

Exercises, Their Purpose and Execution, Part 5
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One of the most important conditions that the trainer must meet in order to ride exercises correctly is strict adherence to the requirements of the training scale. I have repeatedly stated that fact to emphasize its importance. As with any good rule there are exceptions, like the short step away from the correct order of the scale in order to solve a problem the horse may have. Only experienced trainers should allow themselves that shortcut knowing that they will return to the rules of the scale as soon as the problem is solved. The scale demands from the horse thoroughness (rhythm, suppleness and connection) as well as impulsion and straightness for it to further advance in collection. The scale does not claim that it is the only way, but that it is the easiest and most natural way. It takes into consideration the horse's physical, mental, and emotional make-up and, therefore, it enhances its chances for a happy, healthy, and long life in spite of hard work and a life in captivity.

In previous chapters we talked about specific exercises to develop thoroughness and impulsion, and now we move to collection beyond just balancing the horse. It appears as though we have skipped straightness. Actually we did not since all the schooling we have done up to this point helped to overcome the horse's natural crookedness. The best way to straighten the horse is to work him on bent lines. It is important, however, that we have the horse properly bent when we ride these lines. Corners, circles, spirals, serpentines, and shoulder-in, when ridden correctly, will supple your horse and teach him to accept the bit equally on both sides. I believe that straightness was made a part of the scale because this condition needed to be emphasized so that riders would not proceed with collection before the horse had been made straight. The Germans call it, "Straightening bend work."

Should you find that your horse is through, has the desire to go forward, and is powerful enough to collect more but still does not travel straight, go back to schooling him on bent lines and in the shoulder-in until you feel an even connection in both reins. It is imperative that your horse step under his center of gravity in order for him to place his weight a little farther back towards his hindquarters and still be able to carry and balance it. Some horses evade the heavier load by becoming crooked again, stepping alongside their body, and thus weighing the shoulder down. In this case often the demands are too much for him at this time and the trainer must go back to improve the strength of the horse. She can accomplish that by returning to the exercises the horse performed without resorting to evasions. Under no circumstances should she now try to force the horse into compliance. He may obey and she may think to have won that battle but the price will be paid in loss of confidence and desire to be in harmony. This may then turn out to be the beginning of a downward spiral where a little force creates the need for more force, etc. The time spent to strengthen the horse's hindquarters will pay off in much faster progress later and in better performances.

The reason I stepped away from just the exercises is that we now enter into the area where collection becomes the main focus of our efforts. The shoulder-in is certainly an exercise to improve collection but it also plays an important role in suppleness, impulsion, and straightness. Riding a travers, for instance, will also help improve our horses in all these conditions. It, however, already requires collection to also be present in the horse to quite a degree in order to execute this

exercise correctly. So, we will now look at the following exercises strictly with increasing the collection of our horses in mind.

Unlike at the shoulder-in, in travers, renvers, and half-pass, the horse looks in the direction it is traveling. In these exercises the outside legs step around the inside legs, while in the shoulder-in the inside legs move around the outside legs. Another difference is that we start schooling the shoulder-in at working gaits while the other lateral movements require a degree of collection. The reason is that they demand a stronger bend and the horse is asked to travel at four tracks rather than the three tracks of the shoulder-in.

To me the best way to introduce the travers to the horse is to ride a volte in the first corner of the long side to establish the bend, throughness, and collection sufficient for a travers. At the moment the shoulder of the horse arrives back at the track, the outside rein prevents the horse from continuing on the volte and guides it along the rail. Simultaneously the outside leg behind the girth keeps the hind legs from moving onto the track and drives to maintain impulsion and their position inside the track. Once the travers has been established, the inside rein with the inside leg preserve the bend while the outside rein assures an even bend throughout the horse by limiting its bend in the neck. The inside leg at the girth and the outside leg behind the girth sustain the activity of the horse in its hindquarters. The rider's weight helps the horse with its balance by sitting more to the inside. This interaction of all the aids shows that riding the lateral movements is not for beginner riders. It takes a great deal of feel to know what aid is needed and when to apply it to correctly help the horse. This can only be accomplished from an absolutely independent seat.

