

CIRCLES AND BENT TRACKS

Circles and turns are exercises that we ask of our horses quite often. Since the arenas we ride in do not allow us to ride in a straight line for much distance, we spend a great deal of time riding circles and bent tracks. Consequently, this is a very important chapter.

It is not uncommon for the horse to lose his balance, become tense and fall on his forehand when he is ridden on bent tracks. However, if the rider understands how to ride on bent tracks correctly, he can use them to help the horse improve his balance as well as increase his self-carriage.

When a horse is free with no rider on his back, he turns quite differently than when he is carrying a rider. When he is free, the horse turns by bending to the outside of the turn and placing his weight inward and in the direction of movement. Of course, this works very well when all he needs to do is balance himself.

If the horse turns by moving his weight in over his inside shoulder, he will fall on his forehand and be unable to use his back muscles. As a result, his hind legs will no longer step under his body and he will lose his self-carriage. After having done a circle or turn in this manner, the horse will be unable to perform any movement correctly.

But now the horse has a rider on his back and he must, just as we do when we have to carry something heavy, compensate by changing his carriage in order to keep his balance without tensing. If the horse has not learned how to carry himself during a turn while carrying a rider, the horse will try to turn using the same method he uses when he is free. However, this does not work very well. So, what does he do to deal with the situation? He tenses his body. He compensates for the problem by using tension instead.

The horse should be ridden on a circle or turn so that the exercise produces the following results:

- The horse is able to keep his balance without tensing.
- The self-carriage is increased.
- The horse can maintain a steady tempo and freedom of movement.
- The horse becomes more supple.

When the horse is ridden correctly on a circle or turn, he should be bent to the same degree as the arc of the path that he is on. In essence, it is the bend that determines the direction in which the

horse should go.

A turn can be used to prepare the horse for a more difficult movement such as shoulder-in, travers or turn on the haunches.

MOVING FROM A STRAIGHT LINE TO A CIRCLE OR TURN

To begin with, the rider must decide exactly where the turn or circle will start and then look toward that point. Next, the horse needs to prepare for changing direction. Half halts are used to encourage the horse to step further under his body with his hind legs, thereby lightening his forehand. It is the forehand that has to move into the new direction – much like the front wheels of a car. If the horse attempts to change direction while carrying the same amount of weight on the forehand as he does on a straight line, he will find it difficult.

In addition to half halts, the rider should use his inside leg to drive the horse forward and outward to the outside rein, and to give the horse a point around which to bend. The rider's inside leg should be placed just behind the girth.

When the horse is ridden out to the outside rein, it should create a need in him to seek contact with that rein. As a result, the muscles on the inside of his neck and poll will relax, allowing the rider to bend the horse's poll and neck to the inside of the bend by turning his inside wrist slightly. When necessary, the inside rein can also act in a leading manner to encourage this result. But when the horse is well balanced on a bent track, the contact on the inside rein should be very light.

If the horse is not ridden out to the outside rein at the same time that he is asked to bend to the inside of the bent track, his weight can fall over his inside shoulder and consequently onto his forehand.

During the turn, the rider's inside hip should move forward. This action, together with a driving inside leg, encourages the horse to bring the inside hind leg forward and under his body. This places more weight on the inside hind leg, enabling it to thrust the horse forward. At the same time, the rider moves his outside shoulder forward, signaling to the horse to turn. In essence, the rider's shoulders and hips should be parallel to those of the horse.

The outside leg is placed further back than normal to keep the hind quarters in place. If the hind quarters fall out during the turn, the hind legs will step sideways instead of in under the horse. This causes the horse to become croup high, which in turn brings him on his forehand. Some horses tend to move the outside hind leg out of the circle, especially in one direction, almost like

a training wheel. This makes the horse fall on his inside shoulder, making him tense on the inside and as a consequence, difficult to bend around the rider's inside leg. Often the turn itself makes the horse bring his inside hind leg under, but not necessarily the outside hind leg. In this situation, it is the rider's outside leg that is responsible for holding the hind quarters in place.

