

Training for Courage

by Paul Dufresne

GAIT DEVELOPMENT, PART 1: WALK

Performance movement begins at the Walk. Many people don't know what a good walk is for a particular horse until they see it change, which can make the pursuit of it difficult for some. Nuno Oliveira, one of the classical masters, required his students to do months of developmental exercises at the walk.



Rider is sliding a hand down near mid-rein to take a shorter hold



Sitting straight as the rein bends the horse to nearly 90 degrees; the hand prepares to draw towards wither/pommel area



Draw to wither with simultaneous heel cue, horse crossing over



Roll-over at a walk; Easy displaying nod in poll flexion as well



Hand moving from pommel to the hip/cantle area; Easy preparing to move the fore



Easy continuing with the forelimbs

After six months of practicing only in the walk, he asked his students to prepare to practice Tempe changes (series of flying lead changes at the canter). Of course the students thought he was joking - but he wasn't. If they had really developed the walk as they should have by then, the horse's canter would reflect this... and it did!

I don't believe that very many people today are willing to be that patient. If we can be a fraction as patient and thorough as they were back in Oliveira's time, we, too, can be quite successful with our horse's performance. There is a multitude of exercises I can think of that will improve the walk, but I keep thinking to myself that there is one that stands out above the rest. It is better to learn one simple exercise and do it VERY well, than to try many and do them poorly.

Keeping it simple, that one exercise is a good Serpentine that develops into a roll-over and reach. I consider this exercise one move, because I teach the quartering with bend and a poll flexion first. Then, when the horse has this, I progress to the second part - the reaching of the forequarters. This exercise will improve a horse for any discipline.

All I have to do is look at the qualities that constitute a good athletic walk to know why this is one of the best building blocks. A correct walk shows a top line with good posture - relaxed and round - so that maximum range of motion is possible with the least amount of effort, as well as a good supporting posture to carry the rider. It shows ground-covering engagement of the hindquarters with suppleness in the hip and back, enough so that the horse can easily cross its midline and then drive forward with loose forequarters allowing maximum motion while maintaining the integrity of the joints, as it carries its weight mostly on the hind.

Setting up the Roll-Over and Reach

First, slide your hand partway down the rein, then open the rein so the horse is bent 90 degrees at the neck. When the horse is in this position make sure you are upright and balanced. You will draw the rein toward the pommel or withers area as you simultaneously use your heel to move the horse's inside hip over. The key is to make sure you have a good bend without tilting the horse's head; when you draw the rein you will cause a jaw flexion or rolling of the jaw. This will help loosen the horse's poll and back and assist with emotional well-being. The horse will then take its inside hind leg and cross in front of the opposite hind leg. If all I do is the bend and crossing over of the hind legs for a step or two, then change rein and go to the other side, this would be the start of a quality serpentine.

When the horse is responsive to crossing, I give a slight release of the rein. If the horse gives a slight downward nod of the head on the release I know the horse had a relaxing poll flexion. I do this maneuver until the horse is able to relax through it with a smooth and large range of motion. When the horse can do this roll-over or quartering motion without my muscling it around, I add the Reach.

As the horse crosses with its hindquarter by the rail for half a circle, I take the inside rein that was drawn to the pommel and draw this rein towards my hip while supporting the neck of the horse with the outside rein as well. Thus the horse maintains bend throughout the portion of this move as the forelegs reach around and across each other, moving slightly forward (essentially a turn on the haunches).

This exercise, when done correctly, improves suppleness in the horse, loosens the poll and increases responsiveness in a yield of the hip. It improves a horse's ability to drive forward, collect itself and balance itself, and increases range of motion, fluidity

Training for Courage, cont'd



Easy walking the forelimbs; walking through



Easy doing a jump through of the fore (should be done once a horse knows how to walk-through first)

of the hind and looseness of shoulders. It improves lightness of direct and indirect rein, emotional well-being, and readiness for lateral yields because the horse has good lateral bend and vertical flexion. This exercise is great preparation for canter leads, as the horse will actually engage its hip when you ask it to cross and pick up the correct lead.

*When asking the horse to quarter, ask it to step forward strongly after it has made a big step across with its hindquarter, to cause an increase in stride and engagement, as the horse will have softened in the bend and jaw flexion.

* If the horse has a bit of difficulty with the reach, have it face the rail with bend and then ask it to keep moving in the direction of the bend. You can also bump it on the opposite shoulder with your foot suggesting it try to move over as in a roll-back.

* Timing is something you learn. Ask a foot to move as it just lifts off the ground. If we ask the horse to move a leg when it is supporting most of its weight on it, the horse will feel very

heavy to the aid. If you suggest the horse should move in a direction as soon as it changes its balance to lift a foot, you can put more guidance in moving it. This exercise will be discussed in my Endotapping demonstrations at the LMQHA Quarter Horse Bazaar on March 18th.

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.