

Training for Courage by Paul Dufresne

GAIT DEVELOPMENT: WALK, PART 4

The walk is important. It is the slowest gait, but it allows the rider and the horse to gain confidence in movements without the added ingredient of speed. Just as in Gait Development Part 3, we have to remember that any softening exercise ALWAYS causes a horse to be in a more relaxed emotional and physical state.



Leg Yield



Reverse Arc out of Leg Yield (bend decreases as horse gives good flexion and better balance)



Travers out of corner, also left canter lead position



Renvers about 4 feet off rail, flip side of Travers



Half-pass

This relaxed state will be seen and felt, as the horse will move in a looser and calmer way, often with a longer stride and a relaxed back while using its core/ring of muscles to drive stronger. I discussed doing fundamental exercises like the serpentine, then going into a roll-over and reach. It is a great idea to keep going back to the serpentine any time a horse gets tight/heavier in the reins. If the horse gives you a poll flexion easily, you can then go to shoulders-in, haunches-out and leg yields as discussed in Part 2. When your horse is relaxed and coordinated in these, you then can progress to the Reverse Arc, Travers/Renvers, then Half-Pass and Pirouettes, which will be the focus of this article.

These next exercises require more control of the body (the horse's and yours) thus increase in difficulty... but are really only difficult if you don't make sure the horse is supple before you start. These movements will improve the horse's balance, coordination, and suppleness; they are useful in spins, exhibition/dressage moves and trail, and of course will facilitate flying lead changes later on. This is a simplified discussion of these skills and one could easily elaborate considerably more;

but keeping things simple works best!

Let's start with the Reverse Arc. To set this up, you will first go into a leg yield. The horse has bend to one side and you focus the energy of your core to the opposite side just behind that shoulder as you elevate the inside rein. Your inside leg initiates the bend and then asks the horse to keep moving away from it to where you are looking. If the horse can do so in a relaxed and coordinated manner you can then elevate the inside rein just a bit more - almost as if you were half-halting - but now the rein asks the horse to move the weight off the inside fore and to also cross over more strongly with larger steps in the forehand and with smaller steps in the hind. The key when starting to play with this exercise is to not stay with it too long and only ask for a few steps at a time. You start a circle away from the bend, crossing with the fore and beginning to pivot more with the hind. The smaller the circle, the more the horse will pivot with the hind. I prefer to keep both fore and hind crossing. This movement will be very handy in the canter later.

The next progression will be to start the Travers (haunches-in) at a corner. It works well to do a smaller circle to the

corner, and as you come to the rail your horse will be bent on the inside rein. You then proceed to ask with your outside leg for the horse to cross its outside hind in front of the inside hind. Your inside rein will cause a flexion in that bend as well as your inside leg, but you may use the supporting outside rein to steady the horse so it stays moving forward in that bend. This helps to keep the fore legs moving forward while the hind legs cross. The front end of the horse will look like it is going straighter forward while the hindquarters will look like they are moving sideways. This is a great exercise but considerably more difficult than leg yields because you are moving in the opposite direction of the bend. This is a great leadup to the pirouette or half-pass but also great as you are now in a canter lead position with engagement of the hind.

From this Travers position, move both the front and the hind off the wall laterally and focus with your eyes and core forward and to the side behind the shoulder and start to travel in the half-pass, allowing the fore hand to get slightly ahead of the hind. This movement always has a forward and lateral crossing component of both fore and hind.

Training, cont'd



Half-pass with open supporting rein accentuating further reach of hind



Pirouette crossing both front and hind, more on front.

When a horse is reasonably comfortable with both the Travers and Half-Pass, you could try the Renvers (haunches out) which means the horse's hindquarters would be moving laterally forward with its butt closer to the rail rather than away from it. I set this up by travelling about four feet from the rail and cause the horse to bend with my outside leg aid on the rib-cage (toward the rail), then I ask with the inside leg (opposite to rail) to move its hip and cross. Your shoulders and core should be directed forward with the horse's shoulder and the hind moving laterally forward. This is the flip side of Travers.

The next great exercise is to move from the half-pass/Travers to the Pirouette. In the Pirouette, I will focus more sideways and behind, keeping the horse on its hind end. In the half-pass movement, the horse receives more

supporting rein which will cause the forehead to start travelling stronger than the hind, nearly pivoting around the hind. The hindquarters keep crossing but in much smaller steps. If you go from setting the half-pass for one step, then go to asking the horse to circle around with the fore for only a step or two and then straighten out going forward, the horse will get less congested. As the supporting rein slightly guides the horse away from it, we may even slightly raise it so the horse loads the hind quarters more, freeing the front end to move more than the hind. All kinds of drills can be done with this move. One may travel forward and then take a couple of steps of pirouette in one direction, then travel forward for several steps and repeat again until you have created a box with partial walking pirouettes at each corner. When the horse can do this with relaxation, you can move to full pirouettes.

The key to developing good lateral movements that soften a horse is to only ask for one to three steps of a lateral movement and then release with a short break of forward travel, so that the horse will have time to contemplate that it must be guessing correctly, on a looser rein. It may be useful to use a whip to support your leg when asking the hind to cross over. If the horse is a bit stuck you can open the supporting rein with a bit of tension which will cause stronger engagement in the crossing of the hind outside. The horse may have more bend

at first, but as I get better poll flexions there will be minimum bend.

In French classical dressage, the idea is to effect the change you would like with as little use of the aids or combination of aids as possible. I believe this is just good horsemanship, regardless of discipline, and will help any performance movement. When you set these movements up correctly, with as little of the aids as possible, you may even succeed in doing them by mostly looking at where you want to go, once you have the correct bend, flexion, and your seat. When doing it right, the lips of the horse will whiten with saliva and may have streamers. The horse will become lighter to the aids and be more relaxed... if you are doing it correctly.

Again, the key is to keep it simple and do it well. Never be afraid to review the serpentine, as this will relax an anxious horse, and also remember that practice is only good if it is done correctly and your horse is more relaxed/willing!

Paul Dufresne is a writer, performer, trainer and clinician in Pritchard, BC, who educates in Natural Horsemanship, Classical Arts, Liberty and Circensic Dressage. He teaches people to understand horses and, more importantly, how to tap into their relaxation reflexes in ways seldom seen in North America.

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