

Dressage Training IN-HAND

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Lessons in Straightness, Suppleness,
and Collection from the Ground

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Stepping Laterally on Straight Lines

Many trainers recommend beginning the first sideways steps while on straight lines. But, the wall or fence line often has a magnetic effect on the horse's shoulders.

In the beginning, I prefer working on a small circle and then, only once the horse understands the aids, I widen the circle and move us in the direction of the track. This way, I avoid the horse bolting forward or falling out over the outside shoulder. At first, the rail can have a limiting effect and also “draw” the horse’s shoulders, which can be detrimental.

With preparatory work and the many transitions within the exercise, I’ve set the horse up to stay with me, even on a bigger circle, and allow himself to be controlled and led. Through the influence of the reins in combination with the voice, you should be able to halt the horse at any time. If you want to go more forward than sideways, simply turn yourself more in the direction of travel.

Of course, the horse’s natural asymmetry accompanies you into this work. You should always work both sides. But, when traveling in the direction where the horse tends to carry more weight on his shoulder, you should develop more positioning as needed. Or, on the horse’s hollow side, keep him straighter. Begin with a volte, go to the line of a larger circle, then fluidly string together more arena figures. Subsequently, you can do a sequence of exercises to work the horse “away from/off” the relevant shoulder.

As this takes place, you must change your position very little, slightly turning your upper body, if necessary, to regulate the desired lateral degree: limiting as needed (turning toward the horse’s body) or widening (turning in the direction of travel). Walk smartly and fluidly near the horse, so that the forehand always leads! When changing direction or through corners, it’s especially important to make sure that the hindquarters stay active, as the forehand must travel farther. You should make sure to maintain a long stride and an upright posture, just as you want your horses to do.

The positive effects of stepping laterally are acknowledged by many veterinarians. As Dr. Robert Stodulka clarifies in the April 2015 issue of *Dressur Studien*, “Due to the rotation of the pelvis and rib cage, the horse must stretch his topline. In this way, tension in the back muscles is loosened, the fascia of the back is stretched, and the hindquarters are mobilized.”



The PRE gelding Illustrado demonstrates stepping laterally on the line of a circle. The trainer is turned in the direction of travel, in order to avoid restricting the horse’s ground-covering strides.



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EXERCISE SEQUENCE

- 1 Navaro stepping laterally using the whole arena...
- 2 ...next comes a half-circle to change direction...
- 3 ...thereby, the forehand stays in front of the hindquarters and we avoid a falling out of the hindquarters...
- 4 ...leg-yielding along the wall...
- 5 ...leg-yield on the short side and at center line ceasing to leg-yield...
- 6 ...guiding the forehand in front of the hindquarters...
- 7 ...leg-yielding back to the rail...
- 8 ...and to finish we go back to stepping laterally.



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AN EXAMPLE: QUIET CALYPSO

Calypso is a Holsteiner with a very large frame, a sport horse bred for jumping. This horse wasn't predestined for upper-level dressage work, but he is fundamentally very correct in conformation. When he arrived at our facility, his owner complained that she could not position him to the left. In addition, he couldn't be longed because he gave the impression when tracking left that he might "fall over" to the inside. Cantering on the longe was next to impossible.

Every horse in need of retraining that is introduced and entrusted to us, must first be analyzed extensively. We observe his body when he's standing still and in movement, without tack and under saddle. I watch as the owner rides the horse. We'll quickly begin to notice patterns that are the source of the problems.

We can't keep all of the horses entrusted to us forever. Many horse owners come with the goal that we'll reunite them with their horse in



Quiet Calypso, a horse in retraining, practices lateral steps. He tries to over-bend his neck in order to evade the exercise by falling out through the outside shoulder.

such a way that their four-legged partner will stay healthy and sound for as long as possible. This presents a new challenge for us as not only the horse, but also the owner, must be “retrained.”

At first, when we begin working with a horse in retraining, we apply ourselves to the horse alone. With this Holsteiner, for example, his whole body functioned like one stiff board. He only knew how to move straight ahead—this, even though he was conditioned like an upper-level sport horse.

