

## Sequential But Simultaneous?

*by Paul Kathen © 2011  
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If this were a discussion about any scientific topic the headline would have to be considered a contradiction. Since I want to involve you in a conversation about riding horses and how best to talk to them from the saddle, we are a long way away from science. It is therefore my objective to convince you that in our sport such a statement is not much of a contradiction at all.

The aids are the language we use to communicate with our horses and I want to explain the fine-tuning of the dialog. We often marvel at the performances of many of the best riders and their horses where it appears as if there is such a harmony between them that the rider only thinks and the horse executes the thought. Horses are not mind readers so there must be a signal from the rider to the horse. Pressure applied to the horse with seat, leg and rein and the release of these pressures constitute the vocabulary of this language. Combining those aids is like moving from speaking a single word to talking in sentences. This then allows the rider to physically and mentally prepare the horse for a movement, a change of direction or whatever else the rider wanted the horse to do. This preparation is the secret to the smooth execution we admire so much in the well ridden horse since the horse is not surprised by the demand and is therefore ready to obey immediately and without tension.

Unless we want to ride in circles all the time, sooner or later we will be confronted with the task of changing direction, so I will try to explain the sequence of actions on the rider's part to accomplish this without loss of balance or impulsion. Let us assume we want to ride a figure of eight and change from one circle to the other as we cross the center line. Our goal is to ride this change of direction in such a way that the tracks will show two equally large circles that touch at the center line. If you think this is easy, ride a figure of eight in a freshly dragged arena and check your tracks for accuracy. Do not despair about what you may see, this is very difficult and it takes a great deal of thoroughness and balance for your horse to be able to follow a circle line and much suppleness to smoothly change from one circle to another. In my opinion there is more honor for horse and rider in a well ridden circle than in a poorly executed pirouette.

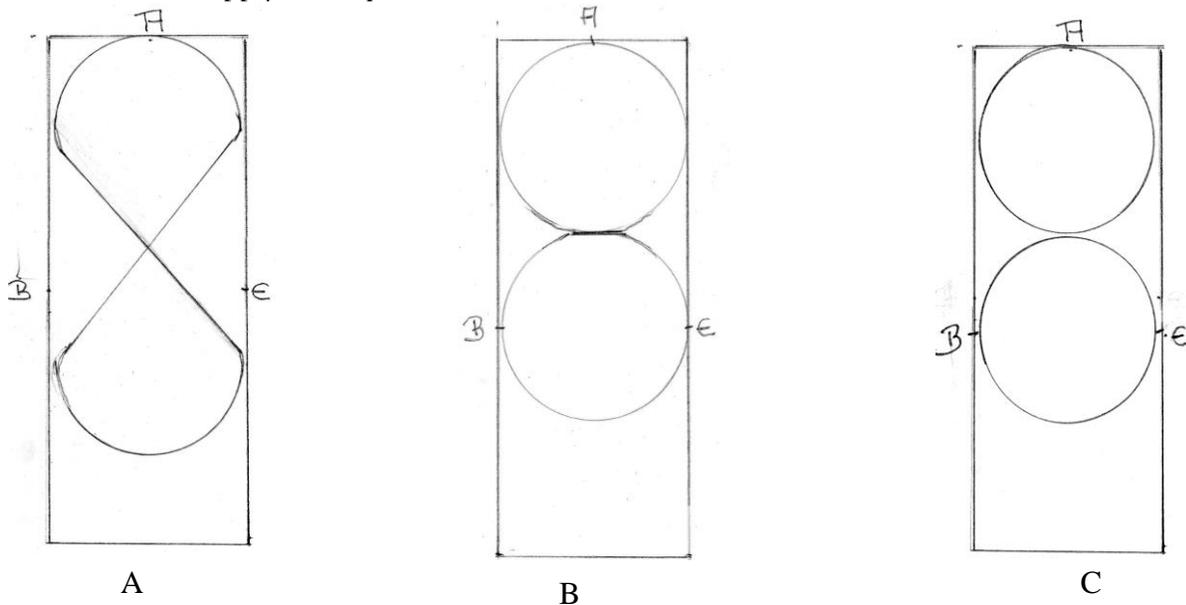
In order to travel the above described change of circles at a trot your horse must change bend and balance as well as direction within one or two strides. Most horses can not achieve that; they would travel either straight for several strides, loose balance, get off the described line or even start to resist. To prevent any of this from happening I must prepare my horse step by step to enable him to obey. The following is the sequence in our dialog: first a half-halt to make sure the horse is paying attention to us. Then I, the rider, must change my seat from sitting circle left to sitting circle right, assuming my figure of eight started on a circle left. This means I must shift my weight which was more on my left seat bone to be more on my right seat bone while changing the position of my legs. While turning left my left leg was at the girth bending and driving while my right leg was slightly behind the girth making sure the horse did not swing out behind. (I am describing here a horse that has no unusual problems that would force the rider to move outside the box to deal with them). Now my right leg is at the girth and my left leg rests slightly behind the girth. If I ride the figure of eight at a rising trot I must also change my diagonal. This must happen before I arrive at the center line, because there is where my change of direction begins. In order for the horse to stay balanced he must also bend in the new

direction before he starts his new turn. As you can see much action is needed to change direction and it must happen in the described sequence and in a very short period of time.

