KEY" EXERCISE

In the beginning, I teach riders to turn their palms up toward the sky or to make an action as if they were turning a key to unlock a door when giving rein aids. Here's why: Most commonly riders turn their knuckles up and elbows out and this produces pull and tension on the reins. When you turn your palms up, your elbows automatically move



1. OPEN REIN



2. INDIRECT REIN



3. TURN THE KEY

closer to your body where they should be. This exercise is useful to teach student not to pull on the reins. In the process of learning these rein positions, the student's aids become more invisible than shown here.

Turn on the Forehand

Turn on the forehand is a great training maneuver to teach and refine the leg aids and rein cues. It also allows the rider to gain control of the hind end and forehand independently. Decide on the place where you will do the exercise, such as a cone or letter. (You'll need to position your horse a few feet away from the arena wall if it is too high so he won't bump his nose when he turns.) To begin the exercise, walk toward the marker and halt (or shorten the walk stride) when you reach it. Don't let your horse step backward at any stage of this exercise, which can happen more often when you do the turn on the forehand through the halt.

1. POSITION FOR THE TURN

In photo 1, I am flexing Indian Harvest's head a little to

the right (open rein) but keeping contact with my left rein so he doesn't bend too much. That left (indirect) rein keeps the head from going too far to the right, and it keeps the shoulder and the front end from stepping to the left. It's important that you keep your center of balance at all times. I position my right leg slightly farther back, and I begin this move with my right leg aid to move the horse's hips and ask him to take steps to the left.

2. KEEP THE HORSE'S BODY ALIGNED

In photo 2, my left leg aid keeps the horse's body straight and going forward. It controls the speed and stops the turn. He needs to be steady and rhythmical. Then I'll use both my legs to ask him to walk forward after the turn.



control the beginnings of roundness as well. Alignment helps the Training Level horse have a supple, round body. His nose should be in front of the vertical. Later, the horse has to be more uphill and rounded. When a horse is channeled between your aids and aligned, you can ride accurate figures and improve his balance.

The Lesson:

Create Balance by Riding Figures

The more you change direction, the more you improve your horse's suppleness and balance. When you change speed or change gaits and make transitions, you're working on the flexibility of his hind leg joints and the compaction of the horse's

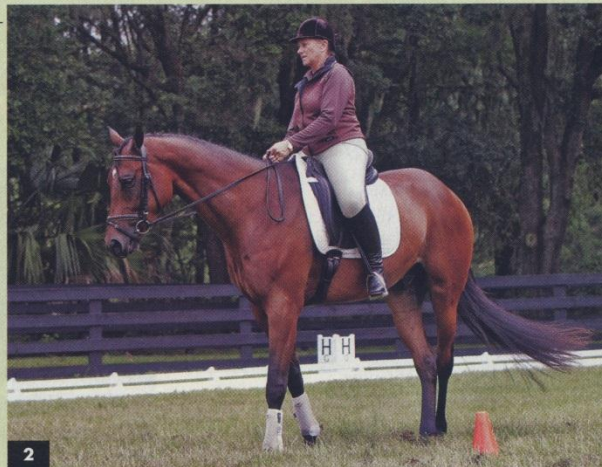
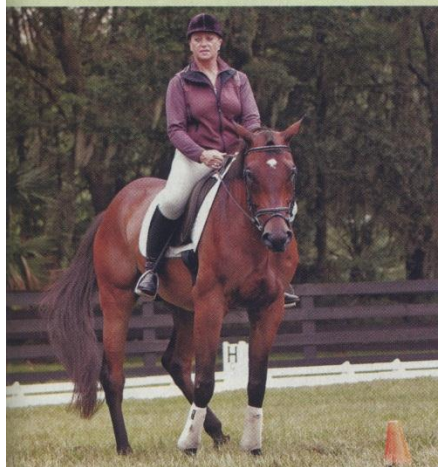
spine. You lengthen his body; you compact it. You go forward; you slow down.

