

# HORSE SPORT

YOUR EQUESTRIAN AUTHORITY

## TRAINING

### Improving Balance, Straightness and Connection from Head to Tail

Achieving connection requires forward energy from the hind end; these exercises improve suppleness, flexion, balance and power.



*Okay, well it's something to strive for... Even if you aren't performing like Charlotte Dujardin and Gio yet, these simple exercises will help your horse develop athleticism. (MacMillan Photography)*

By: Sheri Spencer, CEMT PTS | August 20, 2021

If trying to hold your horse together feels like juggling the groceries or riding a caterpillar, it can be a struggle. However, there are exercises that will encourage and better strengthen the horse to do that on their own.

Rather than riding endless circles with desperate half-halts, it is more advantageous to pinpoint where weaknesses are and target them specifically. In choosing the right exercises, they're better set up for correct alignment through the body, and better able to strengthen the connection from the hindquarters over the topline.

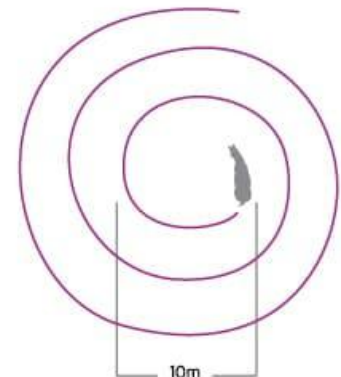
It's not up to us to have to hold our horse together every step, but rather we must properly develop their athleticism so that they can do it themselves.

Achieving connection over the spine requires forward energy from the hind end to drive and carry their shoulders forward in line with their direction of travel. If the shoulders or hips drift out of this line, using exercises that bring it back into alignment will help correct them while serving to strengthen the musculature required for support.

## Power-up the Hindquarters

Spirals do wonders for developing connectivity and strength from back to front while also serving as a preparatory exercise for the volte. After sufficient warm-up, this can be introduced at the walk before trotting to familiarize a less-experienced horse.

On the spiral, using 3 to 4 revolutions to get from a 20m to 10m circle, ask for a slight haunches-in, keeping the shoulder from leaning in and maintaining the inside bend around your calf to get the inside hind activated.



As you spiral back out in 3 to 4 revolutions, ask for a haunches-out, holding the bend to get them working that inside hind. As you return to the 20m circle, see how much you can soften the aids while maintaining a slight bend to test how much more self-carriage is coming over the back.

When you have that lift and throughness from back to front, let them enjoy it. The joy of freedom in movement can often be its own reward!



*In the volte, keep the horse bent around and lifting off your inside leg while supporting with the outside aids as you continue to drive forward.*

### **Shoulders out? Haunches out**

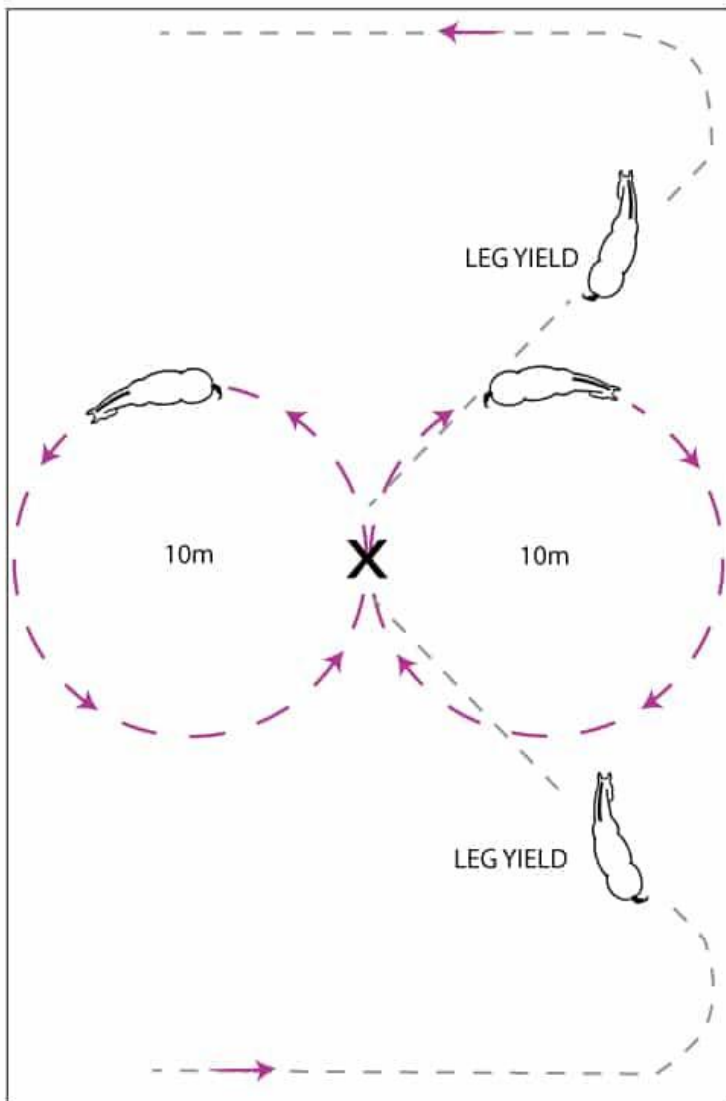
If the horse's shoulders consistently fall to the outside, the horse is on the forehand and crooked. Correction begins with straightening them out, and the easiest way to do that is by positioning their hindquarters to the outside. Get behind the shoulders the same way you would get behind a wheelbarrow to leverage for more power.

