

Exercises - Their Purpose and Correct Execution, Part 6
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Almost everything in the training of horses is progressive. This holds especially true for collection. Taking a closer look at what makes this progression possible for the horse we must realize that it is the development of his physical strength and his understanding of what is expected. As we begin to gradually move the young horse from his natural balance on the forehand to the even balance that we need to ride our horse, he learned the purpose of the half-halt and shifted his weight back towards the hindquarters. That requires a great deal of strength and by carefully developing this strength we enable the horse to work in the proper balance over a long period of time. It also allowed us to ask for more collection. The wise trainer is constantly challenging her horse in this fashion but she never asks for more than the horse is capable of producing at that time.

It is 6:30 AM, I feel great, I have had my cup of coffee and yet I have sat in front of my computer for about thirty minutes thinking of how best to say what you are about to read next. It has been another twenty minutes since I wrote the last sentence and I must get on with it or I will never manage to finish this article. The reason for my hesitation is something everybody knows but nobody wants to hear about when it comes to their horse. Not many horses are capable of performing at the FEI levels and very few can do the work when it comes to Grand Prix and yours may not be one of the few. There it is and it did not hurt all that much. Reading this you may think that maybe I did not feel all that well this morning.

Let me describe to you what I have experienced many times and I am sure you have encountered the same situation. You watch a rider taking a horse to task in a pretty rough manner. She notices that the expression on your face indicates you do not approve. At first she will explain to you why she is beating on her horse by talking to her horse loudly enough for you to hear her telling him why he is being punished. Later, if your opinion is important enough to her, she will seek you out and explain to you that her horse really has a hard time with this exercise because of his low set neck or straight shoulder or any other shortcoming he may have. Bingo. She knows that she is at or past the natural ability of her horse. This horse may only be six or seven years old. That is unfortunate, agreed, but trying to beat another level out of this horse only makes it sad.

We often compare our sport to that of ice skating. You skate and really enjoy gliding over the ice. It is at the jumps that your limit shows. You have competed and done quite well at the local shows but at the next level you must execute jumps and your bruises prove that you are at the end of your talent. Life has many other challenges for you so skating becomes your recreation and you continue to enjoy it. Your horse's options, on the other hand, are limited He has to be what you want him to be and thus he relies on your wisdom and good will for his well being. If your goal is the show ring and your horse shows problems with the demands of second or third level, you must look for another partner. That does not mean that your horse is condemned to a miserable life. There is a place for horses like yours. Right now I am looking for two horses just like the one I described; schoolmasters for young riders. I am having a hard time finding one because such a horse must be sound and easy to ride. A horse that has been pushed beyond its limits usually is neither.

The exercises I want to write about next are the rein back, the walk and canter pirouettes, the piaffe and the passage. In my opinion they are the most demanding on both horse and rider. They challenge the rider's coordination in the application of the aids and sensitivity toward the horse's movement and attitude. I strongly believe that if the rider has not turned the horse into a willing partner by now her attempts to teach these exercises will fail. That is why I feel the horse's attitude is of great importance

for its future. Needless to say that if a trainer encounters a horse with a bad attitude, force may get her something looking like what she is trying to ride but it will deprive her of correctness and harmony. Besides the attitude the horse must be prepared correctly in its development of strength and coordination in order to successfully execute these exercises. Yet we encounter the rein back and the walk pirouette already in the second level. We actually must perform the little sister of the walk pirouette, the turn around the haunches. It is a great deal less demanding and, therefore, appropriate and helpful. The rein back, however, is in my opinion, too early for the horse working at second level.

I think it is even reasonable to question why to ride the rein back at all since it is an unnatural movement for the horse. Horses at liberty will not step backwards unless they find themselves cornered. The advantages of the rein back, however, outweigh that consideration. It is a great test of the horse's strength and obedience as well as a means to further activate the hind legs of the horse. My question is to the strength of the horse this early in its training. To correctly execute a rein back we want the horse to be perfectly straight in a balanced square halt. We expect him to stay round in the back as he moves back with the diagonal pairs of legs taking short steps and lifting the feet off the ground as he does so. As the result of this movement his hindquarters should be lowered, the neck should stay up, and the connection should remain at, or slightly in front of the vertical. He also must not hurry backwards nor step sideways. That is the description of quite a job. This is why I believe that the third level would find the horse better prepared to introduce the rein back. We would still have the advantages of a tool to activate the hind leg further and test thoroughness. I feel particularly strong about the timing of this exercise since evasions and tension once developed seem to be especially hard to correct in the rein back.

