

January 2009 Beyond the Basics ***Gymnastic Exercises for Horse & Rider – Part I***

Use of Corners

What a fun ride this has been over the past five years, writing for Northwest Horse Source! As I reflect upon the beginning humble conversations regarding the desire to bring the discussions, skills, and exercises of the clinic situation to the readership of the magazine, and now look back over the volume of thoughts, maneuvers, and principles we have expressed through these articles, it is impressive! Our desire these past few years has been to present specific topics that inspire readers to go 'Beyond the Basics', to increase their awareness, observation skills, and encourage thoughtful practice of specific maneuvers. While this January issue of NWHHS is focusing on the subject of purchasing a horse (Note: Review the archives: www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles/NWHHS - January - March 2006 series on Buying, Evaluation, & Ownership Responsibilities), we will continue on with the 'Beyond the Basics' providing great exercise, skills, and principles for you to use *after* you get your new horse!

Here is a brief peak into the topics for 2009:

Gymnastic Exercises for Horse and Rider – This will be a four-part series giving you very specific exercises to take to the arena and practice. They will focus on suppling and strengthening you and your horse, to prepare for any type of job or discipline you are pursuing.

Developing Contact: Theory & Practical Use of Bits – We all seek to achieve a 'soft-feel' and willing partnership with our horse, but often shy away from developing 'contact' and self-carriage. Bits and bosals, in thoughtful hands, can help progress the horse and rider team to a higher level of 'lightness'. In this series of four articles, we will examine the use of the snaffle bit, bosal, double-bridle (both Vaquero-style & Classical), and finally to riding 'straight-up' in the bridle.

The Garrocha – Traditions & Posture Tool – The 13 ft. bull-fighting pole used by the Doma Vaquera has a wonderful history, and can be used by aspiring horseman to develop balance, rhythm, timing, and certainly focus for both horse and rider. In this two-part series we will look at the traditions of the garrocha (ga-roach-a) and learn how to accomplish several basic maneuvers to give both horse and rider self-confidence!

The Cavalletti – What, How to Build, and Why – The use of the cavalletti should be found in every horse arena from the trail class to the dressage ring. We will explore some low-cost methods of construction, why to use this valuable tool, and finish the two-part series with several favorite exercises.

It going to be another fun year of reading in Northwest Horse Source in the 'Beyond the Basics' series and we hope riding with us in several clinics! Let's get started with some great January exercises to gymnastically warm-up both horse and rider.

Every true master horseman I have read, or had the good fortune to listen to or watch, has referred to the importance of developing a supple, flexible, strong, and athletic horse. In fact, most animals, including humans, seem to be happier and in the end more relaxed, when they are 'in shape'. In almost every athletic pursuit, we humans are beginning to recognize the importance of not only learning the skills and building strength, we now are adding other exercises to gymnastically supple, lengthen, and flex. Predatory yoga postures should be commonplace in the gym and in the arena!

We have talked in previous articles regarding good habits to develop in warm-up routines that elastically limber both horse and rider. (Ref: www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles - NWHHS '06 June, August, & September) It is important that we start any routine that gymnastically develops our horse with a mindfulness towards the ultimate goal. As example, if I am looking to perfect my half-pass, I need to select gymnastic skills that supple the ribcage, strengthen the back and hindquarters, and encourage balance in the shoulders with extension in the forelegs. With a clear picture of the goal in mind, I can select from a menu of gymnastic exercise to help my horse in performing that skill. It does not matter what discipline or jobs I want to accomplish *with* my horse. This attentiveness to understanding the *reason* for selecting a certain set of gymnastic exercises is critical. Mindlessly flexing the horse, out of balance and heavy on the forehand will allow you to achieve exactly what you practiced!

This month, let's look at three of my favorite gymnastic exercises, and thoughtfully examine each one regarding purpose and benefits.

Long & Low

What: The horse stretches throughout his top line, with the poll lower than the shoulders, but with good drive from the hind quarters, and consistent rhythm (Note: Please do not confuse this exercise with a 'peanut-rolling' posture! The difference is in the engagement or activity in the hind quarters and energetic rhythm.)