By blocking with the outside thigh and positioning the inside seat bone and lower leg back, you mobilize the hindquarters to get back into four-wheel drive. Positioned into haunches-out, you're emphasizing taking weight on the inside hind without arguing over the front end, and developing the "push power" required for them to be able to travel straighter.

Mobilizing their front end can and should be a separate exercise to solidify lateral aids, but the objective at this stage is to carry the weight on the inside hind.

If the shoulders drift in or the horse counter-bends, the same logic perseveres to get them carrying themselves off their inside hind. Position your weight to the outside, but encourage them to bend around the inside leg at the girth.

## Lateral Flexion for Longitudinal Release and Connection



Leg yielding promotes suppleness through the body and flexion through the poll while developing overall coordination. These can be done from the quarter- or centreline to the rail, from the rail to the quarter- or centreline, or incorporated into various movements (such as the spiral). The key is maintaining that the front and hind ends travel evenly, and making sure that the shoulder is not leading and that the horse is not overbent.

Frequent changes of rein can actually help solidify wiggly front ends. The variety is beneficial for “busy bodies” and helps keep their attention while working both sides evenly. Riding figure-eights and serpentines, using a few steps to straighten as needed before introducing the new change of bend, promotes suppleness through the body,



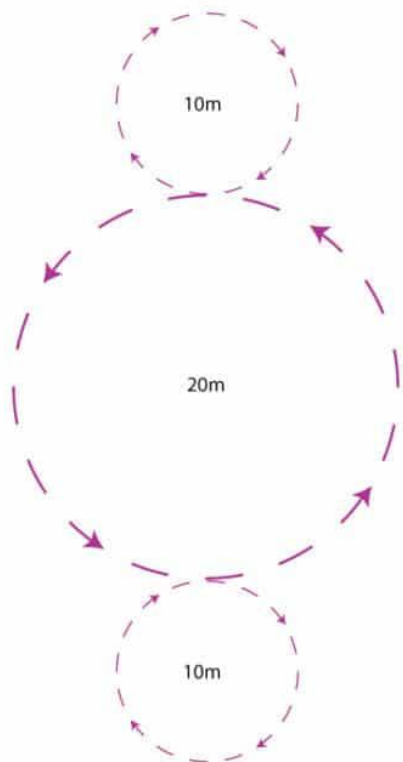
releases tension, and improves connection from back to front.

Incorporating the leg yield with these exercises adds another dimension requiring more focus and prolonged bend. In the walk or trot, as you come out of the corner off the short side, prepare for the movement off your outside leg. Then leg yield to the centreline toward X, ideally reaching it a stride or two before.

If leg yielding off the left leg, volte left at X, touching the rail with the far curve of the 10m circle. Keep them packaged and driving forward through the volte.

Straighten as you return to X, catching the horse with your right leg and half-halt before asking for a change of bend. Prepare for the volte right, continuing to drive the horse forward through the movement. This time as you return to X, maintain the bend, and leg yield off your right leg, returning to the rail ideally a few strides before the corner to better prepare with a half-halt before straightening out and riding through.

## **'Mouse Ears' for Lateral Balance**



Improve circles and build upon figure-eights by incorporating asymmetry in the exercises. Similar to a figure-eight, "Mouse ears" can be ridden off a 20m circle and include a change of direction into a volte on the opposite rein before returning to the original circle. The mouse ears increase difficulty and demand for attention because of the shift of weight into a more steeply bent body-positioning.

As with figure-eights, begin preparations for the volte a few strides ahead and half-halt as you proceed through the steps to change the bend onto the volte. Keep the horse forward maintaining rhythm, and use another half-halt to prepare and rebalance them as you return to the circle. This exercise can be beneficial to use if the horse leans into the outside aids or bulges, and

can help “check in” with those that would much prefer to simply truck around on their own agenda.

As we inspire and develop the horse to carry and unify himself, the biggest favour we can do for them is stay out of the way. Generally, less is more in riding, so especially when things start to click and you can feel the harmony in the connection, become a part of it. Sit as quietly with them as you can manage, because once they can carry themselves, the real dancing can begin.