

CANTER PIROUETTES

The canter pirouette is the most difficult of all the canter work, as well as the most physically demanding of all the exercises.

The canter pirouette is in the same family as turn on the haunches and walk pirouettes, which means that by training turn on the haunches and walk pirouettes you are establishing the basics for the work with the canter pirouette later on in the horse's education.

The purpose of this exercise is to strengthen the muscles over the haunches and top line, to develop the horse's balance, as well as to improve the rider's ability to coordinate the aids.

Canter pirouette can be ridden as a full pirouette (360-degree turn) or a half pirouette (180-degree turn). In a canter pirouette the horse's front end swings around a point that is located directly under his inside hind foot. The horse should take between 6 and 8 canter strides to make a full canter pirouette.

THE PREPARATION

Performing this movement correctly depends on the preparation. For the horse to be able to make a canter pirouette successfully, his training up to that point must have resulted in the following:

- Horse and rider have a common center of gravity.
- The horse is able to remain straight while working.
- The rider has a feeling of riding uphill with more horse in front of him than behind him.
- The half-halts go through during all changes of speed.
- The horse has learned to carry so much weight on his hind quarters that he is able to canter almost on the spot over a short distance.
- The horse has learned to go to the outside rein in both directions.
- The horse is so supple that it is easy for him to bend around the rider's inside leg.
- The horse has learned to follow the rider's center of gravity.
- The horse understands the aids for a turn on the haunches.
- Horse and rider can stay in balance without tension.

HOW TO TEACH THE CANTER PIROUETTE

Once the horse meets all the above requirements and is ready to start working on the canter pirouette, this work will primarily consist of strength training and development of his balance and his ability to carry more weight on his hindquarters.

The strength training exercises used in preparation for the canter pirouette include the following:

- Transitions between canter and walk executed on the track in shoulder-in.
- Haunches-in in canter on circles, making the circle smaller while maintaining the haunches-in.
- Changes of speed in canter, alternating between working canter and a pirouette canter (a very collected canter, almost on the spot) This canter is ridden with a length of stride that is quite a bit shorter than what we call “collected canter.” No horse can execute a pirouette at a speed of canter we normally call a “collected canter.”

It is very important during this training that the horse learns to move sideways away from either the rider’s inside leg or outside leg. If the horse tends to lean on the rider’s inside or outside aids, he will not perform the pirouette correctly.

This work should, first and foremost, lead to the horse being able to canter in a collected frame on a straight line while staying completely straight in his body. Imagine you are cantering on a tightrope in the circus. Don’t fall off! Make sure all four legs stay on the line! Be careful to practice this kind of work only for short periods at a time and give the horse lots of breaks. We want the horse to become stronger, not to suffer overload.

Once the horse has practiced many transitions and half-halts, and has become so well balanced between the rider’s aids that he can follow the rider’s center of gravity, he is ready to begin learning the canter pirouette by changing a 20 m circle into a square. Each corner of the square is ridden as a quarter canter pirouette and the horse is asked to go straight forward along the sides of the square. If the horse tends to fall in during the turns, it is helpful to ride shoulder-fore along the sides of the square between the quarter pirouettes. The horse should be allowed to move forward during the quarter pirouettes—do not ask the horse to center the pirouette until he is ready.

THE WORKING PIROUETTE

When the horse is able to perform a quarter-pirouette, he is ready to practice what we call a “working pirouette.” A working pirouette is ridden on a small circle (the size depends on the

level of the horse at that point in time, as well as on his natural ability). Be careful, as it is common for the hindquarters to fall in during this work with the horse ending up in haunches-in. When this happens, it is difficult for the horse to swing his front end around. If the hindquarters fall in, the rider should move his inside leg back a bit to support the horse's inside hind leg.

If the horse has a tendency to fall in over his inside shoulder during the pirouette, alternating between a few steps moving straight forward in shoulder-in and a few strides of pirouette can be helpful. This will help the horse to understand that he should stay between the rider's inside leg and outside rein, or in other words, remain more vertical.