The horse must be driven forward to the outside rein. This rein adjusts the bending, and if necessary, acts in a resisting manner. The outside rein can be used to straighten the horse when he is over-bent or falling out over his outside shoulder. The rider's outside hand should be placed at the withers. We want to keep the feeling that the horse is standing up vertically right under us, that we maintain equilibrium in his topline, that it feels like we are riding him uphill and that we have more horse in front of us than behind us.

THE AIDS

- The inside rein creates the bend. by turning the wrist in the inside hand, asking the horse to bend the neck and poll to the inside. When necessary the inside rein also acts in an opening fashion.
- The outside rein is resisting, adjusting the bend and keeping the outside shoulder in place.
- The rider's inside leg drives the horse to the outside rein. The horse bends around the inside leg.
- The rider's outside leg holds the hindquarters in place.
- The rider's inside hip moves forward.
- The rider's outside shoulder moves forward.
- The rider's inside heel and knee are lowered.
- The rider's weight is placed in the direction of movement and on the inside seat bone.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

Never ask the horse to make a circle so small that he can't keep his balance. Doing so will cause the horse to become defensive and will teach him to use his body incorrectly to make the circle.

Do not – as is often done – ride the horse around and around on a small circle to get him to bend his neck. This is a completely incorrect way to ask a horse to give and leads to many mistakes. Many horses have been sent to the vet as a result of this kind of riding, as it causes lameness and sore backs.

If the horse suddenly resists giving to the inside or tilts his head, make sure that he is feeling well. Sudden or increasing resistance is a sign of something physically wrong.

Don't forget to ride straight lines in between circles and bent tracks. Many riders keep their horses on circles for long periods of time, since they feel more in control. This is hard on the horse's muscles and joints, especially for young horses. Let the young horse move forward and on straight lines as much as possible.

The best way for both horse and rider to learn to make good circles is to use cones. See the chapter, [Working with Cones](#).

RIDING BENT TRACKS WITH A STRAIGHT HORSE

Once the horse is able to bend and make a circle, it is a good idea to ride circles with the horse straight. If done correctly, keeping the horse straight while on a bent track increases the self-carriage.

When we ride on bent tracks with a straight horse, we should make him straight on the outside. We should imagine him more collected on the outside, and as a result, more free on the inside. Ride the horse forward to both reins. Keep him vertical (not leaning to the inside or the outside) and uphill. His shoulders and hips should feel the same height. You should have a feeling of the back coming up equally under both of your seat bones. This is an indication that the horse is stepping under his body equally with both hind legs. The horse's ears should remain level, which tells you that he is not tilting his head.

Keeping the horse straight while he works on a bent track helps the energy move more easily from the hind legs up into the back muscles, increasing self-carriage.

BENEFITS OF RIDING ON CIRCLES OR BENT TRACKS

- Bent tracks have a strong suppling effect.
- Spiraling in and then out again by using the inside leg aid is a good preparation for shoulder-in.
- It is a good idea to make a circle at the end of an extension. It is not always easy to get a good answer to the half-halts after an extension. If you follow the half halt at the end of an extension with a small circle, the horse will begin to anticipate the circle and be more willing to slow down.
- Riding travers on a bent track is a good exercise for increasing the engagement of the hind legs.

- Passage on a bent track increases the engagement, especially if it is ridden in travers.
- When the horse can work correctly on a bent track in both directions, it will also be easier to keep him straight when working on a straight line.
- Bent tracks are helpful when teaching the horse how to respond correctly to the inside leg.

MOST COMMON MISTAKES

- The horse gets on the forehand.
- The rider uses too much inside rein.
- There is too much or not enough bend.
- The hind feet are not in the same track as the front feet.
- The rider makes an inaccurate circle.
- The horse is behind the vertical.
- The horse's outside hind leg steps out.
- The horse falls out over the outside shoulder.
- The rider collapses his inside hip.
- The rider keeps the horse on a circle for too long.
- The bend in the horse is not uniform