Why: Allows for a lengthening of the spine and back muscles, relaxing of the jaw, a slight strengthening of the hind quarters, and the establishment of rhythm in a relaxed attitude

When: I use 'Long & Low' in almost all of my warm-up and cool-down exercises, as a preparation for a more demanding skill, and as a reward for accomplishment

How: Initially, 'Long & Low' is best taught with a snaffle bit set-up, or horseman's halter/bosal. The first step is to go through your 'Horseman's Protocol'. (i.e. Become present & breathe; Picture & focus; Set it up & allow; Reward!) Encompass the horse with your legs and ask him to move forward at the desired gait. (Walk is always best at first.) Keeping a clear focus forward on a straight line with your torso, and with your legs approached, ask your horse to lengthen his back and neck by dropping his poll, stretching, but still rhythmically driving forward from the hindquarters. Accompany this picture with small squeeze or sponge-type movements in your ring fingers on the rein. (Note: If you are using a bosal, remember that it works on three pressure points, so you will be putting a slight 'bump' on the mecate reins, activating the pressure point on the front of the nose.) Your balance may tip a little to the forehand, and your hand position, one on each rein, remains rather wide and low. Your elbows may relax, a little forward and with little bend.

Cautions: Remember to BREATHE! This is to be a relaxing exercise for both you and the horse – something to look forward to accomplishing. If you encounter resistance, make sure you are looking for the slightest 'try' and reward that moment of lengthening by relaxing the encompassing of your legs, and stop the sponge-type movement in your fingers. After a few steps, try the request for 'Long & Low' again...First in your mind's eye, then with you legs and body position, and finally with the hands. Soon your horse will be seeking this position, with an energetic gait, as his reward for a job well-done!

Square Corners

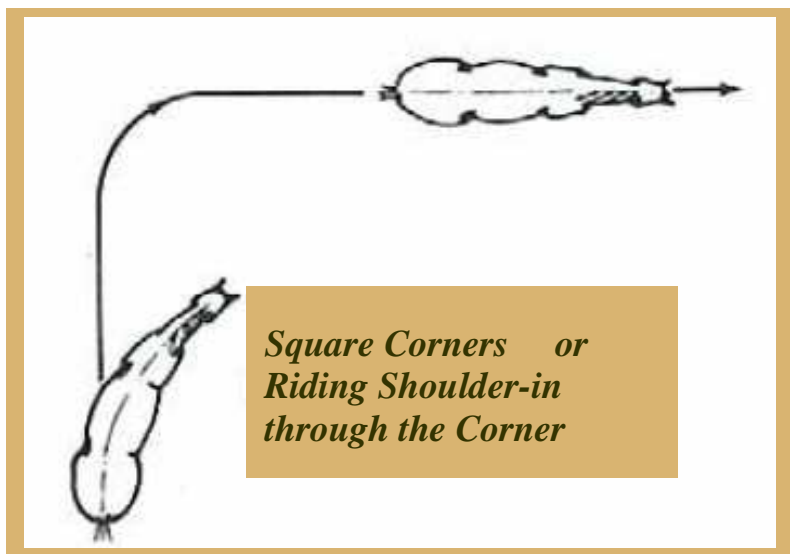
What: Geometrically riding your horse in a square pattern or 90 degree turn or change of direction

Why: Engage and strengthen inside hind leg, hip, and hock; Flex ribcage, soften jowl, establish outside rein, balance shoulders and prepare for shoulder-in postures

When: I use the 'Square Corner' geometry with horses at all stages of development. For the young horse, it helps to establish patience, listening to your aids, and connecting your focus, positioning, and use the rein right down to his feet. For the advancing horse, I use the 'Square Corner' feel for a warm-up and reminder prior to shoulder-in postures and exercises

How: Initially, I actually use the corner of the arena to help me and my horse focus. I ride on the track (let's say traveling to the right) until I am about three-horse lengths from the wall. At this point, I will ask for a softness in the jowl, a slight bend in the neck to the right (only enough to see the horse's eyelash!) and begin to start a circle to the right. My balance is ever so slightly in the direction of travel to the right and my shoulders and torso are starting the turn as well. As the front feet begin to align on the new line, I will half-halt, or put a 'feel' a 'suggestion' in the outside rein, and simultaneously cress with my right lower leg, inviting the horse to step under with his inside right hind foot. At this point my weight or balance is right down the middle of the horse, and my outside or left elbow is just a little heavy. As my horse progresses, I can build this 'feel' (i.e. Riding inside leg to outside rein) into many maneuvers. From 'Sideways or Shoulder-in' on a circle, to actual shoulder-in exercises, 'Square Corners' are a great place to start!

