

February 2009 Beyond the Basics

Gymnastic Exercises for Horse & Rider – Part II

Free-Up the Hips!

Last month we began a series of articles on gymnastic exercises to help flex and supple both the horse and rider. We started with stretching and relaxing movements through the 'Long & Low' exercise that lengthened the horse's back and neck, and worked on preparing his attitude to go to work *with* his human to accomplish a myriad of jobs. Next, we used the corners in aiding us to free-up the shoulders by riding geometrically square changes of direction and finally reverse bend quarter turns. This month, let us focus our attention on the hips and hindquarters of the horse.

First, here are some reminders regarding definitions of terms commonly used in almost every equine discipline. However, sometimes these terms have different meanings, or pictures attached to the maneuver, based on the culture, geographic location, and inadequacies found in translating from one language to another. So, here are the Alice Trindle versions so that at least within this series of articles we are all on the same page!

Shoulder-in: Maneuver where the shoulders come slightly off the line, to the inside of the arena, and hoof prints would ultimately leave three-tracks; The balance of the movement starts with the inside hind foot and flows to the outside shoulder and outside rein; The riders weight/balance sits slightly in the direction of travel

Haunches-in or Travers: Maneuver where the hindquarters come slightly off the line, to the inside of the arena, and ultimately three hoof prints are left or a 'three-track'; The balance of the movement begins with the outside hind foot and flows to the inside shoulder; Riders balance sits in the direction of travel, to the inside of the bend

Half-Pass: Traditionally accomplished on the diagonal line, bend and movement is sideways, both in the same direction; (i.e. Bend to the left and movement is forward & sideways to the left!) Riders balance is to the inside of the bend, in the direction of travel, with the energy flowing from the outside hind to the inside shoulder

Leg-yield: Traditionally accomplished on the diagonal line, with the movement sideways opposite the bend; (i.e. Bend to the left and movement forward & sideways to the right!) The rider sits or balances in the direction of travel or to the outside of the bend

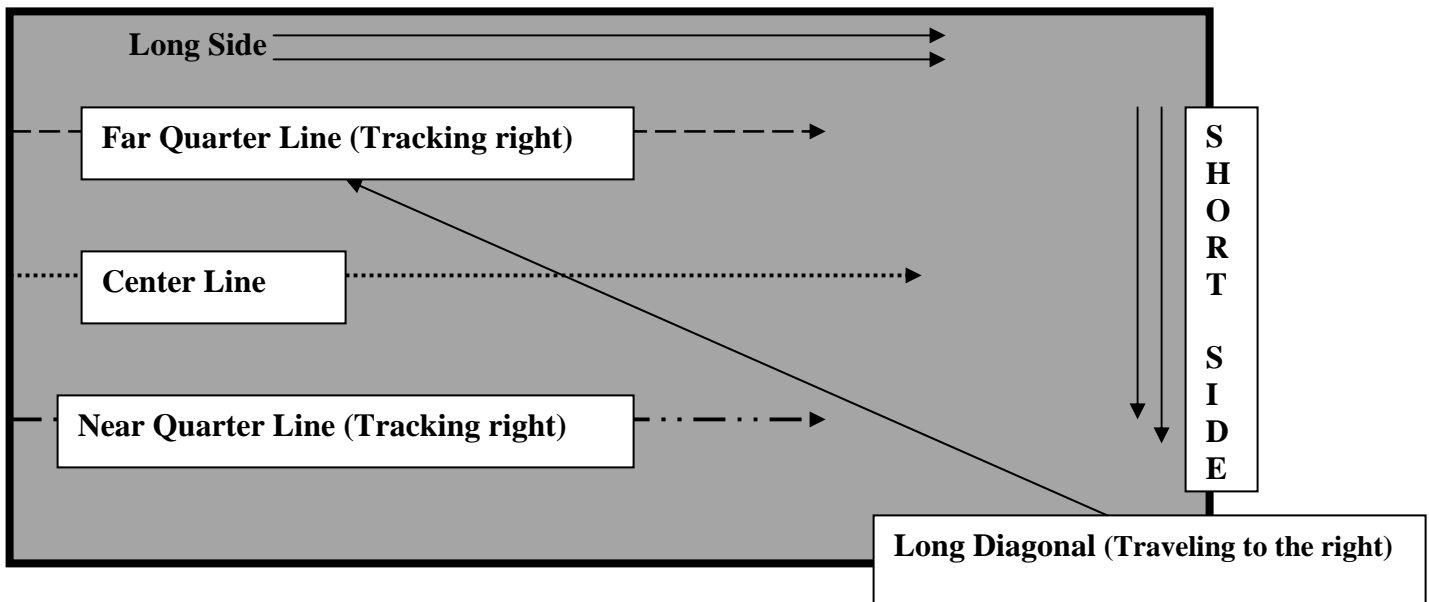
Reverse or Counter-bend: Posture and movement is similar to the Leg-yield, but with less forward movement and the shoulders reaching more than the haunches

