

April 2009 Beyond the Basics

Gymnastic Exercises for Horse & Rider – Part IV..... Riding the Whole Horse!

With spring knocking at our door, I am ever so anxious to get outside...with my horse, with my mind, and with my attitudes! Relax, release, forgive, forget, and let GO are feelings and emotions for which I yearn. With these exercises we have been practicing, I am set-up to put them to practical use in working with the cows, riding the hills, and just enjoying the relationship I have gained with my horse over the winter months. I am prepared to 'Ride the Whole Horse'...Mind, Body, and Spirit with great joy because we now have jobs to do! The art to which we have been aspiring now has purpose.

In Part IV – the final portion of our Gymnastic Exercise series, we will examine two exercises that help me a lot with ranch-type jobs. Opening and closing gates from atop the horse; Backing up for various purposes; Picking up an extended trot or canter on a small circle – nearly a pirouette; These are all jobs that when accomplished effortlessly, illustrate great communication between horse and rider, and are the artistic mark of a true aspiring horseman!

Backing or Rein Back on Circles **ZigZag, Squares, and in Half-Pass Postures**

What: Asking your horse to carry his energy backwards, in balanced, rhythmic cadence, without resistance and with the feet working in energetic, light, diagonal pairs. (i.e. Same foot pattern as the trot going forward.)

Why: Engage and strengthen hind legs, hips, and hocks; Flex ribcage and topline, soften jowl, and lower hips; Help horse & rider to understand precise use of aids (i.e. Seat = balance, particularly fore & aft; Leg = pressure; Hands) and ability to subtly change & flow between postures. This is NOT an exercise limited to those pursuing ranch-type work! These backing exercises are great preparation for soft canter departs, correct turn-on-the-haunch, and confirmation of the aids.

When: I use these backing exercises *after* I have established a great FORWARD! Poorly executed, through use of pulling on the reins, pushing on the stirrups, excessive bumping with the legs will achieve nothing but a dead, dull, stiff relationship! On the young horses, or ones I am re-starting, I start very slowly with the request to backup, and then reward quickly. I try to work on just one thing at a time...First the softness in the jowl and giving to the bit. Next, I search for a shift of balance from the front to the hindquarters, without a stiffness in the top line. Finally, I reward the slightest movement in the feet in a diagonal pattern. The idea is to build on these elements, asking the horse to hold them longer, then carrying this softness on specific patterns with a backwards energy. I also use these exercises with horses who may have become heavy on their front quarters, pushing on the bit, or horses that lack confidence. Learning to trust that I have eyes on my back can be a wonderful feeling for a horse!

How: With rein back exercises it is extremely important that you visualize the geometry of the pattern you will be backing *prior* to starting! I start, as always, by taking a deep breath, becoming present, finding good posture, and then visualizing the backing exercise. Next, I ask for a 'soft-feel', giving to the bit or bosal, and a wrinkle or two in the jowl. These are the "Get Ready" signals for my horse which signal that we are about to accomplish an exercise together. When backing it is very helpful to visualize that you have an eye in the small of your back. By using this 'Horseman's Eye' you will automatically develop good posture, which does not lean too far forward – (Your eye would be looking into the sky), nor lean backwards – (Your eye would be looking into the ground), but positions you perfectly centered and balanced. Using your 'Horseman's Eye' you will also position your hips, shoulders, and leg cues correctly, and stay out of way of your horse's energy moving backwards in whatever pattern you have envisioned. Here again, I highly recommend backing these patterns on your two-leg horse first, to feel the balance, rhythm of the diagonal pairs, and to assist you with using your 'Horseman's Eye'.

“When the rein back is started on demand, and carried out without haste, it is a magnificent exercise which should be repeated frequently.”

**Reflections on Equestrian Art by
Nuno Oliveira**

Here are the patterns I suggest you back to prepare your horse for brilliant forward:

Backing a Straight Line – This is more difficult than it sounds. It will help to focus on an object in front of you about 20 feet. Then using your ‘Horseman’s Eye’ in the small of your back, rein back away from the object with flow, rhythm, and energy. Picture your horse’s feet picking up, as if he were backing in a foot of snow!

Backing a Circle – Now your “Horseman’s Eye’ will really play a role. Start with big circles, and reward after you have backed 1/8th of the circle. Build on that until you can fluidly back the entire circle without resistance. As you progress, try backing a circle in a Half-Pass posture. (i.e. with the nose to the *inside* of the circle)

Backing Squares, Serpentine & Figure ‘8’s – Again, the eye in the middle of your back is really important. Take time to half-halt, or take a deep breath, to prepare between each change of the bend.

