

ESI NEWS

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“My horse is stiff in the neck & body”

By Manuela McLean



Ideally, every training session should begin on a long rein, as long as possible while still being able to direct the horse. The rider should be able to keep a rhythm that is self-maintained in tempo and stride length on a loose-ish rein with a light leg contact. Transitions produce relaxation and turns help to improve line as the rider steers from the outside rein. The horse should also respond to longer and shorter aids and quicker and slower strides for these next exercises to be beneficial.

SHOULDER YIELDS

I have previously written about bend and flexion where the rider flexes the horse to the inside and pushes his shoulders sideways using the inside rein and the inside thigh until the horse moves the shoulders and ribcage away as in a shoulder yield.



Above: *Ideally training sessions should begin on a nice loose-ish rein if possible*

The reins are used toward the outside without crossing the neck so that the horse flexes from the inside rein and moves away with outside rein steering him out.

The horse steps towards the track with the forelegs and the inside hindleg should step slightly toward the outside. Once the horse travels in a shoulder yield it is important to give with aids to check for maintenance, the aids can then be re-applied to achieve more strides if need be.

This exercise helps create true bend and flexion and can be ridden from the centre line out to the wall and then away from the wall with counter flexion and bend to the centre line.

This will initially position the horse so that he relaxes and moves the ribcage away from the rider's thigh. The rider's lower leg in these exercises is only used when asking for a quicker tempo or longer stride.

TIMING OF THE AIDS

The rider should aim to use the inside thigh in the rise or swing phase (as the outside foreleg is in the air) when going from the centre line to the outside track. When asking to go inwards the rider uses the outside thigh in the sit or stance phase of the rising trot to open the shoulder movement of the inside foreleg in the swing phase. When the horse responds correctly, he will naturally flex and soften in the body.



• **Above:** *Lateral Flexion*



• **Above:** *Shoulder yield exercise*

FLEXION

Flexion occurs at the poll both vertically and laterally and can be trained at the halt. When asking for flexion while the horse stands still, the rider stabilises the elbow (left elbow for left flexion) and turns the wrist so that the fingers point up and a little pressure is placed on the corner of the horse's mouth.

Once the horse is flexed where you can just see his eye on side he's flexing towards, the rider changes the hand position to normal (thumbs on top).

A rider should make sure not to pull backward with the flexing rein as this will shorten the neck and teach the horse to lean and be heavy in the mouth but rather raise the bit up the horse's tongue to achieve flexion.

While travelling, the most effective time to flex the horse is when the same side foreleg is on the ground.

CHANGING THE SIZE OF THE CIRCLE WITH TRUE FLEXION

This is the next exercise to train to help develop more swing in the horses back and suppleness and cadence. When ridden on a circle, true bend is around the riders inside knee or thigh and trains the horse not to fall in. It is used to increase the size of the circle to improve the action and stepping under of the inside hindleg toward the horse's midline.

The rider flexes the horse to the inside and then increases the size of the circle with the inside thigh and outside rein in the swing phase of the outside foreleg. Once achieved, the rider applies the longer stride aid to improve dorso-ventral bend or a lift of the horses back. Using the top third of the inner thigh on the outside leg helps with this and the seat cue so should be used just before and during the leg aid (nudge) of the outside leg.

Decreasing the size of the circle can also be ridden with true flexion to the inside. The rider applies the aid of the thigh and outside rein toward the horse to decrease the size of the circle. In this case, the rider uses the inside leg to maintain the tempo of the stride.

COUNTER BEND AND COUNTER FLEXION

Counter bend and flexion and decreasing the size of the circle is much harder but has enormous benefits in suppling the horse when he becomes stiff in the neck and back and particularly when he loses focus; it improves the power of the outside hindleg as it has to step under from the outside.

When a horse stiffens in the neck and jaw, it is tempting to just pull on that rein till he softens but unfortunately this does not work as the rider ends up using a strong contact and a shortening of the neck occurs.

This exercise can be developed slowly and is done on a circle decreasing its size. First flex the horse to the outside using the outside rein slightly toward the neck by turning the wrist to flex the horse to the outside. The horse may mistake the flexion for a slowing down aid so the rider should use the inside leg to increase the tempo and this will improve the counter flexion as the horse relaxes the jaw and neck.

Then decrease the size of the circle by applying pressure on the outside thigh toward the saddle, the inside rein inwards (keeping the hand up) can be used to guide the horse toward the centre of the circle. Ideally, the outside rein toward the neck flexes the horse at the poll and the rider's thigh moves him in.

DECREASING THE CIRCLE FOR SUPPLENESS

To reap the benefits of this exercise, aim that the horse bends its neck quite a lot to the outside while decreasing the circle size, and in the process gives some vertical flexion on the outside rein as well (looks down). The moment this occurs, the rider allows the horse to straighten its neck (undo flexion) while travelling on the same line and maintaining stride length and tempo. A nudge of the inside leg is the aid that should be used to make the stride longer because the horse is flexed to the outside.

Some horses find this quite difficult and will brace their necks and not decrease the circle, pre-trained light whip-taps on the shoulder can help improve the turn to the inside.

Targeting the outside rein aid as the outside fore is in stance phase or on the ground helps the horse to establish flexion and counter bend, the aim being that the inside foreleg steps in with a clear abduction and the shoulders of the horse feel more level.

The outcome should be that the horse relaxes the neck on the outside and lifts the inside shoulder during the turn aid, the shoulders become level. When the rider feels this happen, he/she should ride a straight line with a soft rein contact (undo the flexion) but use the inside leg and upper third of inner thigh, asking for longer strides and more lift or dorso-ventral bend. This is because of the counter bend, the rider's inside leg is now the outside leg of the bend.

The final icing on the cake is that the horse softens immediately to the flexion and bend, and the rider can start to refine their position and start to train the horse to lift its back. The top third of the rider's inside thigh toward the horse's spine will help lift the horse's back while the lower leg lifts the horse's ribcage for a longer stride.

Train this exercise on both reins until the horse becomes obedient from a light touch of the reins and rider's body. Counter bend and flexion is a great exercise to practise changes of direction. The rhythm, tempo and length of stride and line should not change.

RIDING SERPENTINES

Now that you can counter bend, changes of rein are a lot easier. Ride serpentines like the letter "S". In the middle is a straight section which is where the rider changes the flexion and makes the horse go to the new outside or doubles back to the first loop of the "S" and when the horse has changed flexion and bend, then change direction.

Refining the response of counter bend and flexion is important to make those serpentines really smooth. Aim to change the flexion whilst you are still on the correct diagonal of the first loop, then change the bend with the new inside thigh over the centre line and then the rider changes their diagonal.

Enjoy your training and please feel free to ask for some more training tips.

Manu x



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