In training exercises, you're also developing your horse's concentration, you're keeping his interest, and you, the rider, are thinking all the time. That's what I love so much about dressage: The many figures in the tests can help you achieve

The Training Road Map

The Training Scale is a progressive road map you'll want to follow in your training. It begins with **rhythm**; your horse needs to be steady and rhythmical as he walks, trots and canters. Next is **suppleness**; your horse's muscles need to be loose and relaxed as he learns to accept contact with the bit. Then your horse develops the qualities of **impulsion** and **straightness**.

Once all these qualities have been integrated into your training, your horse will demonstrate the ability to collect.



suppleness, relaxation, etc. and develop your horse toward collection (see "The Training Road Map," p. 65).

The figures I use to teach a horse to bend and move away from my leg include the "turn on the forehand" and little baby steps of leg yielding (see how to do a turn on the forehand, p. 60). Also, I'll set up

cones to make figures: a circle, a corner and a slalom course with cones placed randomly around the arena. These teach my students how to have good aid coordination, ride precisely and put their horses in balance. You can do this at walk, trot and canter (see "Bending on a Circle and through a Corner," p. 62). The circle exer-

cise teaches proper bending. I put four to eight pairs of cones, about six feet apart, around a circle forming a chute. If you have only four sets, put them at each quarter of the large circle. More cones give you more visual guidelines. Then ride the circle exactly between the cones.

You can also place the cones straight

Bend on a Circle & through a Corner

To keep the horse's body aligned while bending around a circle, set up eight pairs of cones around a large circle (20 meters or even bigger), forming a chute (1B). Space each pair of cones six to 10 feet apart. They give a visual cue and help you understand what you're trying to achieve. Do these exercises at walk, then trot and, finally, canter. Don't do more than three circles in one direction.

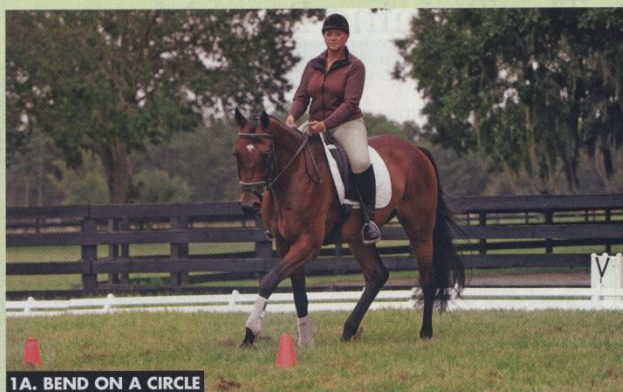
1. ESTABLISH THE CORRECT BEND ON THE CIRCLE

(1A). Flex the horse's head slightly to the inside with your open rein. Your inside leg is behind the girth actively bending the horse's body. The outside, indirect rein keeps the horse straight and controls the head from flexing too far inward. The outside leg is slightly farther behind to keep the hips slightly outward. Riding exactly in the middle track between the cones will give you a great guideline to bend your horse correctly and put him in balance.

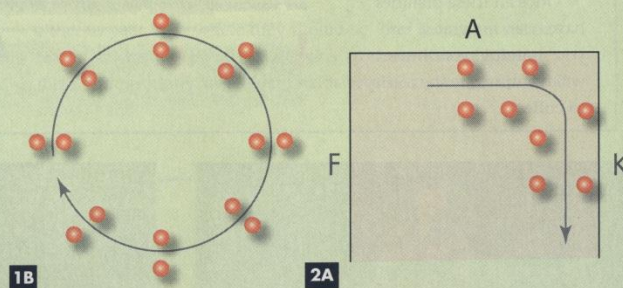
2. SET UP CONES IN THE CORNER (2A). Place the cones six to 10 feet apart. Bend your horse through the corner cones (2B) and follow the same principles of bending as you did riding the circle.

TO ADVANCE THESE EXERCISES

- Move the cones closer together, which helps to keep the horse straight and balanced during transitions and helps him from losing his balance by falling in or out.
- Place sets of cones randomly around the arena. Your job is to stay on the center track and make round, straight and curving lines. This will give you lots of practice bending and straightening.
- When the circle exercise becomes easy, set up the cones on a straight line on the long side or across the diagonal. Ride straight lines, keeping your horse's body alignment and balance between your leg and rein aids.
- Start eliminating the cones between each quarter of the circle and/or corner until they are all gone.