This cloud, however, also has a silver lining. Many trainers do not start to teach their horses in hand until it is time to start the very collected exercises like piaffe and passage. This will remind us that many commands can be started on the ground. The rein back can already be practiced in hand along with teaching our horses to lead. Tell him to stop and when he does, move in front of him and ask him to step back with just a short tug on the halter towards his chest and say, "back," at the same time. If he steps back, reward him, move forward, halt again, and repeat the tug and the command, "back." Should it work again, consider yourself blessed. In most cases you will encounter resistance since horses do not naturally step back. There are several ways in which you can make him obey. One is to just simply push against his shoulder. More effective is to take your outstretched fingers and place them between his sternum and his point of shoulder into the muscle of his chest and push again also verbally commanding to back up. If all else fails, take a crop and tap him at his chest or forearm. Nowhere is the term, "step by step," more appropriate than here. Please remember that this is an unnatural movement for him. A reward for every step and repetition of the command will soon make him understand what you expect when you say, "back."

You can employ the same technique with your horse when he is ready to learn the rein back under saddle. Once you feel he has understood your command, mount up and give it a try. Most likely he will hesitate or want to move forward. First, make sure you ask him correctly. A precondition for a correct rein back is a straight horse standing square in balance. You, the rider, must sit centered on the horse, weight evenly distributed, and legs symmetrically on the horse. I move my legs slightly back and drive forward. Let us describe in slow motion what ideally is going to happen next. Your horse wants to move forward but instead of encountering a giving rein he feels a slight taking of the rein which causes him to push off the bit and step back. At that very moment you soften in your hand and leg only to firm again as you ask for the next step back. You repeat this as often as the number of steps you want him to move

back. Most trainers will tell you, "Dream on." Horses just are not that eager to step back. Even the familiar demand, "back," is often ignored.

Get some help. Halt square and ask the helper to push against the shoulder, poke him in the chest or tap him with a crop while you apply the aids and ask with a voice command. If you pull back too hard, your horse may jerk his head up, drop his back, and drag his feet. If you sit or push unevenly, he may step sideways. If he is weak in his back or hindquarters, he may lean on the bit and lower his neck. If your helper hits the horse too hard, the horse may run backwards. These are all evasions that can be corrected through a patient step by step approach to teaching him. Should your horse evade by rearing, back off the backing up. Make sure there are not any physical problems and go back to exercises designed to strengthen him.

While it is important to have the seat available to drive, I personally like to lighten my seat a little with a young horse to help him stay up in the back. This is an important aspect because only then is he able to lift his hind feet off the ground as he steps back. Once he is competent in the exercise I will sit back a bit more to have my seat more effective in the driving. As you can see, the demands on horse and rider are great and the possibilities for evasions are numerous but the rewards are worth it. It gives the trainer another tool to activate the hindquarters and test the thoroughness of the horse. If you are lucky enough to work with a young horse, either three or four years old, start asking him to back up while leading him each day. If you are patient, you are not going to do him any harm and you will have a year or two to make walking backwards second nature to him. That will make it less likely that he will develop evasions when you start to ask him to back up from the saddle.

I was tempted to write about the turn around the haunches before the rein back, especially since some trainers will use that exercise to help teach the rein back in case their horse refuses to step back when asked. In my opinion that is dangerous since stepping back is one of the major sins in performing the turn around the haunches. Horses seem to have an unlimited number of evasions so please let us not give them any further ideas.

The turn around the haunches is executed from the walk. The movement forward is stopped and simultaneously the front end of the horse is led around the hindquarters. Throughout the turn the horse maintains the rhythm of the walk, a clear four beat. It is as always highly important to maintain thoroughness in the horse. That is more essential than the smallness of the circle the hindquarters describe. As long as the circle of the hindquarter is smaller than the circle of the front end I am satisfied at first. Gradually reduce the size of the circle at the hindquarters until it is not larger than one step at show time.

