

Exercises – Their Purpose and Correct Execution – Part 2
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When you read a book or a magazine about riding, do you ever put the pages down and imagine yourself practicing what you just read? Do you ever stop riding while you are experiencing a problem riding a particular exercise with your horse and try to remember a solution to a similar situation you read or heard about? It happens to me quite frequently, even more so when I am writing. When I describe a problem on horseback and offer a solution, I often visualize and feelalize my advice to make sure that it has a chance to work. I also examine the solution for correctness in theory. It is foolish in my way of thinking not to benefit from the mistakes others have made and the corrections they have found to be effective with most horses.

Theory and practice are interconnected. One loses meaning without the other; at least it does so for the serious student and rider. Nothing about training and riding of horses is really new. I believe the most often quoted author is still Steinbrecht, and the most universal training system is the training scale which in turn is based upon Steinbrecht's book, The Gymnasium of the Horse. That was started well over a century ago yet I believe the performances have improved. For this we must thank the breeders. Several trainers have tried different methods of training but have returned to the training scale. It is perfectly natural for competitive persons to want to improve their performances at all times, which is why we continue to look for new ways to get more out of our horses. In my opinion the answer to this ambition lies in perfecting our work within the proven system and not in trying to re-invent the wheel.

Since I want to concentrate on the exercises, their purpose and their correct execution, it may be a good idea for you to search back in the HDS newsletters of May and June 2004, and read the articles, "The Aids – A System of Communicating With Your Horse," and the April edition, "Riding, A Dialog Between Horse and Rider." You may also find them by going to my website, www.tex-overfarms.com, and looking under, "Articles."

One of my former instructors and friend, Uwe Wiechmann, used to say, "The easiest and fastest way to get your horse to perform for you is by riding the appropriate exercises correctly." This statement contains three major points to consider. Point one is that exercises are the easiest way, point two is to choose the appropriate ones, and point three is to ride the exercises the way they were designed.

We hear it said that practice makes perfect. The truth is that only perfect practice makes perfect. If we then combine this truth with Uwe Wiechmann's statement, we must, in order to progress with our horses, ride exercises and ride them perfectly correctly. That sounds so easy and self evident that you might wonder why I even bother to write about it. The simple fact is that it is very difficult. Every time you start an exercise you take your horse out of its comfort zone. Up to this point you rode your horse under the minimal conditions of rhythmic gaits, supple body and on the bit. You have to fulfill these conditions to be able to call even a ride on a straight line good. Any work at first level adds the requirement of a degree of impulsion. Exercises at second level require a degree of straightness and the beginnings of collection. "All right," you say, "So you know the training scale." Let us go and ride a twenty meter circle while maintaining in our horse all the conditions necessary to fulfill the demands of the training scale.

Well, was it perfectly round and your horse did not change his rhythm? Did he stay supple throughout and not once did he feel like he was going to object? If you feel that was how it happened, you must have done a great job training your horse and riding the circle. How many judges have agreed with you and awarded your circles with a ten?

They do not award many tens and there is a good reason for that. Usually it is because the shape did not look quite round or the horse lost its straightness. Sometimes the horse showed resistance to the bend or slowed down due to the increased load on the inside hind leg. If one or several of these problems happened to you on a twenty meter circle you must now decide how best to improve your horse's work. I would start by making him more supple by working him in exercises designed for just that purpose.

At this point I feel I must make sure you understand the place the exercises play in the training of the horse. They have no purpose of their own but are strictly tools to improve the horse's way of going, its suppleness, obedience, and comfort for the rider.

Is riding a circle considered an exercise? Yes it is, and a great one. You can vary its degree of difficulty by changing its size, the number of repetitions, changing from one hand to the other and spiraling in and out. But again, it is only helpful if you ride it correctly so it makes more sense to ride a large circle well than to ride a small circle on a struggling horse. Now let me describe a circle for you. It is round. That means the circle line is at an equal distance from its center at all points. Now, let me translate that into its appearance in the dressage ring. The spine of your horse is bent equally throughout its body and to the same degree as the circle line. I am describing the center circle of the dressage arena. We give it four circle points: One at the rail (E), one at the crossing of the centerline, one at the opposite rail (B), and the fourth at the next crossing of the centerline. This divides the circle into four quadrants. In a perfect circle these quadrants are exactly equal. The body of the horse is parallel to either the short or the long side of the arena every time he passes a circle point. If your circle looks like that and your horse stayed forward and on the bit, you deserve a ten.

While riding exercises to supple your horse you will also strengthen him. Ride straight lines in position and round off the corners. The benefits are doubled in this exercise because you have the loosening effect of the flexion in the poll and the bending in the corner since it represents a quarter of a circle. Most horses will handle a corner well if it is rounded enough for their level of work and if they are properly prepared through the positioning on the straight line. Next, add a half circle to your program. Ride, for instance, two large corners at F and K followed by a half circle from E to B, and ride the two large corners again. Change rein through any diagonal and repeat the combination of exercises on the other hand. It is the constant change in the degree of bend between the corners, the straight lines and the half circle that achieve the suppling. Notice that only if you ride correctly enough that these subtle changes will occur.

