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Straightness Defined

Now that we are well into the show season, (and because I have received several e-mails requesting a discussion on this subject), I think it would be a good idea to review the true meaning of “straightness”.

It might seem a simple chore to define straightness. Everyone involved in either training or riding horses is familiar with the term. But depending on the source, you might have learned that straightness is defined by the hind legs following in the tracks of the fore legs, or the position of the horse’s spine relative to the track. These two definitions can certainly hold true. But for me, I have found flaws in both these definitions as they fail to describe what it is about straightness that makes it so important to training. You can have a horse in a “straight” position with poor function (this is further explained later in this discussion), but you can’t have good function with a crooked horse. This is so because even with his feet lined up or the spine in a straight line the horse could have more weight on one shoulder, or a bulge of the ribs to one side. Both these conditions, for example, negatively affect the bio-mechanics of the horse’s balance as he begins to move forward.

Straightness is one of the truths of riding - a horse must always be straight. But this statement is only true if we accurately define straightness to include *function* and not just position. If defining straightness has any value at all in helping us understand it’s benefit

in training, it has to have some relationship to equine movement and function. That being said, before you get too confused, let me offer a more useful definition of straightness; one that allows us to use it to positively influence training:

“Horses can be said to be straight if they are physically prepared to move efficiently forward in good balance and without loss of energy, whether on an arc or in a straight line”

So, with that thought in mind, let's explore this a bit further and get you thinking about what straightness really means.

Applying the Definition of Straightness to Equine Movement

Let me pose this question to you. Is a horse considered straight if his body is positioned so that his hind feet are in line with his front feet? The correct answer is maybe, He could certainly be straight, especially when traveling in a straight line with his spine parallel to the track. There are definitions of straightness in literature which define it as just that - ..”*a straight horse travels with his spine parallel to the track..*”. But what happens when the horse is traveling on a circle? This definition is useless unless you argue that now the horse's spine should parallel the arc of the circle. But the problem here is that this definition only works at lower levels of training, where the arc of the circle is large. At higher levels the horse's bend is created by spinal rotation, collection and the horse's ability to reach under his body and shorten his frame. So, in a canter pirouette for example, this definition does not accurately allow you to assess the straightness of the horse.

Now, let me ask you another question. Can a horse be crooked on a circle? Of course, the answer again is yes. But if a horse could be crooked on a circle, then a horse can also be straight on a circle. But here's another option. Can a horse be bent on a circle? The answer

again is obviously yes. Let me remind you that straightness is one of the truths of riding - a horse should always be straight. So.....if a horse is correctly bent on a circle, is he then considered straight? Before you get a headache, let me introduce a few more facts for you to ponder.

When a horse moves, he creates energy, which when correctly organized will travel through the horse to the bit (hence the term “on the bit”) and will create proper function. There will be no loss of this energy, (for example, through the shoulders or the rib cage) and the outcome of the horse’s movement will be correct. The position which is considered ‘straight’ on the track will not work if the horse keeps this same position on a circle. On the circle, the position must change and the horse must bend if he is to remain in balance. Therefore, if we define straightness as “... *prepared to move efficiently forward in good balance and without loss of energy...*” we can accurately refer to the horse as straight on both the track and the circle (even though his actual position is different). So it should now become obvious that straightness is related to not only position but function as well. Simply put, we don’t train straightness for position’s sake, we train horses to be straight to improve function and performance.

Let’s Move on to Training...

Sometimes as part of a training exercise, we intentionally make a horse crooked to help them learn to be straight, especially when dealing with resistances. However, this is always done with the goal of straightness in mind.

The fact is that most educated riders DO understand what straightness means in terms of training, regardless of how we define it. All good trainers at the highest levels of riding know the importance of straightness because they understand the crucial role it

plays in proper training. Training straightness encourages balanced bilateral muscle development and therefore sounder horses.

A Final note.....

Having said all that, (and not be the bearer of bad news). it has been written (and generally agreed upon) there are no horses who are truly 100% straight. All horses are bit crooked one way or the other, and all we can do is strive to get as close to perfection as possible. Although emphasis on straightness is high up on the training scale, straightness something which is considered at all levels of training. In the scheme of things, consistent attention to straightness in training seems a small price to pay for the pleasure of riding a balanced, well schooled horse.

Until next time,

Dr. Bev Gordon.