When the horse falls in over his inside shoulder, or swings his haunches out of the turn, it can be a sign that the horse is not sufficiently collected, does not give enough or bend enough to the inside, or simply that it was too soon for him to start this kind of work.

MAKING THE PIROUETTE SMALLER

When it comes time to begin centering the pirouette, it is helpful to use the sides of the arena. Here is an example of such an exercise:

Canter in shoulder-in along the quarter-line to prepare the horse for making a pirouette towards the wall, either before or in the corner. If you want to make a pirouette to the left you should track right and ride on the quarter-line in left lead, shoulder-in left. After making either a half or a whole pirouette, make a transition to walk if your horse gets tense or is in too much of a hurry. On the other hand, if your horse gets stuck or loses impulsion during the pirouette, ride more forward out of the pirouette.

Another way to use the wall as a resisting aid during a pirouette is to begin in counter canter, turn onto the center line, ride half pass to the quarter-line and make a half or full pirouette there.

It can also be helpful to practice the working pirouette by riding around a post that serves as a fixed point for both horse and rider. In this way you will quickly find out whether you are able to create a smaller turn while keeping the turn round. It is also a very beneficial exercise if the horse has a tendency to move sideways.

For some horses it is helpful to train canter pirouettes by starting the pirouette from a turn on the haunches in walk. Make the turn on the haunches on a small circle, and when you feel that everything is exactly as you want to have it in a canter pirouette, ask your horse to make a canter depart and continue the turn in canter. During this exercise it is important to ask your horse to continue turning, so that he doesn't go straight ahead as he begins to canter. But it is OK to make

the circle a little larger.

EXERCISES ON THE DIAGONAL

You can also work along the diagonal line both for strength training and to develop the canter pirouette. If you want to practice a pirouette to the left, turn across the diagonal in left lead canter. Before you reach the track on the other side, collect, ride a half pirouette to the left and canter back along the same diagonal line. When you reach the other end, ride a half pirouette left again back to the same diagonal once more. In this way you can use the wall as a resisting and collecting aid. While you are on the diagonal you can choose either to keep the horse straight, or if necessary, to ride in shoulder-in left. Be cautious with this exercise – do not make too many repetitions in one session, as it is hard work for the horse.

THE AIDS

The aids for the canter pirouette are the same as for walk pirouettes. The horse starts by cantering straight ahead on a straight line. By using small, fine half-halts collect the horse until he is almost cantering on the spot. Bend him slightly to the inside while at the same time moving your inside hip forward. Lower your inside heel and inside knee. Sit a little deeper on your inside seat bone. Your inside seat bone and leg, which are placed by the girth, control the horse's inside hind leg. The outside rein regulates the amount of bend. The outside leg is moved back slightly to hold the hind quarters in place and to make sure the outside hind leg does not fall out. Place your weight slightly inward and back towards the inside hind leg. This is the primary aid which signals to the horse to make the pirouette. You can move your outside shoulder forward if necessary.

When you finish the pirouette, your weight, along with the outside rein and inside leg, straightens the horse while your driving aids propel the horse forward into collected canter again.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- Don't make the pirouette any smaller than that in which the horse is able to keep his balance.
- Most horses find it easier to understand that they should lower their hind quarters when they keep the poll as the highest point.
- It is important to be able to make the horse straight and ride forward out of the pirouette at any time during the pirouette.
- If the pirouette is not on the spot, do not finish the pirouette by yielding back to the line the

horse came from. Always go straight forward after completing the pirouette. If the horse has a tendency to fall in, it can be helpful to move out of the pirouette in shoulder-fore.

- When teaching the horse the canter pirouette, use as many strides as possible all the way around. In other words, make the canter strides as short as possible.
- Keep a light contact with the outside rein, without restricting the horse from bending and turning.
- Sit completely still. The least amount of unsteadiness on the rider's part can cause the horse to lose his balance.
- Create confidence in the movement. It takes only a moment to create the opposite.
- The pirouette will never be better than the preparation for it.