Another exercise to help in loosening your horse is the leg yield. It also helps to confirm your horse on the outside rein. How casual we are at times about the training of our horses was driven home to me by a conversation I overheard between a coach and his student. The student was lamenting that her horse had a hard time with the leg yield. The coach answered by saying something to this effect. "Don't worry, you only need it for first level." While I agree that the leg yield loses its value at the higher levels, it still is an unfortunate misunderstanding of the purpose of exercises. The leg yield is not designed to test your horse, but to teach it to move away from the pressure of your leg and to stretch the shoulders and the croup. This in turn along with the movements of the joints will improve the suppleness of the young horse. The reason the test writers included the leg yield in the test is to insure that your horse has acquired the skills necessary to move on to the next level.

The last paragraph already mentioned the dual purpose of the leg yield, teaching the yielding to the sideways driving leg and the suppling of shoulder and croup. There is, in my opinion, a third very important effect of the exercise. When executed correctly the leg yield helps establish the horse on the outside rein. Like with many exercises they require a skill from the horse but then improve it. The horse must be accepting in the outside aids in order to execute the leg yield correctly, but by doing that the horse will improve its connection to the outside aids.

There are basically three ways in which we can ride the leg yield. We can move our horse away from the long side toward the centerline or from the centerline toward the rail. We can also ask our horse to yield to the rider's leg along the rail with its tail to the rail. A third possibility is to leg yield along the rail with the head to the rail. The criteria for correctness would be the same in all cases. The horse is straight with a slight flexion in the poll away from the direction of movement. When riding away from the rail the horse's body should be parallel to the rail and when traveling along the rail it should be at an angle of about thirty to forty degrees. That means that front and hind legs must cross at the same amount. The rider asks for the leg yield by moving the inside leg slightly behind the girth and pushing the horse's body sideways. Remember by moving to the right the horse is flexed to the left so the left is the inside. Let us stay with the example of the leg yield right. The most common mistakes would be a horse that is too bent in the neck, leading with the hindquarters, rushing forward or just simply moving on a diagonal line toward the center or side of the arena, not crossing in the legs.

The underlying cause for just about all of these mistakes is that the horse does not understand or properly react to the sideways driving leg of the rider. The best way to teach the horse that particular leg effect is the turn around the forehand. To me this is one exercise you can forget about as soon as it has fulfilled its purpose of helping the horse understand the sideways driving leg. The reason I feel that way is that we work constantly to shift our horse's weight away from the forehand while the turn around the forehand loads the weight onto the forehand. To minimize that effect I like to teach it first in-hand. If I want my horse to move away from pressure behind the girth on the left side and move his hindquarters to the right, I stand on his left side, put my hand where my leg would be as though I were mounted, and apply pressure. The natural temptation will be to help the pushing hand by pulling his head toward me to the left. To a small degree that is fine but please remember that you are teaching him to yield to the pressure on his side, not to a pull on the rein. Just ask for a step at a time. You do not want him to rush around. Once he moves around step by step and you no longer have to help with a pull on the rein, he is ready to start under saddle.

Mount, flex his poll to the side away from the direction of movement, move your inside leg back a little and apply pressure with it. If he does not listen, help your leg with a little tap of the whip behind the leg. When he steps over one step, stop the leg pressure and repeat it. As soon as possible start to move to the leg yield. If your horse overreacts and wants to rush forward, try the leg yield along the rail with his head to the wall. This again is not one of my favorite exercises. I do not use it unless I deal with an overreacting horse and even then I just may delay working the leg yield until the horse becomes more relaxed. The exercise with the tail to the wall works well, however, and can also be employed to prepare the horse for the shoulder in.

The rider must take responsibility for some of the other mistakes like a popped shoulder, a leading hindquarter or a loss of balance by the horse. The popped shoulder is often the result of too much inside rein or not enough support on the outside rein to limit the amount of bend in the horse's neck. The leading hindquarters often are the result of the inside leg too far back and/or an inside rein applied too strongly and thus preventing the front end of the horse from moving over. Often a rider will try to help the horse move

sideways by sitting to the outside in order to help the horse in that direction. That is how it works in the half-pass but in the leg yield the horse is moving away from its bend so the rider will throw the horse off balance onto the outside shoulder. This, of course, will only cause tension in the horse and, therefore, be counter-productive.

I have also found the leg yield helpful in teaching canter departs to young horses. While riding at a trot along the short side of the arena I will turn into the arena parallel to the long side about two meters from the rail and leg yield toward the rail. As soon as I have reached the rail I will turn onto a twenty meter circle and ask for the canter. Rarely have the youngsters refused the canter or taken the wrong lead. The same effect seems to happen when I prepare a horse for canter pirouettes. A few jumps of leg yield before asking for a working pirouette guide my horse onto the outside rein and leg, shorten his jumps a bit and make him attentive to the aids. One more jump to activate the inside hind leg more forward with my inside leg now at the girth and my outside leg behind the girth will simultaneously stop the sideways motion and along with the inside rein introduce the turn. The horse will move its front end around the hindquarters while the hindquarters describe a small circle still jumping forward.

Another example of how the trainer can use a known exercise to introduce a new one to the horse is the leg yield with the tail to the rail preparing the horse for the shoulder-in. In both exercises the horse travels with the front legs inside the track and it is flexed at the poll in the same direction. The difference is that in the shoulder-in the horse's body is bent and the hind legs, therefore, do not cross. This alters the way the horse must balance and consequently changes the purpose of the exercise. That will be the subject of my next article.