

# Master Dressage

Ride More Beautiful Tests,  
Achieve Higher Marks, and Have a  
Better Relationship with Your Horse

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**NEW  
EDITION –  
REVISED and  
EXPANDED**

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smoother changes of bend with no straight lines. When training loops it is often easier to start with a 5m loop as it keeps the changes of bend easier.

## 10m circles and related figures

In diagram 12 (page 61), there are 10m circles in several places. We can look first at the ones at E and B. You can see I have added the 5m radius line in one of the circles and the dashed line is the most frequent mistake I see riders make, by making this circle too deep.

The only real way to get good at 10m circles is to draw them into the arena floor using the method I have already explained. You need to learn the angle at which you come away from the track and really keep your eye on the markers as much as possible. If you are doing a circle at B you will come away from the track at the angle you have learnt from experience and then, as quickly as you can, keep an eye on X. As you then approach X you will need to start looking again at B.

Have a look at the photo below. This shows Milly's mare just leaving the track, starting the 10m circle. Look at the angle at which she is leaving the track, notice the even balance in both shoulders and the appropriate bend for the circle size.



*Leaving the track correctly, starting the 10m circle.*

Whilst performing the circle you should be thinking about the balance beam and continually turning. Be careful not to create too much bend, as your horse will tend to fall onto his outside shoulder. As stated previously, your horse turns using his shoulders – so keep his shoulders on the ideal path. The photo below shows the problems when the rider thinks about neck bend too much instead of controlling the shoulders.

With a 10m circle from E or B you have two clear touching points, the marker and the centre line and, if you are familiar with doing lateral movements from the three-quarter line (which I've marked on the diagram in orange), you will know that this line represents the midpoint of a 10m half-circle from E or B to the centre line.

Riding a 10m circle from A or C is harder than from E or B, because you have fewer reference points. However, you will cross the centre line half-way between A (or C) and X in a 20 x 40m arena. After drawing the circle into the school floor you will be able to train your eye.

Drawing the circles into the school floor is like having training wheels on a bicycle and, after a while, you might just want to mark out the quarter points of the circle. You could have two versions of the circle marked



*Leaving the track with too much bend.*





*Aerial view of a 10m circle from A.*

into the school floor; a full circle and one with just quarter points marked. The photo above is an example of a 10m circle at the A end of a 20 x 60m arena with annotations.

## Change the rein through two 10m half-circles

As we go through the levels we are asked to change the rein through two 10m half-circles. The tests ask for this in walk, then in trot, then in canter with a simple change through X.

The following are typical mistakes in the change of rein through two 10m half-circles:

- Rider makes the first circle too deep.
- Spending too long straight on the centre line.
- Not stepping off the track at the first marker (E or B).

Most often, when judging tests, I see riders making loops instead of half-circles. This makes the turns much sharper than needed and is almost

guaranteed to result in the horse losing balance. An example of the loop shape I see most often is added as a dotted line at B in diagram 12. Once again it's definitely worth getting out the lunge line and drawing the circle out on the school floor, or at the very least marking a 5m line either side of B.

The biggest challenge for riders is changing the bend through X. Here is what British Dressage has to say about this kind of movement: *'The athlete should make his horse straight an instant before changing direction at the centre of the figure.'*

Now, don't let this statement lead you to making violent or hasty changes of bend; however, it should make it clear that you are not on the centre line for many strides. If you do find yourself dwelling on the centre line for more than a horse's length, check out the depth of your circle. Have a look at diagram 13 and you can see that the half-circles touch it only briefly and if you draw them out on the arena floor you can see that clearly.

## Half-circles and incline to the track

In certain movements, such as a half-circle then incline back to the track, the aim is to hit the track at a certain angle and then go large. It is the rider's responsibility to think about the angle with which they are going to hit the track. (Although we are primarily dealing with 10m half-circles at this point, the key issues here apply to an incline to the track from half-circles of various sizes, including the 15m figure which is a feature of various tests.)