Whenever I have any doubt about what is most essential in an exercise I go back to the purpose of riding it. The turn around the haunches is designed to help the rider supple and strengthen the hindquarters and thus enable the horse to collect more. The same holds true for the walk pirouette. It gives the rider even more leverage to bend the inside hind leg. Logic, therefore, tells me that I must keep my horse relaxed throughout the exercise because tension in the mind leads to stiffness in the body which prevents the joints from bending and stops improvement in suppleness. This stiffness is the result of muscles held tight by the horse's tension. Such a tight muscle does not allow for proper blood circulation and, therefore, that muscle does not receive a sufficient supply of nutrients. That means it will not grow and strengthen. Since the purpose of riding the exercise is to supple and strengthen muscles, the rider has failed on both counts if she allows the horse to become tense. In addition there is the chance that she

may have caused the joint to be injured since the tight muscle did not protect the joint from the extra weight shifted onto it by the pirouette.

Next we must maintain the idea of forwardness. I believe that a pirouette with the hind leg describing a circle the size of a dinner plate serves its purpose better than a pirouette where the inside hind leg is lifted up and then placed back into that same spot. Here is my reasoning. We want the horse to collect more. He should, therefore, become shorter in his base (distance between front and hind legs). The horse turns his front end around the hindquarter by stepping sideways with his inside front leg and then moving its outside front leg across and in front of the inside front leg followed by another step sideways with his inside front leg. If the horse were to pivot on his inside hind leg, the distance between the inside hind leg and the inside front leg has remained the same or has become slightly longer. Since we want the distance to become shorter it is necessary for the inside hind leg to step forward-sideways just a little bit. The outside hind leg then follows by advancing forward-sideways a bit more than the inside hind leg. I have in my description ignored the proper sequence of footfalls to simplify drawing a mental picture of the walk pirouette. If you were to look at the hoof prints in a freshly dragged arena after a walk pirouette you should see three circles with the smallest one the size of a dinner plate.

The difference between a turn around the haunches and a walk pirouette is only the size of the circle and the aids are, therefore, the same. I am going to describe the aids and the sequence in which they are to be applied and you will see that these exercises are not only a challenge for the horse but also for the rider.

The horse is positioned in the direction in which it is going to turn. The rider sits to the inside and maintains an even contact on both reins. Both legs at the girth prod the horse into shorter steps. As the outside rein stops the horse from moving farther forward the outside leg slides back a little. At the instant the horse stops moving forward the inside rein asks the horse to turn. Next, two aids happen at the same time. The outside rein relaxes to allow for the turn and the outside leg becomes active to prevent the hindquarters from stepping out. The bend of the horse and the turn loads down the inside hind leg of the horse and he would like to level the load by stepping forward. The outside rein must guard against that and it may have to firm again. Another way a horse may try to relieve the pressure on that leg is to step back. The rider's seat and legs must prevent that.

Pivoting on a stiff inside hind leg is quite often seen and, like stepping back, is considered a major mistake. The correction used most frequently is a tap with the whip on the inside or a touch with the spur. This will fix the symptom but the cause, in my opinion, is often a tight outside rein or a late release on that rein. If everything worked according to plan you have now completed the first set of steps. Your horse has lifted up and set down each of his legs once and he should have done it in a clear four beat as well as in the same rhythm of the walk before the turn. With the exception of the initial aid on the outside rein that stopped the forward progress, you now repeat the same process again and again until your horse has turned as far as you want it to.

As you can see, there are two very important preconditions the rider must fulfill before she can attempt to ride this exercise. First, she must be coordinated enough to use all the aids independently, either in rapid succession or sometimes simultaneously. Second, she must be able to feel the movement of the horse, interpret it, decide on the appropriate correction and turn it into action, all at a high rate of speed. She also must not let this concentration turn into tension since that would, of course, cause the horse to become tense himself and spoil the effectiveness of the exercise.