Cautions: The most common error we all do in riding is trying TOO hard! Remember to relax, breathe, and to keep a positive tension in your body. If you get stiff and rigid, your horse will also. Go back and try baby steps, remembering to reward the slightest try, particularly in the beginning stages.



Reverse Bend or Counter-Bend Corners

What: Geometrically riding your horse in a 90-degree change of direction, with the nose slightly away from the direction of travel.

Why: Free-up shoulders, in balance; Flex ribcage, soften jowl, established outside rein, strengthens hip and hocks

When: Basically, I use the 'Counter-Bend' at the same time in my progression as the 'Square Corner' exercise

How: Tracking right, as I approach the corner I will ask for a 'soft-feel' in the jowl, slightly tip the nose and eye to the left or towards the outside wall. Next, I will bring my balance slightly to the right, and put a 'feel' or 'cress' in the right rein. Simultaneously cress

with the lower left leg, and focus on the right ear of your horse. Once the shoulders have aligned with the new direction, or in other words followed the 90-degree turn, change your aids back to riding a straight line to the right, with a slight bend to the right. (No more than an eyelash!)

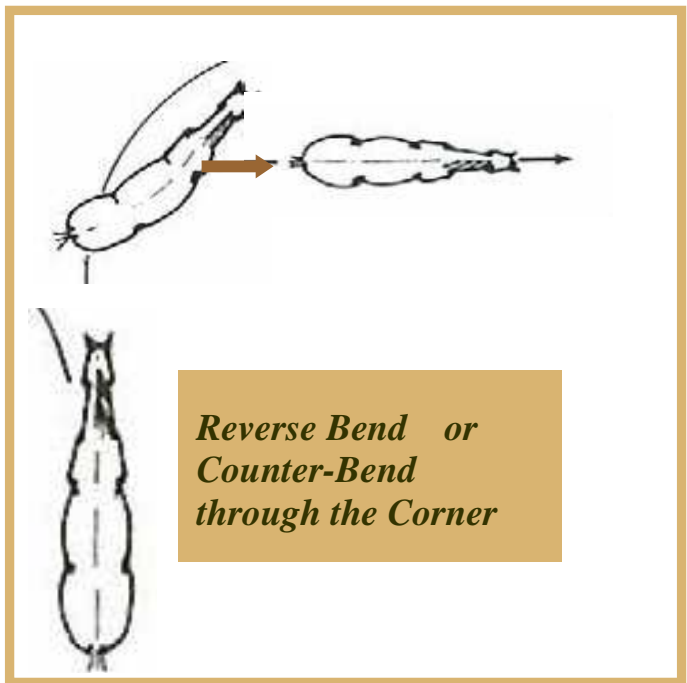
Cautions: Remember, you are not *pushing* the shoulders sideways, rather balancing your weight in the direction of travel, inviting the horse to flow into the suggestion of the outside rein. (i.e. In this case, the right rein, or the outside of the bend) Another pitfall is looking too far in the direction of travel. This tends to put you out of balance, with a tip in your shoulders or stiffness in your neck. It will cause the same reaction in the horse! Keep your shoulders parallel to the ground, keep an eye on your horse's ear, and enjoy the flow!

This January as you head out to the arena, try riding all three of these gymnastic exercises on your two-leg horse. This will allow you to become flexible and balanced, maybe even rhythmic before you reach your horse! Once on board, try starting your lesson plan for this entire month with these three routines. I will guarantee a better ride, with a softer, more flexible and happy horse.

References:

Gymnastic Exercises for Horses by Eleanor Russell

Reflections on the Equestrian Art by Nuno Oliveira



“The good rider is not he who, seeing resistances and serious difficulties appear in a new exercise, tries to conquer them at any price, sometimes using violence and brutality, but rather he who, on seeing the resistance rise up, knows how to return to the beginning, to the preparatory exercises, until he has obtained the flexibility and relaxation necessary to start the exercise he is trying to teach.

Reflections on the Equestrian Art
by Nuno Oliveira