This order of aids is not an invention of mine; it is as old as dressage. For centuries you could hear in the riding halls of Germany: "umsitzen, umstellen". This translates into: "change seat, change bend". A ridden horse, in order to be balanced, must maintain its spine parallel to the line it travels. That means that its spine is straight on a straight line and bent on a bent line, as for instance, on a circle. Balance also demands that its spine must be bent according to the bend of the circle line. A smaller circle therefore demands a stronger bend in the spine.

The rider can not change a bend in a horse without changing the position of her legs and she can not help the horse maintaining its balance without changing her own balance. So she must change before the horse changes and it must change its bend before it changes direction. There are many changes required that ideally should all happen simultaneously. As I stated earlier, many horses, especially young ones, and most inexperienced riders can not achieve this until they learned and practiced it many times. Practice only makes perfect if it is done correctly, so the rider must in her practicing stay within her and her horse's limits.

For the young horse and or inexperienced rider, in order to execute the change of direction in the prescribed sequence and not make mistakes, we must consequently simplify the change. The difficulty of the exercise lies not so much in the aids or their sequence but in the short time to accomplish them. Therefore we change the figure of eight into two half-circles connected by two short diagonals as shown in the sidebar (drawing A). The rider now has time to change her seat and make the horse straight anywhere on the diagonal before the center line. I do insist that my students change their horse's position for the new direction as it crosses the center line. The reason for it is that this is the place where we eventually must change and I also try to create a bit of a sense of urgency in the rider. Before the horse reaches the beginning of the second half-circle the position of the horse is turned into a bend. Once we can accomplish this regularly without loss of balance, rhythm, impulsion and throughness, we begin to gradually move the half-circles closer together thus shortening the diagonals and the time to apply the sequence of aids.

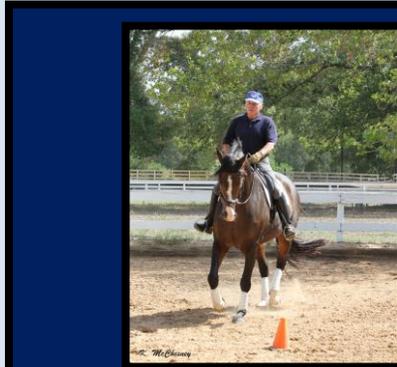


Drawing A shows the two half circles connected by two diagonals. To perfect the exercise ride two correct half circles, do not ride corners, and then a diagonal to a precise half circle in the opposite direction. Where exactly you place the second half circles would depend on how long of a diagonal you need to accomplish a smooth change of direction.

Drawing B shows the two half circles now as two circles connected with a straight line across the centerline of the arena. Important is that your horse faces perpendicular to the long side of the arena as it crosses the centerline.

Drawing C: This is how your tracks should look when you ride the figure of eight perfectly.

Soon we will arrive at our first true figure of eight. Again I allow for a little more time to change by riding straight across the centerline (drawing B). It is however essential now that I ride this line perpendicular to the long side of the arena because that must be the position of my horse if I want to ride the figure of eight perfectly later (drawing C). Like about everything else involved in teaching riders or training horses this is a process and taking time now saves time later. Patience is in short supply in this computer age but people or horses are not machines that we can fine tune with the turn of a button. However time spent now to lay a solid foundation will save much time and frustration later. You might say:” yes he does become a little tense at the change of direction but I can keep him pretty much on the line and I do want so much to practice the shoulder in.” I say:” Go ahead and start your work on the shoulder-fore, since this may even be helpful to avoid drilling the figure of eight but continue to improve his throughness to eliminate the tension in the change of direction, because one day you will want to ride a zig-zag half-pass and think about how much tension he will experience at that change of direction, if you do not prepare him now!”



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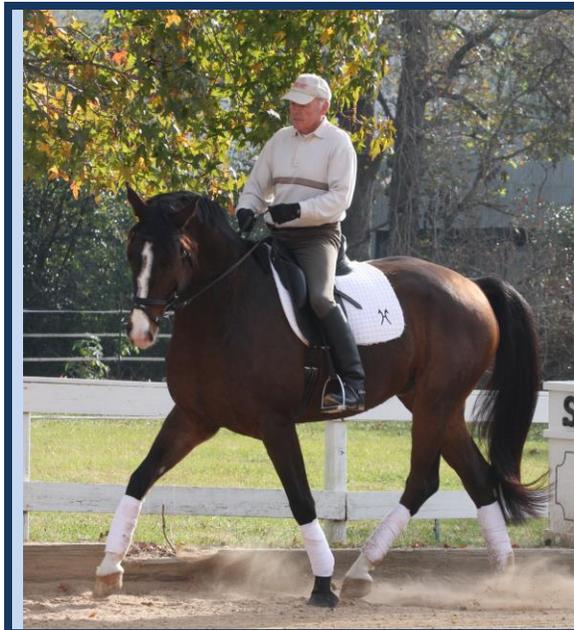
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3