To teach a horse these exercises we must not expect that the horse will execute them if only we apply the aids correctly. At this point he does not have a clear understanding of what the trainer wants, and to move laterally is awkward to him. He will be very hesitant to follow all the aids and may, therefore, not oblige. This is not disobedience and the horse should not be punished, but it must be corrected. The degree of correction depends on the horse's response to the aids. This means that the trainer must feel her way to the least severe but effective correction. That takes a great deal of sensitivity for the horse's reaction to her aids. This is also the point where the trainer must realize that without throughness in the horse, without the horse's desire for harmony, and without the horse's body sufficiently prepared in strength and flexibility to be able to execute the exercises, she is stuck.

The best approach to teaching lateral movements to the horse is to expect progress in small increments. The temptation to want it all right now is very great but equally great is the number of ways in which the horse can evade correctness and protect itself from the physical harm it may inflict upon itself by obeying a command its body just simply is not ready to execute. Many of the evasions are very subtle, like a tilt in its head, stiffening of the hind legs, a change in rhythm, and worst of all a change (often almost imperceptible) in the beat of the gait. Such a trainer is not only stuck, but has entered quick sand.

Let us do the math to explain the merits of the small increments approach to teaching the travers. You decide to just add one inch per day to the bend of your horse. You measure it by the amount with which your horse steps into the arena with its hind legs without resorting to any evasions or showing any kind of resistance or tension. That would mean that after only thirty riding days your

horse has mastered the travers. That is fast considering all the other benefits that come along with this accomplishment. The shoulder-in has improved, the renvers is a gift that only requires little work to be added to your horse's knowledge, your horse is prepared to start schooling the half-pass, he seems to enjoy his work more, his confidence level is up, etc. Of course this is a rather simplistic explanation. There will be days where adding even a single inch appears too much, but the next day he seems willing to try for two. He is still a horse and not a machine, but with this idea of a little progress every day your progress will be faster and you will have preserved your horse for better performances, a longer useful life, and much, much more fun at your work.

In the travers we want enough bend in the horse that he travels on four tracks. This increased bend is the additional difficulty for the horse of the travers vs. the shoulder-in. A further problem for the rider is that she must rely solely on feel to determine whether her horse has bent enough to correctly execute the exercise. Mirrors in the arena or knowledgeable eyes on the ground are helpful in that case.

As far as the renvers is concerned, the increased difficulty lies in the start of the exercise, not in the exercise itself. In the shoulder-in and the travers the rider has the opportunity to prepare the horse by creating the proper bend in the corner or off a volte. The renvers, when executed along the rail, requires that the rider must start with a shoulder-in and then change the bend of the horse while maintaining the hindquarters at the rail and the shoulder on the second track inside the arena. It is the change of bend that often proves to be the source of tension or loss of cadence in the movement. The horse must have acquired a greater degree of suppleness and throughness to be able to change its bend seamlessly.

As long as your horse still shows some tension or resistance to the shoulder-in or the travers, it is not ready to school the renvers. Spirals and figure of eight will help to accustom a horse to changes in its bend. Also, shoulder-in to leg-yield and back to shoulder-in help prepare the horse for the renvers. By first only asking the horse to vary its spine from bend to straight and back to bend in the same direction again we have once more reduced the demand and made it easier for the horse to obey. This obedience allows the trainer to stay in harmony with her horse and strengthen the horse's confidence to give the change of bend from one side to the other a try. The technique of asking for only a little more every time will prove effective again.

Sometimes when I read my own articles I believe I could have made it as a preacher. It seems that I have no hesitation about repeating myself over and over again to make a point. Patience, so it appears, leads in the list of priorities when it comes to training a horse according to these articles. This is followed by sober judgment. It takes courage to be honest in the assessment of one's own work up to this point, but it is essential to proceeding in the training. The answers to three questions must be clear in the mind of the trainer: First, where is my horse physically, mentally, and does he have a clear understanding about what he has been taught? Second, what are my horse's strengths, weaknesses and limits? Third, where are my strengths, weaknesses and limits? The last one, of course, takes the most nerve to face and judge correctly. It is the trainer's ability to properly evaluate her current situation with her horse that will show her how to progress from here successfully.