One of my favorite exercises is the canter pirouette. I think it is fun to ride and a joy to observe when it is performed well. In many ways it is very similar to the walk pirouette. It is designed to improve strength in the hindquarters and to help supple the hind leg by causing the joints to bend more and push off harder.

In the canter pirouette the horse jumps in a circle around the hindquarters. To complete a pirouette the horse must perform between six to eight jumps. At fourth level and Prix St. George we execute the half pirouette and it requires three to four jumps. The number of jumps is important because if it were to take more than the required number, the horse would not turn enough per jump, thus making it easier. Often we see a horse just throwing itself around completing the turn in less than six jumps. This horse is out of balance during the pirouette and that is considered a major fault. As a rider, I want to be able to end the pirouette at any time and a horse so much out of balance would not be able to obey. Once out of the pirouette the horse also would have to be rebalanced before it could perform other commands like a flying change or a counter canter.

Another mistake we see quite often is loss of impulsion during the pirouette. As a result the horse will change his lead behind or drop into trot steps. While the pirouette requires a strong collection, too much of it will also cause the horse to stick on the ground and pivot or jump sideways instead of forward. A horse that seems to rear up and fall back onto its forelegs also has collected beyond its ability to carry the weight on the inside hind leg. When the circle described by the hindquarters becomes too large we just simply can no longer call the movement a pirouette.

Trainers have a name for a pirouette that allows for a circle up to three or four meters while the horse turns its front end around the hindquarters. They call it a working pirouette. It is an apt name because it is an exercise designed to prepare the horse for the pirouette. Other than rider error, the main reason for the above described mistakes in the pirouette is the result of lack of strength in the horse's hindquarters. The working pirouette is an excellent tool to develop that power. Lateral work, as well as the counter canter, is also often employed to achieve the necessary strength.

The aids are very similar to those of the walk pirouette. The additional difficulty in the canter is the need to keep the canter active and clean. The rider must, therefore, ask the horse in every jump to continue with another jump. The best way I have heard it described to achieve this is to apply the aids as though the rider wants to start a canter from the walk at every jump.

In many cases when an exercise does not go well it is the result of poor preparation. This preparation began when the horse was first started. The rider is now asking the horse to give its all. This exercise will cause the muscles to burn even in the strongest horse. In order for the horse to willingly endure that much strain it must trust the rider. This trust is earned by the rider in her daily work with the horse. Her fairness towards the horse at all times will pay great dividends at this point.

In the immediate preparation the horse must canter in short jumps with a great deal of impulsion. It must be slightly bent to the inside and stretch well into the outside rein. The last one or two jumps before the actual pirouette the rider should guide it into a shoulder-fore like position. At the start of the pirouette the rider stops the forward jump with a half halt on the outside rein. The inside rein guides the horse's forehand into the turn while the outside leg behind the girth holds the hindquarter in place. The outside rein with well timed short half halts prevents the horse from jumping forward. The inside rein and inside leg maintain the horse in the canter and help to preserve the slight bend in the horse. When the horse has jumped the pirouette as far as the rider wants it to, the outside rein and inside leg guide the horse out of

it. One can easily see how the outside rein affects the inside hind leg of the horse if its action coincides with the leg's position on the ground. I had stated earlier that one of the conditions for a successful pirouette was throughness in the horse. That means that the firming outside rein causes the inside hind leg to stay on the ground just a split second longer and thus allows the horse's weight to bend its joints just a bit more, resulting in a stronger push off. So, we can see here the production of collection and the effect of it. In the canter pirouette we can also witness the consequence of too much collection when the horse can no longer bear its weight on the inside hind leg alone and loses its rhythm in the exercise or steps out of it.

It is fair to say that the more difficult an exercise for the horse, the more cautious the rider has to be in her use of the aids and in her own balance on the horse. It also requires a better knowledge of all the difficulties a horse encounters during the exercises in order to avoid reaching beyond the limits of the horse and losing its confidence. Too much caution, on the other hand, may cause the trainer not to challenge the horse enough and prevent it from performing at its best. The three most difficult exercises, piaffe, passage, and the changes from jump to jump are yet to come. Read about them next time.