The shallowest angle of attack will be the least difficult for the horse. As an example I was judging Novice 28 and one movement was 'Just before H half-circle 15m diameter and incline back to the track between E & K.' I saw so many people during that test starting their 15m half-circle well before H and giving themselves such a hard task! Have a look at diagram 14. Note that the line from the 15m half-circle to the K marker is less steep the closer to H you ride the 15m half-circle. That means that your horse doesn't have to make such a sharp turn onto the track and can appear more balanced.

So why not do it *at* H? Well, for a start the directive is 'just before H'. But the main reason is that H is only 6m in from the short side track, and a 15m half-circle requires you to start 7.5m in from that end.

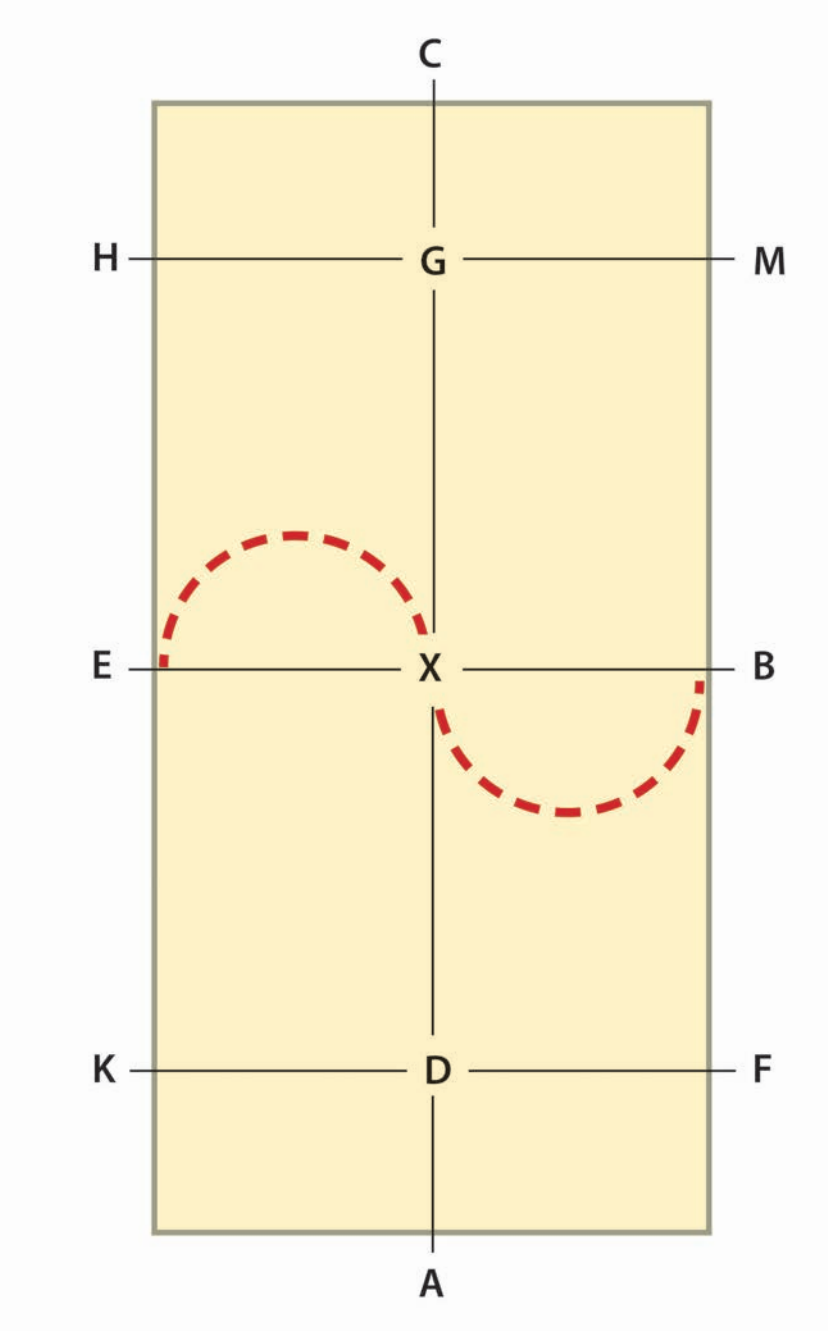


Diagram 13: 10m half-circles.