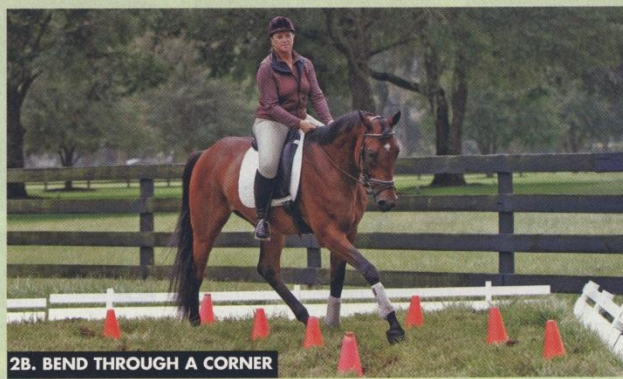


1A. BEND ON A CIRCLE



1B

2A



2B. BEND THROUGH A CORNER

down the centerline or on a diagonal. If you can't stay in that center track, it's going to tell you what aids aren't working.

Here's how to keep the horse aligned and moving on the track: 1) Your inside rein directs or flexes the horse's head

inward. The neck is curved (lengthwise), but it stays aligned between the shoulders.

2) The inside leg slightly behind the girth is the bending leg aid. 3) Place your outside rein slightly against his neck so the outside shoulder doesn't move out of

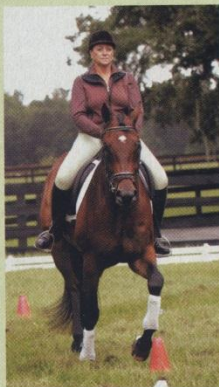
alignment and the head doesn't flex too far inward. 4) Place your outside leg slightly farther back than your inside leg. This keeps his hips from swinging out of alignment. 5) If a horse doesn't want to bend around the circle and loses his balance, re-

How to Correct Loss of Balance on a Curve

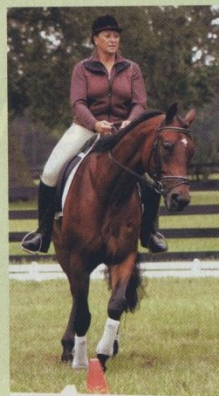
Normally, the horse wants to make one side of the circle rounder than the other. There is a place where he usually falls inside the arc of the circle and a place where he falls out. Often this happens near a gate or, in the dressage ring, at A, because that's where you enter. For example, if you're doing a 20-meter circle at B on the right rein, more than likely the first half (toward A) is where the horse is going to want to fall out. That's natural instinct for him to go toward the gate. When you're on the second half between E and B, that's when the horse is most likely to fall in. A thinking rider will feel the horse falling in or out and use her aids to make corrections.

1. FALLING IN: If the horse cuts in on the circle, he is falling in (coming too close to the inside cones). When a horse loses his balance inward, he will always increase his speed. To correct falling in, you need your inside, indirect rein along with your active, inside leg aid to move him to the center track. Once he comes back to the center track, you must support the bend with your outside indirect rein and outside leg.

2. FALLING OUT: If your horse moves outside of the circle (coming too close to the outside cones), he is falling out. Use your outside leg aid more actively and the outside indirect rein to bring him inward to the center track. Once the horse comes back to the center track, you must support the bend with your inside, indirect rein and inside leg.



1. FALLING IN



2. FALLING OUT

establish his alignment and get him between your aids. Try the exercises again.

Reminders:

1. Your seat aid keeps the horse forward and rhythmic. Your leg aids should always be more active than the rein aids because you ride your horse from back to front.

2. Look where you are going. Keep your mind in front of the horse. See his head and neck through your peripheral vision.

3. A horse will usually keep or lose his balance in the same places on the circle each time. It is the rider's responsibility to improve the horse's body alignment and balance before he gets to the weak areas.

Your homework this month is to practice turns on the forehand, bending, straightening and transitions using the cones. Don't forget if you want your horse

