

TRAINING

Unlocking Inversion

If your horse tends to have a hollowed back, it can indicate weakness through the abdominals and lack of engagement. Here are some targeted exercises.



FEI/Stefan Lafrentz Photo

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A dropped or hollowed back can be a critical roadblock to advancing the athletic development of the horse. More important than the sought-after aesthetics, it is a definitive indicator of weakness through the abdominals and lack of engagement from the hindquarters, and it prevents freedom through the shoulder.

Once ill-fitting tack and pain have been ruled out as potential factors, it is a matter of targeting the horse's body in ways that release tension and develop strength specifically in those areas of weakness.

Lateral Bending for Horses

For some horses, carrying themselves like a llama is so natural it becomes a habit. They seem to lock their neck in place while bracing through their entire bodies. When the view from the saddle is a hollowed neck and raised head, the solution is right between your legs: creating lateral flexion helps release longitudinal tension.

Through circling exercises, serpentine and leg yields, the natural bend that is created through the spine helps unlock the topline while encouraging the horse to step under himself more with the inner hind leg. Exaggerating this bend for limited periods in the early stages can be helpful to encourage suppleness and get the point across.

To encourage a deeper flexion and suppleness to the inside during bending exercises, the rider's inside leg cue at the girth when the horse's inside hind leg is airborne will maximize the reach of that step as well as the bend through the ribcage. For the rider, keeping the shoulders back and abdomen aimed in the direction of travel will ensure that their weight will support, rather than hinder, the horse's freedom through the inside shoulder. By keeping the centre of weight in line with the horse's core, the rider can influence without getting in the way.

Maintaining a steady rhythm is essential; avoiding rushing and allowing more time for the hind end to step under will help strengthen the muscles for engagement necessary for progressive training.

Squares and Diamonds Exercises

Squares and diamonds with rounded corners are useful exercises for alternating between creating a lateral bend and straightening. Rounding the corners as if they are quarters of circles affords the opportunity to establish a bend for a few strides before straightening again. For horses who achieve engagement and roundness through the body while circling or bending, but struggle to do so on straight lines, this exercise in turn helps develop their self-carriage.

The square utilizes the walls of the arena as the straight sides of the pattern, and can be ridden at either end of the arena to take advantage of three walls, or in the centre to use two walls and two open sides, which can increase difficulty.

The diamond is a step beyond the square in that all four sides are open regardless of your location in the ring, using X, A or C, and points on the wall halfway in between as the corners. This increases difficulty due to the horse's tendency to drift to the rail. Discretion will be up to the rider based on the level of the horse.

Through the corners are the bending phases, where the rider's inside leg asks for a deeper inside bend and engagement of the hind leg during the posting phase of the trot. By pushing the horse's ribs outwards, the inside hind can step under more, thereby lifting through the abdominals and allowing for softening and elevation through the back, shoulder, and base of the neck.

Through the straight sides of the pattern, by asking for the same activity as through the corner, the horse learns to translate the engagement and softness he had through the bend into movements on straight lines. This technique also helps refine cueing off the rider's inside leg to mean more

than just influencing tempo or gait. If the horse continues to flatten or hollow out through the straight sides, pushing the haunches slightly outward with an inside bend will help activate that inner hind.

If the horse proceeds through the straight sides desirably after practicing the exercise, it is a great opportunity to round out the shape onto a circle and allow them to proceed ahead, letting them carry themselves as long as they're able, making corrections only as necessary.

With practice, the horse can begin to associate that when cued while their inside hind leg is airborne, it means a deeper step, engagement of the abdominals and a lifting through the back, whether through a corner, circle, or straight ahead.

Half-Moon Exercise

Even advanced horses can be prone to dropping their backs and can benefit from targeted exercises to activate the supporting muscles. The half-moon is a demanding exercise for these horses that forces them to step under themselves, carrying themselves over the weight-bearing leg in the haunches rather than being able to move forward off of it and tilting their weight onto the forehead.

After the warm-up, the pattern begins at a halt, generally at the centre of the long side. It is easiest to visualize it as standing on the edge of a slice of pie facing the point. The objective is to reach the other edge by crossing over without walking forward through the hands.

From the outside leg, ask the horse to step over until his body is roughly at a 45-degree angle from the rail with his hindquarters furthest, and then ask him to move away from your inside leg back to the rail along the same curved track. Walking forward can be corrected with a backwards step, and then resume.

Twice is generally sufficient, so once you return to the rail the second time, ask the horse to trot on and into a 10-metre semi-circle. Observe the gait and be sure to maintain an even rhythm, as the exercise tends to inspire a lot of power.

If the horse is proficient with the rein-back, an effective change of rein can be executed as you arch onto the centre-line, ask for a halt and proceed into a movement called the 'schaukel' (swing): rein-back 3-4 steps, walk forward 3-4 steps and immediately reverse again while a forefoot is still airborne, then trot on. After a few steps, turn into a 10-metre semi-circle in the new direction. Halt at the centre of the long side and repeat the exercise off the other leg.

It is a great idea to allow for a trot ahead, letting the horse reach out onto a long rein after practicing this difficult exercise. Not only does it allow you to assess the efficacy of the lesson through how he carries himself, but encouraging him to stretch out the topline is an essential reward for body and mind.

The most important things to remember when trying to overcome a dropped or hollowed back is that the strength to correct it must come from the abdominal muscles and hindquarters. The softening and rounding of the neck comes more naturally when the chest is elevated and the back is supported. Practicing exercises that encourage engagement of the abdominals and stepping under with the hind-end will help the horse support and lift his back, furthering his athletic potential.