

Standing On A Dime

Paul Dufresne

Many of the most critical foundation exercises developing movement are the simplest. Now just because I said simple I didn't necessarily imply easy. Why would Standing on a Dime or reducing the base of support to that size be so important? Who doesn't want to have a horse that can really use its hindquarters without getting uptight? Wouldn't it be nice to have horses with powerful hindquarters to avoid any sore backs? You might think this isn't really for me, or is it?

Do you fall in any of these groups of people?

- 1) Pleasure rider who likes a relaxed long, powerful smooth and fast walking stride
- 2) Dressage rider who wants the extended gait with over-reach to be more than just a word in their vocabulary with a horse of flexible mind and body
- 3) Classical Dressage rider who may want a multitude of various walks and flexible lateral movements; Piaffe, Passage
- 4) Western rider who would like to ride their horse in a slide, or canter take-offs from 0 to 50 in a second or so
- 5) High School; Airs above the ground
- 6) Gaited horse person who would like their horse to actually do a Gateado (move cat-like) type gait
- 7) Doma Vaquera rider who may want to do Bullfighting and needs to do a slide to a canter take-off in one movement or maybe even canter backwards to entice a bull off the rail

As Classical Dressage trainer Craig Stevens stated... "There are three muscle systems in the horse. The first is the deepest. It helps hold the skeleton together and is not under control of the horse or rider. The second is postural. It gives the outline of the horse. The third and most superficial is used for movement. The horse can only control the second and third systems hence the rider can only influence either of these systems. Training can be affected from either. The least effective way to train or control the horse is to deal with the movement muscles. This practice in modern forms of training only manages to damage the horse and stiffen the movement. Training works most effectively from inside to out. That means that the postural systems must be controlled first. This is the source of the adage 'position precedes action.'"

It proceeds from the mind to the body and then from the postural muscles to the movement muscles. The classic masters of old developed this and I feel when combined with Natural Horsemanship approaches can be invaluable in setting up the horse for success.

Standing on a Dime is very simple in nature but does require some skill and practice to accomplish well. It is not rocket science and most people can succeed at doing this. In preparing for this exercise it might be a good idea to start in a horseman's halter, cavesson or later in a full-cheek snaffle bit. First we have the horse stand against a rail. Then we ask it to bring its head down lower than it was with slight pressure on the halter or whatever apparatus we chose to use. As soon as the horse makes an attempt to lower the head we acknowledge it. My choice is to say "goood" and release the pressure as soon as the horse complies. Then walk forward a few steps. In handling the horse in this exercise I choose to walk backward as it will put me in a better position to lead the horse as this exercise progresses. You will have to learn to walk backward rapidly. Once I get the horse to understand bringing its head down on cue just so it

The 3 phases of Dimesizing



a) head down
cue only

b) head down and
bring hind feet closer

c) head down bring
back legs right in.



a) Dimesizing with
head down

b) dimesizing starting
to elevate

c) dimesizing-elevate
departure

is close to the ground but not so close it gets distracted by sniffing it I am ready to progress to the next phase.

Now when the horse lowers its head I will use a buggy length type whip or reasonable facsimile and tap the horse's back foot at the hoof or pastern area. The horse may push forward on the front hand. If this occurs I back the horse off and ask again, always correcting it leaning on my halter or bit hand so that it understands it is ok to have light touch but not lean on the halter hand. If the horse makes an attempt to move one of the hind legs forward I reward by stopping the tapping and say "good." I will then calmly walk off 10- 20 steps and stop. It is important to correct the horse at any point if it leans on the halter. If it pushes forward I back it up, if it lags I tap it on the back of the body encouraging it to step forward with me lightly. We want to be able to lead it like a dance partner with enough touch to follow in harmony and hold itself.

The horse may progress in this without incident, especially if the leader has done some preparation with accepting touches and yielding to pressure with the back legs. Often people have not done enough preparation with this and soon realize their horses do not like being touched on the back legs and asked to reduce its base of support. If the horse chooses to strike back at the whip behind its legs, I ignore this and keep tapping until the horse makes an effort to comply. If the horse strikes toward the leader I back the horse and discourage this response. It usually doesn't take very long before the horse finds it is not worth its while to protest.

Now the really cool thing is that as the horse puts its head down on cue it naturally goes into the reflexive feel good position which helps release the tension in the topline and allows the freedom of the hindquarters to step under its body.

Now some Classical trainers choose to do this exercise with the head in an elevated position at the start. I disagree with this because the horse needs to develop strong relaxation cues which allow us as leaders to initiate anytime we want the horse to feel better. So any time the horse becomes anxious being asked to bring its head down the horse can't help but feel better and also release the tension in the topline so that it can be more athletic. We never can really over practice relaxation cues!

On A Dime, cont'd

We keep asking the horse to reduce its base of support until it can stand on the size of a dime. Then we progressively ask the horse to hold this position and stretch its back and then calmly step forward in a big stride with more and more energy. Once a horse can do this without any negative tension and with good balance in the Standing on a Dime position the leader can ask the horse to elevate the head from the base of the neck slowly and walk out for 30 to 40 steps. This helps loosen the connection from the back to the hips especially if we couple this with the quartering exercises we covered in one of my last articles. As the horse progresses with this we can then ask it to elevate its head without losing the back and bring the hind legs into the dime position. Once here all kinds of movements are possible. We don't only have a horse that understands relaxation we have a horse that understands position and posture so that now we can engage the powerful movement muscles in a meaningful manner.

Combining Standing on a Dime and quartering can allow us to loosen and lengthen any horse's stride, have them feel better and be much stronger. In developing a good foundation in this exercise we also can then access the multitude of movements available from this position such as:

- Energizing it and obtaining Piaffe
- Moving it into possible Passage
- Elevate further and go into Pesade
- Later to go into the Levade
- And then into Courbette, Capriole (with a crack of the whip)

I hope now you are starting to get the picture of all the exciting possibilities from this foundation exercise of Standing on a Dime. If you still need convincing on the significance of this Classical exercise please come to a clinic and see for yourself. I will show you and your horse what it feels like.

Since I was 12 years old people have been telling me that you can't do that with horses... dogs... pigeons... crows... rabbits... rodents... raccoon... and one African Lioness. Even at this early age I had heard of people doing wonderful things training all kinds of animals. I wasn't much of a reader as a kid but I did manage to read every horse and dog book in the small town library. I quickly realized that many of the training principles were basic and common to all forms of training. One of the things I noticed is that each type of animal had different behaviour characteristics, which influenced how they related to you. I didn't formalize my understanding of it, I just did it. Some things I did I would never do again. Many things I have refined on my own or through experiences with other knowledgeable people.

Paul Dufresne has an education background and has been training horses for over 20 years. His clinics and training are a blend of Natural Horsemanship/Classical-Circensic Dressage/Spanish Reining. His focus is on developing self-sufficient leadership that allows the horse to be a good follower, fostering confidence to perform creative movements or acts with Courage in his Training for Courage Clinics. For more information on training check our web site www.pkequestrian.com.



Ljibbe making an attempt at Passage from dimesize position in movement



Ljibbe making an attempt at Piaffe from dimesize position with elevation