The half-pass is the logical next step in the horse's education. It is a travers along an imagined diagonal line. We ride it across the width of the arena, half the width of the arena, across the width of the arena in only half the length of the arena, half the width of the arena in only half the length of the arena, half the width of the arena in half the length of the arena and back half the width of the arena, across the width of the arena in half the length of the arena and back the width of the arena and the zigzag half-pass. While training at home we can, of course, use any combination of diagonals along which to travers and we can combine the half-pass with other exercises to improve our horses. The aids are the same as in travers. One of the characteristics of the correctly ridden half-pass is that the shoulder slightly leads the hindquarter. The most effective way to guide the horse into the half-pass is, therefore, to ride a step in shoulder-in before asking for the half-pass. The horse is bent around the rider's inside leg and looking in the direction in which it will travel. Also in the half-pass we must be aware of the horse's tendency to lose impulsion when traveling bent lines or with a bend in its body. Our inside leg, while actively maintaining the bend in the horse, must also work against the loss of impulsion. Our outside leg placed behind the girth also must double task in not only pushing the horse sideways, but also forward.

What causes me a headache in defining the correct execution of the lateral movements is how to describe the correct bend in the horse during lateral movements, especially the half-pass. The bend in the shoulder-in is determined by the tracks of the horse's feet. The outside shoulder is arranged in front of the inside hip, the outside hind leg travels close along the inside hind leg thus establishing three tracks. The bend must be even from poll to tail. That sounds real simple. The bend, however, will vary from horse to horse. A horse with a wide shoulder will need a stronger bend than the narrow shouldered horse. A longer horse will need less bend than the short horse. The same horse will show a different degree of bend when collected than when traveling at a working gate. In all of my research I found that the only definite answer to the bend is its evenness throughout the length of the horse. Most warnings about avoiding mistakes were about too much bend or a bend in the neck only and the loss of impulsion as a result. It becomes even more unclear in the travers and renvers. How far from the inside front does the outside hind step to describe the four tracks?

As you know, when in doubt we bring in the experts to share the blame. My experts in this case were: The German manual, then Harry Boldt as competitor and trainer, the view of an international Judge through Alfred Knopfhart, Egon von Neindorf to champion the classic position, Hans von Heydebreck represents Dressage of a hundred years ago, and finally the rules of the FEI. Here are the results. The German manual speaks of a, "Slight bend around the inside leg of the rider." At the half-pass Harry Boldt does not want a bend larger than at the shoulder-in. Egon von Neindorf also speaks of a slight bend and then quotes von Heydebreck who wants the bend in the travers such that the outside hind foot travels on the edge of the first track, in other words, close to the inside of the inside front leg. The rules and regulations of the FEI want a slight bend that is even throughout the horse's body. How clear is that? Alfred Knopfhart took a stand. He declared that the bend should be such that the body forms an angle of about thirty degrees with the rail in travers as well as in renvers. If we were to measure the angle of a horse moving with the outside hind stepping on the outside edge of the track of the front legs (Heydebreck's and Egon von Neindorf's position) we would discover that it is about the same angle. Since we have no clear description of the bend in the German manual, the FEI rule book, or by Harry Boldt, other than that four tracks should be visible, I will accept Alfred Knopfhart's definition.

The half-pass, although a travers along a diagonal line, changes the angle a little. All my experts agree that the horse should travel along that line in such a way that its body is about parallel to the long side with the shoulder leading a little. Imagine your horse at a half-pass along a line from F to G with its body parallel to the long side. This would make it a very small angle and it would require little bend to create that angle. Now imagine your half-pass goes from F to E and it is easy to recognize the need for a much greater angle if we still want our horse's body parallel to the long side. In my view a horse cannot stay parallel to the long side and travel in a half-pass along a diagonal line as steep as going from F to E. Even if it could manage to bend well enough to look at E while its body stays parallel to the long side it would now have trouble not to get tangled up in its front end. The outside front leg has to reach over the inside front leg to such a degree that the inside front leg would bump it when bending the knee to lift the foot off the ground. In case the rider would insist on such a bend the horse would just straighten in the back and bend in the neck only. It could also escape the situation by trailing in the hindquarters. The answer would be to assume a lesser bend, as Harry Boldt states, or to allow the shoulder to lead in a greater degree. In this case the criterion for a correct travers along the imagined diagonal is no longer fulfilled. Since the requirements for the half-pass ask for a body parallel to the long side, the bend must be less than in the travers to allow the horse to stay supple and forward in the exercise.

Now that I have described the exercises I must say that they are easier to ride than to explain and that is why we should watch those who do it correctly and try to imitate them. This knowledge of the theory, however, is important to recognize who is correct and worthy of observing and to understand the purpose of riding the movements. Again, theory adds meaning to practice, so keep reading.