Bend: The slight arc in your horses body to the right or left; Just enough to see the eyelash in most cases, unless accomplishing supple & flexing exercises

Inside or Active Rein: The rein on the inside of the bend; (i.e. Bend to the left, then the left rein is inside and your fingers act in a 'hold & release' or 'sponge' fashion

Outside or Supportive Rein: The rein on the outside of the bend; (i.e. Bend to the left, then the right rein is outside and in a 'support' or 'suggestive' hold or 'feel'

Geometry of the Arena:



Haunches-In to Haunches-in on Circle

What: Riding the long side with haunches to the inside of the arena, keeping this posture as you ride a large circle, and continuing on down the long side – haunches-in

Why: Engage and strengthen inside hind leg, hip, and hock; Flex ribcage, soften jowl, prepare for half-pass postures; Help horse & rider to understand precise use of aids (i.e. Seat = balance; Leg = pressure; Hands)

When: I use the 'Haunches-in' postures with horses at all stages of development, as soon as I have established willing forward, with rhythm and balance. Normally, I begin schooling the 'hindquarters-in' from the ground, as a Work in Hand exercise. For the young horse, it helps to establish patience, listening to your aids, and connecting your focus, positioning, to the feet. For the advancing horse, which has a good grasp of the aids and free hips, I rarely use the haunches-in, but rather more Half-Pass exercises.

How: Here again, I use the square corner to help me visualize the geometry of this exercise. As I ride into the corner, tracking right, I double check that I can see the horse's right eye and a wrinkle or two in his jowl. Soft and a little gathered. As we progress through the corner, I picture his hips staying to the inside of the track, as my focus picks up the new line and my balance shifts slightly from center to the *right!* I put a little feel in the right rein and place my left leg back slightly to encourage the hip to step to the right. I feel for the movement or energy flowing from the left hip to the right shoulder and rein. The bend stays to the right. As you approach the middle of the long side, picture a large circle, then ride the horse's shoulders on that circle, with his haunches slightly to the inside. When you reach the track again, flow off, in the same posture (haunches-in) for a few steps, then straighten and reward.

Cautions: Boy - this is a big one for trying too hard to accomplish this maneuver, and actually setting it up for frustration in both horse and rider. Relax, visualize, try it first on your two-leg horse, then in ground school, and by the time you attempt under saddle, the horse will be there! Remember too that you are not 'pushing' the hips away with your outside leg, rather inviting him to come into your inside leg, following the balance of the movement. In the beginning, reward the first steps and build on that, holding the haunches-in posture longer and longer.

