

STRAIGHTNESS

The horse is born with a concave and a convex side. This means that the horse is not equally strong in both sides, and therefore is not equally balanced in both reins, similar to left-handed and right-handed people. In order to use the horse's energy to develop balance, self-carriage and quality of his gaits, it is extremely important that we are able to make the horse straight and equally strong and balanced on both sides.

Most of the faults that can be associated with collected work, such as a short neck, traveling on two tracks, a hollow back, resistance to the hand, a tense lower neck, a pacey walk or a four-beat canter, are the consequence of a basic education in which the horse has not learned to go forward while remaining straight. ***The majority of faults must therefore be corrected by establishing straightness.***

This rule is one of the oldest in classical dressage, written by Xenofon more than 2000 years ago. He wrote, "Straighten your horse and ride him forward." This rule is still valid since it follows the laws of nature, as we will discuss later. The rider who learns to work with the laws of nature, rather than against them, makes things much easier for his horse and himself. Take a stone in your hand and see if you can get it to rise upward when you open your hand and let it go. Of course, this goes against the laws of nature. This is what happens to many riders when they experience problems with their horses. They work against, instead of with, the laws of nature. ***Creating a horse that is straight and even on both sides and in both directions takes years of correct training.***

How do we know when the horse is straight?

- All the vertebrae are in a straight line from poll to tail.
- The horse goes forward equally to both reins.
- The horse pushes equally with both hind legs.
- The hind legs follow the same track as the front legs.
- The rider feels the back equally under both seat bones and does not have the feeling of a lot of back under one seat bone and a hole under the other.
- The horse's shoulders are at an equal height.
- The horse's hips are at an equal height.
- The horse is equally supple on both sides.

- The horse carries himself equally well in both reins.

ACHIEVING STRAIGHTNESS AS A PREREQUISITE FOR COLLECTED WORK

How do we achieve straightness? To begin with, we must realize that we cannot physically straighten the horse. This is something he must do himself, but we can work him in a way that creates a natural need for the horse to straighten himself.

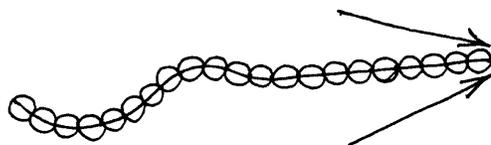
The most important element when working on straightness is energy, which also has a big influence on balance. Think of a soccer ball. You give it a good kick and it rolls quickly across the ground. As long as there is energy, the ball will roll in a straight line. But as soon as it begins to lose energy, it starts to wobble, until it finally stops.

Have you ever tried to balance on a bicycle that is standing still? That's hard, isn't it? You tense up, and shift your weight from side to side. As soon as the bicycle moves forward (energy), you can ride in a straight line, keep your balance and relax. This is something we should keep in mind when we discuss straightness in the horse.

We say that the rider should feel the horse seeking contact in his hands. This is also an important element in creating balance and straightness. I like to say that it is the horse that should go to the bit - the bit should not be pulled back to him. To illustrate this concept, let us compare the horse's vertebrae to 2 pearl necklaces that are placed as in these drawings.



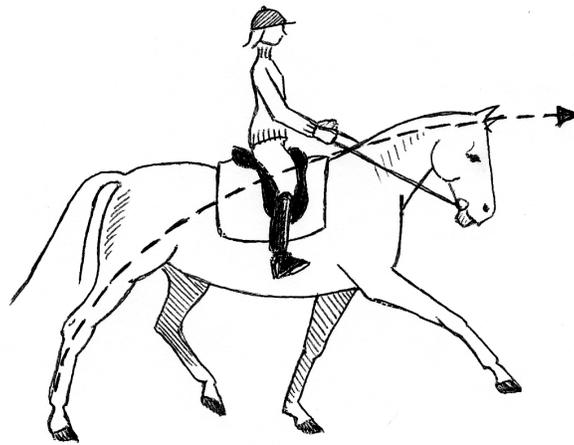
The rider pulls on the reins to create contact/control and makes the horse more crooked.



The horse reaches forward to establish contact with the bit/rider's hands. As a result, he becomes more and more straight.

Another way to visualize this concept is from the horse's back. Imagining that a strong man is drawing the horse forward by the nose to keep him straight.

When everything is correct, how much weight should we have in our hands? I can describe that best as a little bit more than just the reins. This 'little bit more' comes from the force of the horse's hind hooves as he is pushing his body forward with his hind legs. This push sends energy up through the hind legs, on through the croup, lower back, back, neck and poll, all the way to the bit at the other end, and then from the bit, through the reins and back to the rider's hands.