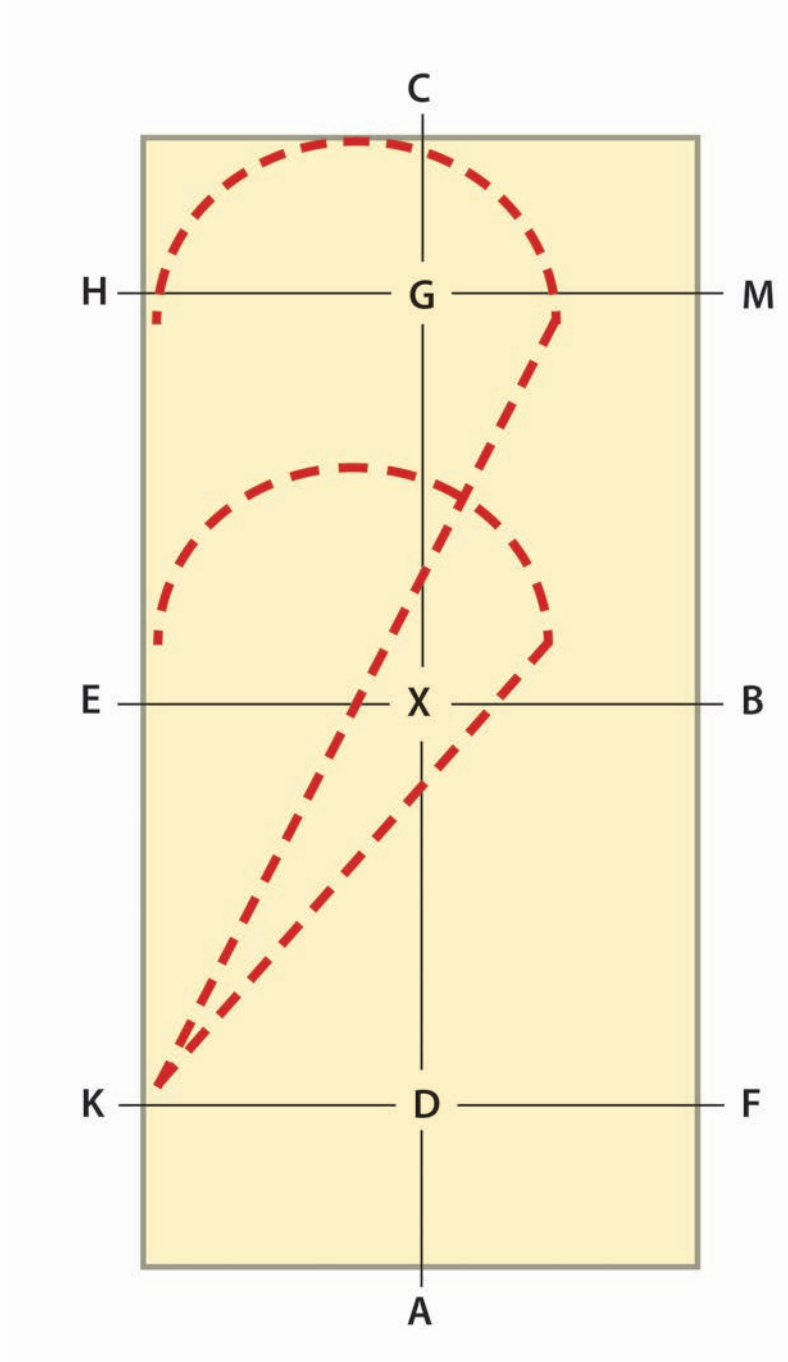


Diagram 14: Half-circles and incline to the track.

## Inaccuracy in riding 10m circles

I remember writing for a judge in an Advanced Medium test and watching quite a few horses come in and out. One error which caught my eye a lot was in the riding of 10m circles. We often had horses falling out and then, upon returning to the track, making a second error of balance.