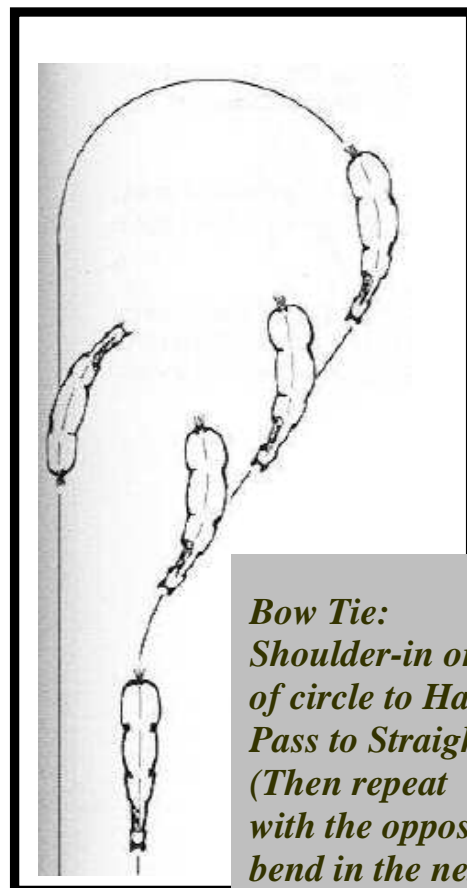
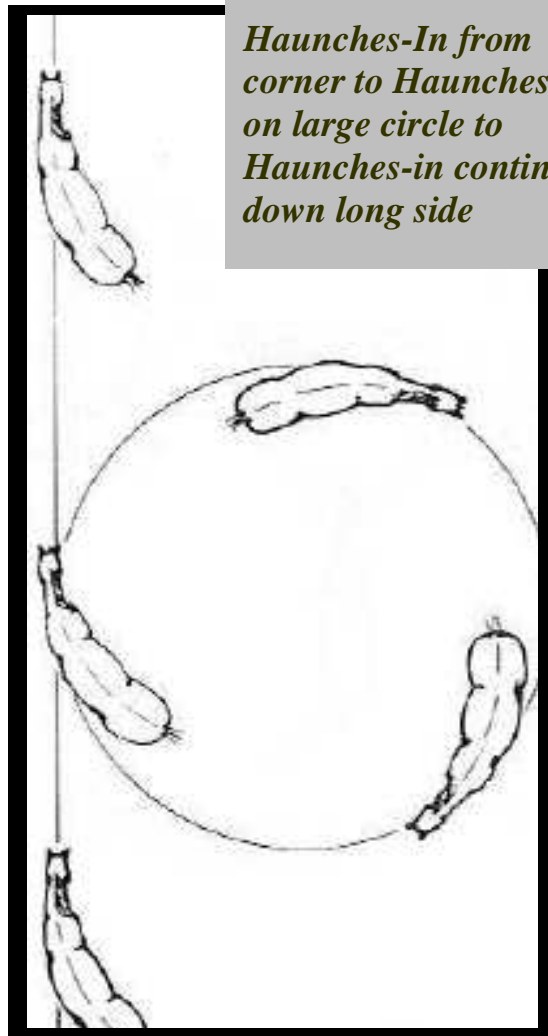
Bow Tie to Half-Pass

What: Geometrically riding your horse in a loop or change of direction, with the nose slightly in the direction of travel, and continuing on, sideways and forward in a Half-Pass posture.

Why: Free-up hips, in balance; Flex ribcage, soften jowl, establish aids, strengthens hip and hocks; Prepares for other Half-Pass postures.

When: This is a great exercise, once haunches-in and shoulder-in have been established, to teach the forward and sideways – into the bend – posture of the Half-Pass.

Haunches-In from corner to Haunches-In on large circle to Haunches-in continuing down long side



Bow Tie: Shoulder-in on 3/4 of circle to Half-Pass to Straight (Then repeat with the opposite bend in the next long side corner)

How: Tracking right, as I approach 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.) Keep this posture and balance through the corner, as you picture the beginning of a circle or loop that will bring you down the near quarter line. As you start down the quarter line, still bent to the right, change your aids from feeling for the right hind to the left fore and sitting to the left, to a haunches-in feel. (i.e. Ride the left hind to the right fore, with your balance slightly to the right.) Amazing... You are riding a few steps of Half-Pass – forward on the diagonal to the wall and flowing now to the left. Change the bend and reward your horse!

Cautions: This exercise really accentuates the need to visual the exercise and ride geometrically. Draw it out on the arena floor in your mind’s eye. It will help you to keep the horse straight, in balance, without the shoulders or hips racing ahead or behind. It truly helps me to ride this exercise on my two-leg horse first. Remember, the bend (in this case to the right) is no more than an eyelash, and you can see that throughout the maneuvers.

OK...Time to move up the scale and free-up those hips! This month, start combining the January ‘Square Corner’ exercises, with these haunches-in maneuvers. Your horse will become more supple, responsive, and I just bet happier!

References:

Gymnastic Exercises for Horses by Eleanor Russell

Riding Essentials by Francois Lemaire de Ruffieu

“Often, I meet riders who know so little about, or just forget how, why, and when, the natural aids are used. In my opinion, it is mandatory to know, *by heart*, what must be done to obtain a specific movement from your horse.”

*The Handbook of Riding Essentials
by Francois Lemaire de Ruffieu*

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