EXERCISES FOR STRAIGHTNESS

In order to use the following exercise successfully, the horse must be supple and understand how to answer the driving aids and the inside leg aid. See the chapter in this section (The Basics) called The Aids.

Walk on the quarter line all the way around the arena, sitting straight over the horse, keeping a soft contact with the horse's mouth in both reins. Keep your body totally relaxed and follow the movements of the horse. Drive and create energy (think of the bicycle and the soccer ball). Make a quarter turn on the haunches in the corner, look ahead and imagine that you are on a tightrope with the horse's legs as your legs. It is 40 feet to the ground, so you'd better not fall off!

If the horse is not going straight, create more energy. If the horse is not seeking to go forward and down to the bit, it is a signal that he should take longer steps and cover more ground. Again, the solution is to add energy. Don't be afraid that you might cause the horse to break into a trot. If he does, he has answered half right. He went forward when you asked but misunderstood (used

the energy in the wrong way), so never punish a horse that thinks forward. It is better, in this situation, to control the excess speed by turning or using leg yielding to act as a brake. If the horse breaks into a trot he is not disobedient, but it is an indication of a tense back. Ask then the horse to work in a lower frame to relax his back.

Teach your horse that when you drive him forward in a walk rhythm he is supposed to stay in walk. Be careful with your aids and use them in synchrony with the horse's walk. The ability to get the horse to walk forward with as long strides as possible has a lot to do with creating the need within him to make himself straight.

The reason for making the quarter turn on the haunches in the corners is to develop more engagement in the hind legs, to get the back up, and to move the center of gravity further back. These things together create a natural need in the horse to seek to go forward and down to the bit. This work should also give you the feeling that you have the horse 'in front of you.' We should be able to elicit the same response from the horse in all three gaits.

Continue to work on developing straightness until you feel that:

- The horse is centered and standing vertically right under you, and moves straight forward.
- The horse reaches forward and down.
- The back is relaxed and moving very freely – no tension in the top line or stiff, straight legs that move like pillars under the horse.
- All the horse's joints bend, and the top line is round. Look down for once and see if the shoulders, neck, and poll are completely straight. If you are not sure, get somebody to stand nearby and see if the horse's hind legs are following in the tracks of the front legs. The whole horse must be engaged in the work.

You should ride off the track and on the center line often, to be sure that you can ride straight forward without support from the wall. It is also a good idea to spend some time riding on bent tracks with a completely straight horse. See the chapter in this section called Circles and Bent Tracks.

It is necessary for you to be able to ride your horse straight in order to develop gaits, balance, and suppleness. This kind of work should always be done prior to asking for collection, and you must consistently return to working on straightness as soon as any problems occur. This, among other things, is what we mean when we say, "back to the basics."

But is it enough to just ride your horse from behind and forward to the bit in order to create straightness? The answer is no. Horses are not born equally strong and balanced on both sides.

Sometimes we say the horse has a supple side and a stiff side, or a strong and a weak side, similar to humans who are left or right handed. All horses feel different, depending on the direction you are working them, because they are better balanced and stronger in one direction than the other.

So, what can we do to help the horse develop more equally on both sides? We need to strengthen the weak side. For example, let's take a horse who finds it harder to bend and give to the right while traveling on the right rein. Such a horse can be ridden counter-bent (bent to the outside or left in this case), while driving the horse forward with your left leg until the horse begins to reach forward and down to the left rein. Be as passive on the right side as possible. Once the horse reaches forward and down to the left rein, carefully start to move his neck to the right, while keeping the contact with the left rein. If you feel resistance to your right rein, go back to bending left for a while and then try to bend right again. At the moment the horse starts to give to the right, drive him from your right leg out and into the left rein. Do not bend the horse to the stiff side before he reaches into the outside rein.

When riding this horse on circles and corners tracking left, keep the horse straight on the outside, maybe even thinking a little haunches-out. This will help to keep the outside shoulder from falling out. When riding shoulder-in left, keep the horse straight on the outside, and when riding shoulder-in right ask the horse to work in a lower frame.

So to summarize, when doing exercises with the horse's weak or stiff side to the inside of the circle or bent track, keep the horse straighter, and when doing exercises with the weak or stiff side to the outside, ride the horse in a lower frame where the horse will find it easier to give and bend. Remember it's not a question of obedience. The horse needs help through positive and correct training to develop straightness and become even on both sides. It's also very important to be aware when your horse feels different from normal when doing this kind of work. It should be a warning that something is wrong and that your horse should be checked for any injuries. ***ridden diagonally out and into the outside rein.***