These three pictures show Merino executing the change of direction in a figure of eight. In the first picture Merino approaches the centerline bent to the left. One stride later in the second picture he is straight and perpendicular to the long side. Half a stride later he is bent right, he is at the center line (cones) and starts his second circle. Picture 1 shows that the rider has given on the old inside rein as he starts the change and allows the horse to stretch into it as the new outside rein. Ideally the rein should stay in contact throughout the change and the rider should follow the demand for a longer rein (picture 3). In pictures 1 and 2 the legs of the rider are passive but picture 3 shows them to be in the right place and the inside leg at the girth creating the bend and the outside leg behind the girth making sure that Merino does not swing the hind quarter out. As he crosses the centerline he is balanced for the circle right, stayed through and maintained his impulsion.

Let us talk about the shoulder-in, since it also involves a change of direction. Your horse moves from a corner or circle line to a straight line while being bent. Even if you ask him to perform a shoulder-in from a straight line, he must first travel for one step onto a circle in order to move his shoulder off the line and then transition to the shoulder-in. Practice must be correct and training is progressive so how can I simplify the shoulder-in? I can not change the line like I did in the figure of eight, but I can lessen the bend and try a shoulder-fore. If you then ride the corner correctly, a quarter of an eight to ten meter circle for the shoulder-in or of a ten to fifteen meter circle for the shoulder-fore (drawing D), your horse already has the bend he needs for the exercise. You allow him to stay on this circle line for one step past the rail to move the shoulder off the rail and then you must stop him from continuing the circle and change direction to travel along the rail on a straight line staying bent and with his shoulder off the rail. Two aids applied simultaneously will accomplish that; firming on the outside rein to stop the horse from following the circle line, and your inside leg applied at the girth along with the inside seat bone push towards the outside shoulder of the horse telling him to move in the direction of that push. If you were to look for a slight differential in the timing of the aids and follow the rule of “from the back to the front” your leg and seat aid would be slightly ahead of the rein aid. In this case however you first must stop one movement, the circle, and then start the other, shoulder-fore or shoulder-in, so the correct sequence would be; rein aid before leg and seat aid yet close enough together that you could call it simultaneously.



Here Merino demonstrates the Shoulder-in. He moves in Rhythm, is Relaxed and remained well Connected. He shows Impulsion, is correctly bent (Straight) and sufficiently Collected for the exercise. He has fulfilled the requirements of the Training Pyramid and is ready to move on to more difficult work

The teacher in me needs a paragraph here to warn about a few mistakes commonly made in this exercise. One is that the rider tries to hold the horse's head into the arena by pulling on the inside rein. Nothing will get your horse's shoulder back to the rail faster than that. Often the rider will at the same time drop the outside rein making the same problem worse. If, for whatever reason, your horse is losing his bend, ride a circle and start your shoulder-fore again. Also a horse may lose the bend and travel on three tracks with a straight body. I call this a haunches-out. The reason frequently is that the rider has taken the inside leg back and thereby pushes the haunches out. These are however the aids for a leg-yield and the obedient horse executes a leg-yield along the rail with the tail to the rail. An easy

way to recognize this mistake is to watch how the horse travels in the hindquarter, if the hind legs cross and no longer travel straight the horse has lost the bend.

I hope that this article has made you aware of the importance of fundamentals, the need for correctness in the aids and the value of perfection in your practice. It has been said that ours is a thinking persons sport and I have a challenge for you to prove the accuracy of this statement. Again, assuming that your horse understands the aids and is obedient, think yourself through the sequence of aids for a half turn around the haunches. This will not only show you how complicated a move it is, it will also prove the importance of clarity in our understanding of the sequence of aids so that we can be precise and timely in our commands to the horse.

Think of what you want, communicate it to your horse, analyze your horse's response, reward or if necessary to correct, think and correct, analyze, etc. this is the sequence of actions in your dialog with your horse while in the saddle. We must communicate our commands and corrections to the horse and the more channels (seat, leg and rein aids) we can apply simultaneously the larger our vocabulary will be which allows us to be more precise. This precision reduces the need for corrections and allows for the harmonious performances we admire so much in our best horse-rider teams.

In your riding your seat must be in the saddle, your eyes on the road and your mind busy preparing your horse for tasks, commanding executions and analyzing what your eyes see and your seat feels. If necessary it must formulate corrections and communicate them to the horse. It is obvious your conscious mind is hard at work and it does not have the time or the speed to think about how to formulate the words. That must be left to the subconscious mind and for that it needs to practice, practice and practice some more.