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Sidelines Magazine

USING THE REIN-BACK TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE

Part 2 - Backing Circles to Straighten your Horse

It surprises me that so many well schooled upper-level horses have difficulty performing good quality rein-backs. Many riders tell me they rarely school the rein-back because their horses will then begin to back up at times when they are not asked to do so, as in after a halt, where it is a serious fault. However, this is actually a rider communication problem. The horse responds by anticipating the rider's intentions, or by developing a conditioned response. The horse is therefore, NOT responding to aids. This occurrence is always rider error, as it is the rider's responsibility to teach the horse to respond to the aids through 'feel', not by anticipation. Aside from improving scores for the rein-back when competing, rein-back exercises can be used to improve overall performance, that is, *if* the rein-back is executed correctly in the first place. Quality backing can enhance suppleness, reinforce collection, as well as lightness in the bridle. Backing can also be used to strengthen and develop the hind end. Additionally, we can often utilize the rein-back to determine unevenness and a predisposition toward unsoundness.

Improving the quality of the rein-back begins with the rider's appreciation of the fact that horses need to yield to pressure *immediately, unconditionally, and in a willing frame of mind*. These principles should never be compromised, yet it is apparent that so many horses fall short when performing the rein-back. Compared with the physical demands associated with executing high level dressage skills such as canter pirouette and piaffe, it would seem that every horse performing at that level should be able to back up straight, active, and tension-free. So, why don't they?

Like the half-pass, backing is not instinctively performed by horses in their natural environment. Horses' natural inclination is to spin and flee. So, in terms of the horse's *response to the aids*, what is the difference between a horse who executes the rein-back well and one who doesn't? The simple answer to this question is this: it is the *quality* to which the horse adheres to the above mentioned principles, primarily, how well does he yield to pressure. The exercises included here in part 2, and those in part 3 will center around

improving the horse's capacity for *yielding* to those distinct aids necessary for a good quality rein-back. This article will deal specifically with backing circles.

First, let's briefly review the classic, traditional rein-back aids. In summary, they are 1) begin with a straight horse, round and on the bit 2) rider sits tall with legs slightly behind the girth 3) rider initiates forward movement, then restricts this forward energy and lightens the seat so as to direct the energy backward. Horses should back straight, with even diagonals, regular rhythm and with lively steps.

Awareness is the key to success. Remember that you are looking for those spots where your horse demonstrates *resistance*. Horses will likely NOT perform these exercises well at the start. These exercises help the rider determine where the horse is having trouble so they can help their horses through it. The horses' ability to perform each exercise should improve with each session, and if it doesn't, then you are not supporting your horse properly, or your horse is not physically prepared to perform that exercise yet.

Backing Circles

It is important to be able to back your horse in a circle. Backing circles teaches the horse to yield to rein and bit pressure, as well as to the rider's leg and weight aids. But one of the most important benefits of backing circles is that it gives you the ability to straighten your horse. When backing circles we still regard the same values without compromise; regular rhythm, lively steps, and even diagonals. The horse still remains in front of the seat and leg, energy ridden forward and in collection. However, when backing circles it will be extremely important to be able to accurately direct the feet. *This will be what allows you to keep your horse straight when backing on a line - the ability to affect the placement of the footfalls*

Here are some things to remember when backing circles. 1) The horse should not pivot on either front or hind legs and is not permitted to take any forward steps. 2) Tip your horse's nose slightly toward the *outside* of the circle. 3) Your leg on the outside of the circle will slide slightly back and your other leg will stay forward. 4) Remember to ask *specifically* for each diagonal step and soften rein contact *slightly* between steps. 5) The goal is to enhance the horse's response to weight aids, and to respond more accurately and with less resistance to lighter leg and rein aids.

Footfalls

It is interesting to note here that the horse's body, unlike when moving forward on circle, will *not* conform to the path of the circle. The horse's body position will be straighter, encouraging energy to travel in a fairly straight line from front to back. It is exactly this which will teach the horse to stay both connected and straight.

There two ways to place the feet when backing your horse. The first method of backing circles allows a small amount of lateral placement (sideways movement) of the feet (figure 1), while second method increases the demands on the horse by increasing the lateral deviation of these steps (see figure 2a & b). The major difference lies in the biomechanical stresses imposed on the horse. Begin with the first and progress to the second as your horse improves. Always step your horse backward one or two steps straight before beginning the circle.

Let's start by backing a quarter circle to the right. The horse will begin facing forward, and finish facing 90 degrees to the right. Remember to place the feet specifically when backing circles. The most difficult part of this exercise is understanding the footfalls. But, here goes. I will try not to be too confusing.

In keeping with our right quarter circle, let's consider the right diagonal pair of legs (right front and left hind) and understand how they need to move. Simultaneously, the right front will step backward and *slightly to the right*, and the left hind will step backward and *slightly to the left* (see figure 1). You will tip the horse's nose slightly to the outside of the circle (the right), slide your outside leg (right) backward to allow for the opening of the right shoulder, and ask the horse to back with active, regular steps.



Fig 1a Left Circle Backing



Fig 2b Right Circle Backing

In figure 2a I am demonstrating 'opening' the right shoulder and the lateral step of the right front foot. Notice the right front leg stepping outward, and backward at a 45 degree angle. It sometimes helps to think of the right rein being connected to the right front leg; lift that foot off the ground and place it backward.

In figure 2b, I am backing the horse in a left quarter circle with the opening of the left shoulder and the placement of the left front foot backward and laterally, also about 45 degrees. Notice the horse is better able to step back and out with his left front foot (2b) as compared to the right (2a), showing a greater resistance (difficulty) with his right front foot placement. I would therefore work to help the horse become even in his ability to back both right and left circles. This will, naturally, make the horse more even in his hind end strength, suppleness, and ability to yield the aids. **Horses need to be trained through difficulties as this enables them to build a good foundation necessary to achieve resistant-free performance.**

Refinement

One major resistance which often occurs is that the horse responds (usually after a few steps) by pivoting and stepping outward or inward with either the haunches or front end only. Or, loses his backward motion and gets sticky in his feet. If this happens, he will probably either have his head turned too much toward the outside of the circle, or drop his back. This occurs when the horse loses connection so the energy does not travel straight through the horse. If this occurs, keep your horse straighter and *put more life into the feet*. You will find as you practice and improve your horse's ability to back circles, you can *easily* straighten your horse when backing on a straight line. Try this. Set up two cavalettis four feet apart and back your horse between them from different spots in the arena. Also, back serpentines. You will find by just slightly tipping the horse's nose opposite to the direction you want the hind end to move, you can easily and accurately place your horse's hind feet to the right, the left or on straight line. By improving your horse's ability to *yield*, it's not difficult to correct the crookedness and improve the quality of the rein-back. (Which makes it difficult to understand why so many performance horses do not perform this skill better than they do).

The biomechanics associated with rein-back directed on a circle and its effect on the anatomical structures of the horse is complicated, and it is not practical to explain within the confines of this article. However, you will surely *feel* the effects as you develop the ability to accurately place the footfalls while keeping the horse straight and connected. Then it will become clear; how backing circles improves straightness.

Your aim is to teach the horse to YIELD: 1) *yield* to your weight - shift his weight backward; 2) *yield* to the bit - lighten his forehead; 3) and to *yield* to your legs - step actively backward. Ask yourself this, "can I place my horse's

front foot 45 degrees back, shift his weight backward, and lighten his forehand with almost imperceptible aids?" Yes, you can.

Next article will be Part 3 - Rein-Back Exercises for Refinement of Overall Performance

Until next time,

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