

March 2009 Beyond the Basics

Gymnastic Exercises for Horse & Rider – Part III..... Combining Exercises!

If you have been following this series on gymnastic exercises, and have been applying them with your partner...the horse, then you should be feeling an improved balance, softer shoulders, and hips that are moving more freely. All of the previous exercises help to strengthen and supple the horse, along with assisting the understanding of subtle communications through the use of your aids. Combining your balance aids (i.e. Primarily the upper body, through your focus, shoulders, arms, elbows, tummy, and hips influencing your 'seat') with the pressure aids (i.e. The 'leg', calf, inner thigh) and politely making suggestions with your 'hands' through a feel on the reins, you are able to execute these exercises with minimal effort. (See NWHs article on Pressure and Balance Aids: www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles Beyond the Basics July – Sept. 2007) Now, let's combine these maneuvers to develop a flow between postures, that creates rhythm, enhances our timing and use of the aids, and prepares both horse and rider for such jobs as flying lead changes, canter pirouette, or correct spins.

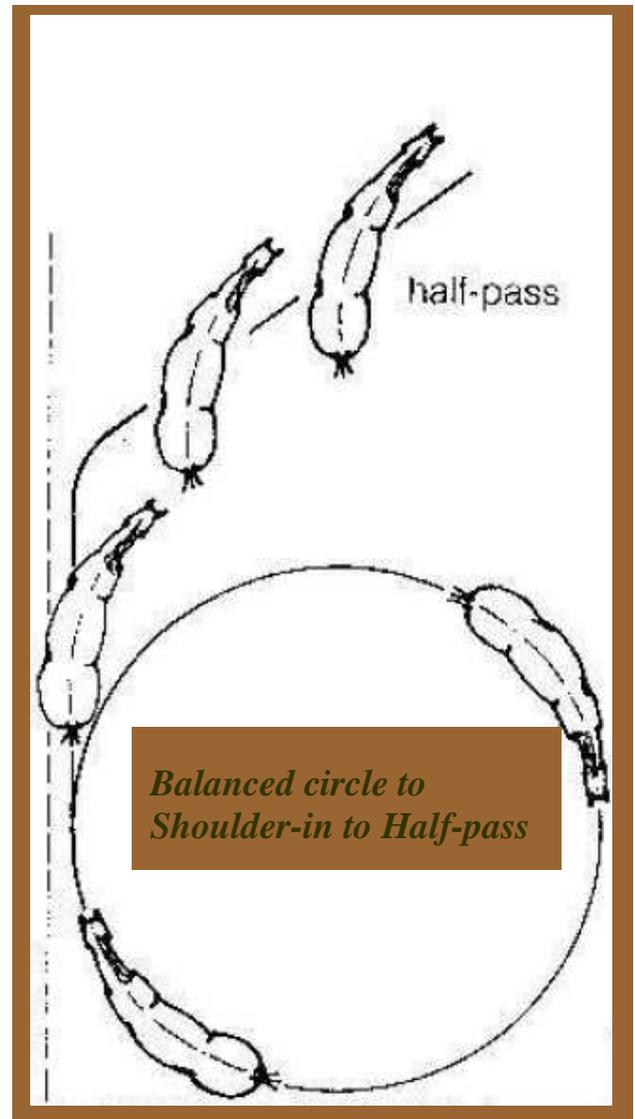
Balanced Circle to Shoulder-in to Half-pass

What: Riding the long side or from center line, pick-up a 10-meter circle, to a few steps of shoulder-in to a half-pass on the diagonal, shoulders leading.

Why: Engage and strengthen inside hind legs, hips, and hocks; Flex ribcage, soften jowl, prepares for correct positioning & balance of half-pass postures; Help horse & rider to understand precise use of aids (i.e. Seat = balance; Leg = pressure; Hands) and ability to subtly change & flow between postures. This is NOT an exercise limited to those pursuing Classical dressage! This combination is wonderful preparation for balanced lead changes, correct turn-on-the-haunch, and in short...communication to all four corners of the horse.

When: I use this combination *after* I have established a balanced circle, a flow for the shoulder-in, and a beginning understanding of the half-pass. These elements need to be in place first or you will risk attempting this combination with poor rhythm, shoulders casting, hips leading, and over-all lack of balance. This combination of postures & movements requires both horse and rider to become more vigilante of their aids, the geometry, balance and timing.

