

Training for Courage

by Paul Dufresne

GAIT DEVELOPMENT, PART 2: WALK



Proper bend and flexion in a serpentine



Shoulder-in out of circle or out of bend, coming back to the rail



Leg yield off circle or bend, coming back to the rail



Relaxation phase on looser rein after lateral movement

In last month's article on gait development, I mentioned how important the walk is to the performance of our equine partner. We started off with the most fundamental of exercises: the serpentine-roll-over or sweep or quartering (refer to glossary of terms). The horse bends to one side and then crosses under himself with his inside hind leg over the outside hind foot. The correct bend allows the body to move as freely as possible. This is facilitated by asking for a jaw flexion (or rolling of the jaw) once the horse has adequate bend in the neck, nearing 90 degrees. It is important to mention that you bend less than 90 to start with and work your way up to 90 degrees. Many horses are not supple enough to bend the neck to 90 degrees without getting anxious. The vertical jaw flexion is easiest to accomplish with 90 degrees of lateral bend in the neck, but later can be done effectively in all positions on a well-schooled horse. You should remember that any resistance to a relaxed poll should be dealt with by going back to warm-up bends and flexions as we did at the start.

The roll-over exercise from Part 1, which is the first part of a good serpentine, is worth reviewing as this lateral bend of 90 degrees with a poll flexion is also the best position to affect the beginning of a shoulder-in or leg yield. When a horse knows how to bend and quarter his inside hind across the outside hind, you can then take this horse on a circle, set him up in this bend and apply inside leg to the rib cage as you travel on the circle, causing the horse to gradually increase the size of the circle. If the horse shows he is sufficiently supple from doing multiple serpentines, travel on a circle and bend the neck to 90 degrees. Elevate the inside rein while looking in the direction of the outside shoulder and you will have the beginning of a shoulder-in.

It is important to note that I said "the beginning." In all lateral movements, when we begin to ask these of the horse, he won't know exactly what we're asking. Ask only 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 consider that he must be guessing correctly. It is the elevation of the rein toward the wither that causes a poll flexion; the relaxation is often expressed in the break portion of the exercise and usually lightens on the rein aids on the following tries. In French classical dressage, the idea is to effect the change we would like with as little use of the aids or combinations of aids as possible. In most cases, when done correctly, a horse that has correct bend while travelling on an arc will go into a shoulder-in lateral movement merely by using the rein aid.

If you set up the same way as above, but add more inside leg to the ribcage at the girth area, the horse will move laterally and cross with not only his hind legs but also his forelimbs, in a lateral movement, as you look to the direction you wish to move too. Should the horse lag on the hindquarters, make sure the bend of the neck is correct and apply a bit of leg aid to the hindquarter and he will be inclined to try harder with the hindquarters. As mentioned in the shoulder-in, ask only for one to three steps of lateral movement and release to a relaxation phase. All horses will be able to accomplish this fairly soon if you take the time to build it. Remember, if the horse gets anxious and stiffens, go back to serpentines until he calms again. I personally teach all of these on the ground first. **If your horse is confused in the riding of this exercise, go back to working on the ground where you and your horse can find success, and re-build again.**

If you want to maximize the gains from this exercise on a circle and your horse understands the basic lateral movement, then, as the horse takes his last lateral step before the release, urge him to walk out forward. You should find that first step on the last cross will often end up being bigger and stronger. This develops extension and power in the stride as the horse softens in the lateral movements with good posture.

Practice the circles with shoulder-ins and leg yields over several riding sessions until your horse can easily do four to six

Training for Courage, cont'd

strides of either with very light aids. Once this is achieved, you can progress to this next useful classical dressage suppling pattern: As you travel on the rail, bend your horse and move to the inside of the arena for three to four steps on an arc, then elevate your inside rein and look in the direction of the outside shoulder for a shoulder-in for three to four steps, back to the outside rail. Travel straight forward for a few strides (or until you are organized for another repetition) then bend inside again and repeat. This pattern can be done with a shoulder-in or leg yield. When done correctly, horses will soften and relax and some may drool. When done correctly, the lips will whiten with saliva and some will have streamers. They will become lighter to the aids and more relaxed - if you are doing it correctly. Again, the key is keeping it simple and doing it well. Never be afraid to review the serpentine, as this will relax an anxious

horse. If your horse is high energy and/or anxious or difficult to focus, try doing the serpentine at the trot for a while, and then come back to the walk. Have a great time riding your soft, happy horse! Stay patient as you are both figuring it out!

Glossary of Terms

Quarter or Quartering: *an old Spanish classical dressage term; to cross over with hindquarters.*

Sweep and or Mini-sweep: *a Paul Dufresne term; describes the action of bending a horse laterally and initiating a vertical flexion by elevating the rein towards the front of the withers area, while putting pressure on the ribcage with your other hand (where your leg would hang if you were riding) and then sliding it back towards the hindquarters. This causes the horse to cross over with his inside hind as he bends in a quartering movement. A full sweep will cause the horse to cross over and disengage to a stop. A mini-sweep will cause the horse to cross over and then drive forward, engaging as we urge it.*

Roll-over: *a term used by Buck Branaman and Ray Hunt; describes the act of bending the horse's neck to near 90 degrees and initiating rolling of the jaw (jaw flexion) by slightly elevating the rein in the withers area, as you then simultaneously ask the horse with a leg aid behind the girth area to cross over with his hind.*

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. In doing so, he is able to guide people in creative experiences where the human learns to be an effective, safe leader. The horse learns to be more emotionally secure and will respectfully follow while developing athleticism in a mutually courageous manner by having a deeper understanding of how they affect each other. Visit his website at www.trainingforcourage.com.