Ground School Patterns – Don’t forget to practice backing with rhythm and flow in your ground school exercises!

Cautions: The biggest caution with rein back exercises requires you to check your humanness at the gate, and try not to fall into a mindset of “MAKING” your horse back up. Rather, set it up so he wants to move backwards...Gracefully, with rhythm, and see that there are many purposes for these backing maneuvers. No pulling...No brace...No force! Relax, breath, picture, which will set it up for you to wait for the correct response, and then reward!

Half-Pass Bow Tie

What: Geometrically riding your horse in bow tie pattern, beginning with straight to a haunches-in on a circle to a few steps of true half-pass on the diagonal, then straight again.

Why: This is a great combination which reinforces the use of your aids to influence the forward and lateral progression of your horse and specifically encourages the beginnings of engagement or bend in the hind legs.

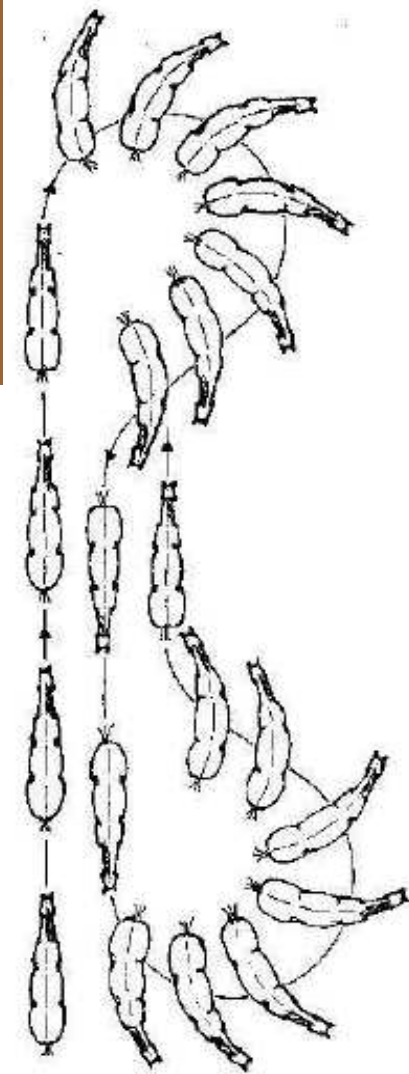
When: This exercise pattern should be used after you have established a soft and willing forward, and you and your horse understand the shoulder-in and half-pass postures. It is not for the beginning horse, and yet, this pattern is one many humans procrastinate on using because it is not easy to accomplish correctly and with softness throughout. The only way to become comfortable with half-pass postures is to ride them!

How: Begin practice at the walk, tracking right on the long side. As you approach the corner, ask for a slight haunches-in, keeping the bend to the right and riding the left hind to the right fore. Your balance should be slightly to the right, with the left leg back and right leg caressing at the girth to keep the bend and invite the movement. Ride this pirouette with some forward, feeling for the rhythmic energy moving from the left to right with the shoulders staying balanced. Halfway through the circle, begin to focus on the diagonal towards the wall, riding the same ‘outside to in’ feel. Remember that at this point the shoulders are leading in these several steps of half pass. Finally, depart on a straight line, change the bend to the left, and begin the half pirouette to the left.

Cautions: Two primary faults occur in this pattern: 1) We loose forward energy, often times by riding too small of a circle, and end up loosing softness, rhythm, and ‘sitting down’ feeling in the hind legs; 2) We lead the half-pass with the hips, causing the shoulders to drag behind, loosing balance, rhythm, and the possibility of engagement.

Half-Pass
Bow Tie
Straight to
Haunches-in
on circle (or
half
pirouettes)
to
Half-Pass

References:
Gymnastic Exercises for Horses
by Eleanor Russell
Reflections on Equestrian Art
by Nuno Oliveira



It has been great fun writing about these gymnastic exercises. I know that if you practice them they will make a world of difference in your relationship with your horse.

“Dressage to me has always been the physical and mental development of the horse’s body to make him more pleasant to ride and to prolong his useful life. Horses that are gymnastically fit and supple are far less likely to break down when asked for a major effort, than a stiff and nervous horse whether they be show jumpers or dressage horses.”

Thoughts by Eleanor Russell in her Introduction...Gymnastic Exercises for Horses

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