How: As in previous gymnastic exercises, it is important that you visualize the geometry prior to starting. I highly recommend riding this combination on your two-leg horse first, to feel the balance, rhythm at the walk & trot, and to assist you with your focus. As you ride out of the corner, pick up a straight, balanced 10-meter circle, where the inside pair of feet track up on the circle, along with the outside pair tracking-up on the outside of the railroad track. Just prior to departing the circle, keep a slight inside bend (to the right in this illustration), bring your balance slightly to the left, relax your left leg, and caress slightly with your right calf. Accomplish a few steps of shoulder-in. (This will position the shoulders to 'lead' in the half-pass, rather than starting from a haunches-in posture, which would cause the hips to lead and the shoulders to drag behind in the half-pass...not good!) Next, visualize your half-pass on the diagonal. Shift your balance to the right, or the inside of the bend. Place your left leg back to secure the haunches, put a little 'feel' in the right rein, and leave a slight 'feel' in your right calf to invite the horse to step into it, keeping the bend to the right. I feel for the change in flow of energy from the right hind to left rein in the shoulder-in, to the exchange from left hind to right fore and/or rein in the half-pass.



Cautions: Here again, this is an exercise that is easy to try too hard to accomplish, and end up creating brace in both yourself and the horse. Relax, visualize, see the geometry, and ride for the balance and 'feel'. The biggest caution reiterates that a proper, balanced half-pass starts from the outside hind, flowing to the inside fore, but the shoulders are still positioned *ahead* of the hips. Since we practiced the haunches-in posture out of the circle in last month's exercises, your horse may want to depart the circle with his hips to the inside of the track. Don't let him! Start your half-pass with the shoulders-in, then change your aids to request the half-pass, and your forward/sideways movement will remain balanced, rhythmic, and ready to ask for another maneuver.

Zigzag: Half-Pass to Leg-yield To Half-Pass

What: Geometrically riding your horse in zigzag pattern, beginning with a half-pass on a diagonal to the leg-yield on a diagonal to another half-pass.

Why: This wonderful combination again reinforces the use of your aids to influence the forward and lateral progression of your horse.

When: The zigzag geometry is great to practice from leg-yield to leg-yield, in which case you change the bend when you change lateral direction. This exercise, where your move from leg-yield to half-pass, should be practiced after you have established a good shoulder-in, and your horse is beginning to understand the use of the inside leg and rein aid. (I.e. Understanding to move 'into' the inside leg suggestion.) My favorite place to practice these 'zigzag' maneuvers is on an old logging road, using the tracks as my geometric guide.

How: Tracking right, as I depart the corner I will ask for a 'soft-feel' in the jowl, keeping the nose and eye slightly tipped to the right, and begin to ride a shoulder-in posture. (I.e. Right hind to left fore, with the shoulders off the track to the inside of the arena.) Still bent to the right, change your aids to feel the balance shifting and ride the left hind to the right fore, with your balance slightly to the right. (I.e. Begin the half-pass) After a few steps of half-pass, straighten and ride forward with equal balance in your seat and both legs equally approached. Next, start the 'zag' by picturing a leg-yield forward on a diagonal. Now your balance is to the left, and the energy is flowing from the right hind to the left fore/rein. After a few lateral steps, straighten again, and start the 'zig' or half-pass posture again.

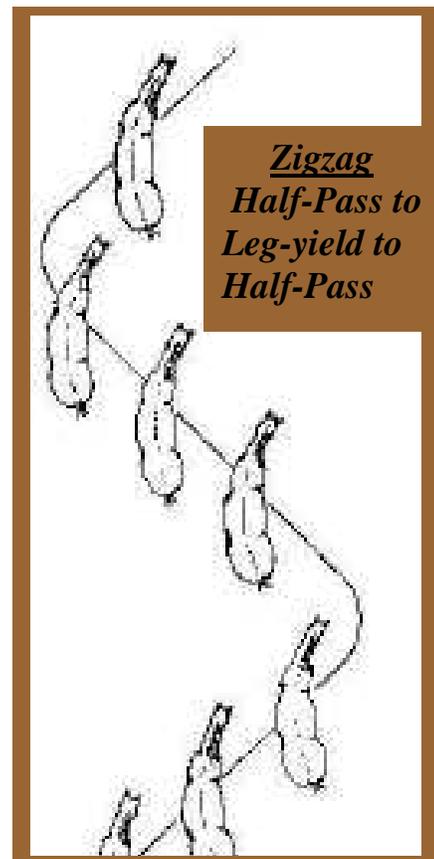
Cautions: It is easy to loose track of the need for 'forward' and 'sideways' in this exercise. Another fault is turning the torso and shoulders, causing the shoulders or hips to travel one faster than the other. Remember, that in general, you sit or balance in the direction of travel, and your shoulders and hips should align with those of the horse. (In this example: The right shoulder is slightly back, and the left hip slightly forward.)

Here we go again...time to combine these exercises to supple, flex, and prepare you and your horse for a magnificent dance! One where both partners have positive attitudes with bodies ready for anything life throws at you.

References:
Gymnastic Exercises for Horses
by Eleanor Russell
The Gymnasium of the Horse
by Gustav Steinbrecht

"There are two words, that when applied to horsemanship & life can set up the actions and attitudes for positive communication. Asking 'Please' makes you breathe, create a picture, & prepare things with patience. 'Thank you' allows you time to reflect and appreciate."

Thoughts by Alice Trindle



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