

Training For Courage

Paul Dufresne

Positional Ground Progressions in the Circle

In an article last year I covered Bending and Releasing the Pole, as the key to Courage. The jest of this article was to use the horse's natural relaxation reflexes to help the horse gain lateral flexion, move into a state of a relaxed top line and enable him to begin proper vertical flexion. This exercise naturally leads into the preparation for collected movements.

When the horse has a relaxed top line and can assume this state on cue (for example, using a head down cue or relaxing his top line when traveling in a smaller circle) we can look at building collection into the horse's movement by setting it up for positive development.

First we have to realize that the horse's body has muscle movements or contractions on three different levels:

- the autonomic system, which a horse has no real control over (body functions)
- the positional system, which enables the horse to be in a balanced posture and
- the muscles of the athletic system, which are used in any athletic activity.

The autonomic system is not something we have any real control over so we will focus on the positional system, which is the most often neglected or incorrectly developed system. **It is easy to get excited about the athletic abilities and muscular fitness of the horse.** However, increasing strength in the large muscles of the athletic system without proper position or posture may reduce the quality of performance or can make the horse contracted and stiff. This often leads to issues that require specialists to correct such as trainers, veterinarians, massage therapists, chiropractors and sometimes, confused saddle fitters.

You can prevent these issues! Once our horse understands how to travel with a relaxed top line you can ask the horse to prepare to collect. You can do this in-hand with the use of halter, cavesson or snaffle bit. If you drive the horse forward walking just beside the shoulder, you can elevate the horse's head. Do this progressively, raising it higher every time. When you reach nearly as high as the horse can go comfortably, with a slight inward tilt you can then ask the horse to quarter by disengaging the rear, stepping under as the hindquarters move away. While doing this, ask the horse to step forward and sideways. The horse will reach under more, further flexing the hocks and increasing the length of the stride of the hind legs. The key is to do this relaxed and at the walk. With practice the horse will loosen at the loin and hip, causing a more



Ljibbe warm-up on circle, relaxed on bend, head below withers



Ljibbe elevated at stand preparing for quartering

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engaged walk (a longer more powerful stride) moving forward right after the lateral movement of the hind legs.

To use these movements in an exercise try driving your horse in a smaller circle, allowing him to relax. Then raise his head by hanging on to the inside ring of the snaffle bit using slight pressure to cause his head to tilt slightly to the inside. This should cause the hindquarters to disengage, pushing the legs outward from the circle. Then ask the horse to cross over with clucking or with a small tap of a dressage whip on the hind, asking the horse to step longer and across. As the horse does this allow his head to come down and step out allowing the horse to catch-up to you usually with a bigger engaged stride. This exercise can be repeated quite frequently but should have many short breaks when first learning and then more constant repetition as the horse starts to understand. When the horse understands the exercise and extends effort without any anxiousness, ask him to step forward out of the quartering with his head still elevated.

This exercise helps the horse assume correct posture, raising the base of the neck, and lightening the forehand while rounding his back while driving his legs underneath. This is all positional. When we ask the horse to step forward we are developing the power muscles once the proper posture has been established. There are many lateral movements that can be attained from this position, turn on fore, hind, shoulder-in, half-pass, pirouette, renvers, travers and all at a walk.

My last article, Thinking Outside the Box, also ties in as it also helps develop the positional system by shortening the base of support using the core muscles to posture, then using the large powerful muscles to engage the hindquarters into whatever athletic movement we choose. This Classical Dressage approach works with all horses in all disciplines. **Once the horse understands this proper posture, you can ask for vertical flexion without altering the posture, power and more importantly, the physical well being of the horse.**

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. See his ad below and his listing under Stallions/Breeders.



Ljibbe elevated and crossing under in quartering exercise



Ljibbe doing variation of exercise going into shoulder-in