In addition to the jaw-relaxation and bending exercises, one of our first steps was to bring the horse closer to “forward and sideways.” We needed the stiff joints of the hindquarters to mobilize. We also needed to make clear to the horse that he didn’t need to throw his croup up high when he moved, but instead, could flex and lower through the joints of his hindquarters. On his hollow side, we tried to maintain a straight neck. The horse had the tendency to bend his neck to the inside to the extreme, thereby, avoiding the exercise by falling out over the outside shoulder. In contrast, on the stiff side, the gelding was extremely unbalanced. The lack of balance was due to the fact that the horse was not yet physically able to move with correct positioning, bend, and balance supported by agile, active hindquarters where the joints were flexing properly. His joints remained stiff, and the muscles of the rump on the outside of the body would not yield enough to allow for correct bending and positioning. On a horse that’s very one-sided, these muscles will be significantly contracted. Slowly, we needed to attempt to supple the horse in order to help him find balance. Horses that have been worked in a very one-sided manner show a clear difference in the development of the muscles on either side of the back (how pronounced they are). To me, this is yet another reason that I first begin working with them in hand.

While the horse’s body should always be considered as a whole, as the trainer I cannot always take on the correction of the entire body at once. Of course, we know that one part directly affects the other, but even knowing this we can’t expect an ideal picture in the beginning. We must be satisfied instead with small steps in the right direction.

So, in the beginning we had to accept that Quiet Calypso was going to adventurously contort his neck in every direction as we tried to get him to cross over with his legs. Despite his fantastic character, he would still try to evade—for him, it was more difficult to bend the joints of his hocks than it was to lower his neck, lift his croup, and fall on the forehand. When certain behavioral patterns have manifested, it takes a lot of cleverness on the trainer’s part in order to “re-form” the various body parts of the horse. Therefore, I work with various exercises for different blocks in the body and tolerate that the horse is trying, in one way or another, to evade this exercise. And, step by step, we get closer to doing the exercise correctly and recognize a positive physical change in the horse.



Please—not like this! In this position, Quiet Calypso is clearly pushing through his outside shoulder and sending his weight onto his forehand. This is a bad habit, which the young gelding had internalized.

THE OSTEOPATH'S PERSPECTIVE

In the bottom left photo, the horse shows limited mobility as he performs the exercises. This is caused by hypertonic muscles and likely by blocks in the vertebrae of the neck. When re-training a horse that has physical deficits, I recommend working hand in hand with the veterinarian, osteopath, and/or physical therapist. This way, the combination of suppling work in hand and therapy can help ensure the best possible outcome for the horse will be achieved.

It's uncomfortable for the gelding to stretch the rump and neck muscles on his outside and to position himself correctly; therefore, he tilts his poll. It's important to note that he's not yet accepting the outside rein correctly. It will take about three months before we recognize a clear change in the horse's neck muscles. That's the time when I call the saddle fitter so that the saddle can be fit to the now-improved musculing of the back. Often, there will be several centimeters of growth, which not infrequently means a difference of one or two whole gullet widths. At the end of this book, I have included a few "before and after" examples of horses we've retrained, with photos.

With horses in retraining that either try to constantly hide behind the bit or resist the bit strongly or lean on it hard, I try to take the following steps during in-hand work. While the horse is stepping sideways, I take the reins above the bridge of the nose and allow the horse to move around me with a high poll, while he crosses over with his legs. First, at a quiet walk. Perhaps, I allow him to trot for very short periods.



The habitual pattern of Quiet Calypso (in for retraining) when asked to step laterally on his stiff side.



Correct head and neck position on the right (his hollow side). It's good to recognize that the horse should not be any deeper than this in his head and neck position under any circumstance.



An exercise that can help horses in retraining. This is definitely not the way we'd see it executed in any textbook!

I was introduced to this exercise by my former trainer Manuel Jorge de Oliveira. At the time, I had a young horse that was permanently lame due to two broken navicular bones and was in danger of being sent to slaughter. The veterinarian asked me to work with him on suppling exercises in hand only. I did so, but my sessions with this horse lasted a total of 15 minutes, including warm up. We always included very short segments: a few seconds of trot, halt again, allow to stretch, take a break, and change direction. At the time, I never believed that these exercises would get us anywhere. But, three months later, the horse was no longer lame. Many horses being retrained can benefit immensely from these exercises. The amount and manner in which they're executed is, of course, extremely important.



After the correction, I finally get the bridge of the nose correctly on the vertical.