To illustrate what I mean more clearly, have a look at diagram 15. On the right you will see a correctly shaped 10m circle and the line you see from it

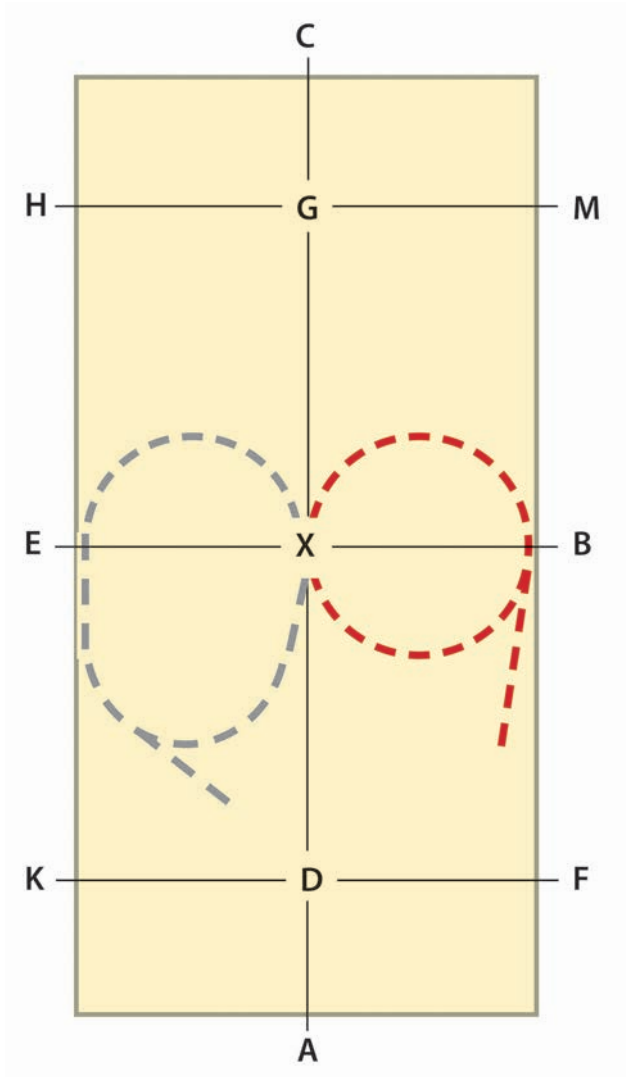


Diagram 15: Correct (right) and incorrect (left) 10m circles.

is an attempt to show the delineation of the horse's body as he steps onto the track. The horse reaches the track with a fairly shallow angle.

The 'circle' on the left shows what happens when the rider loses control of the horse's shoulder and drifts on the second half of the circle. You can then see the mistake I saw numerous times in the test, whereby the horse has to make a much sharper turn to the right to get back onto the track again.

So not only did the riders get a mark off for the horse falling out through the shoulder, but lost another mark for loss of balance onto the track again. No doubt they will have lost some fraction of a mark too for their overall collectives, if they repeated the error elsewhere.

I am sure that, if the riders were aware of the balance beam and used it in all their training, then they would not have made this mistake in their competition. This kind of error is often made when we fall into the trap of overbending to the inside.

## The 20 x 60m arena

Everything you have learnt regarding the underlying principles of riding school shapes in the 20 x 40m arena will also work in the 20 x 60m arena. I hope that in the preceding pages I have given you the bug for accuracy and given you enough information to extrapolate out to the larger arena size.

Looking at diagram 16 you can see that we can now fit in three 20m circles. Unfortunately, we no longer have the luxury of X as our marker for circles at A and C. A circle of 20m at A comes 2m above the VLP line and this is something you should probably mark out on your arena to get the feel for the distance. I put small dotted circles to mark out the 2m distance.

H, M, F and K are still 6m in from the end of the arena. The remain distances between the horizontal lines HGM, SIR, EXB, VLP and KDF are 12m apart. A quick bit of maths shows that 4 x 12m sections plus the 2 x 6m sections adds up to 60m.

For our US cousins the 20 x 60m arena is the norm, but in the UK we spend quite a lot of time in the 20 x 40m arenas, which makes the 20 x 60m version seem a little daunting! Hopefully some study of diagram 16 will allow you to set out some markers and get used to the few differences there are.

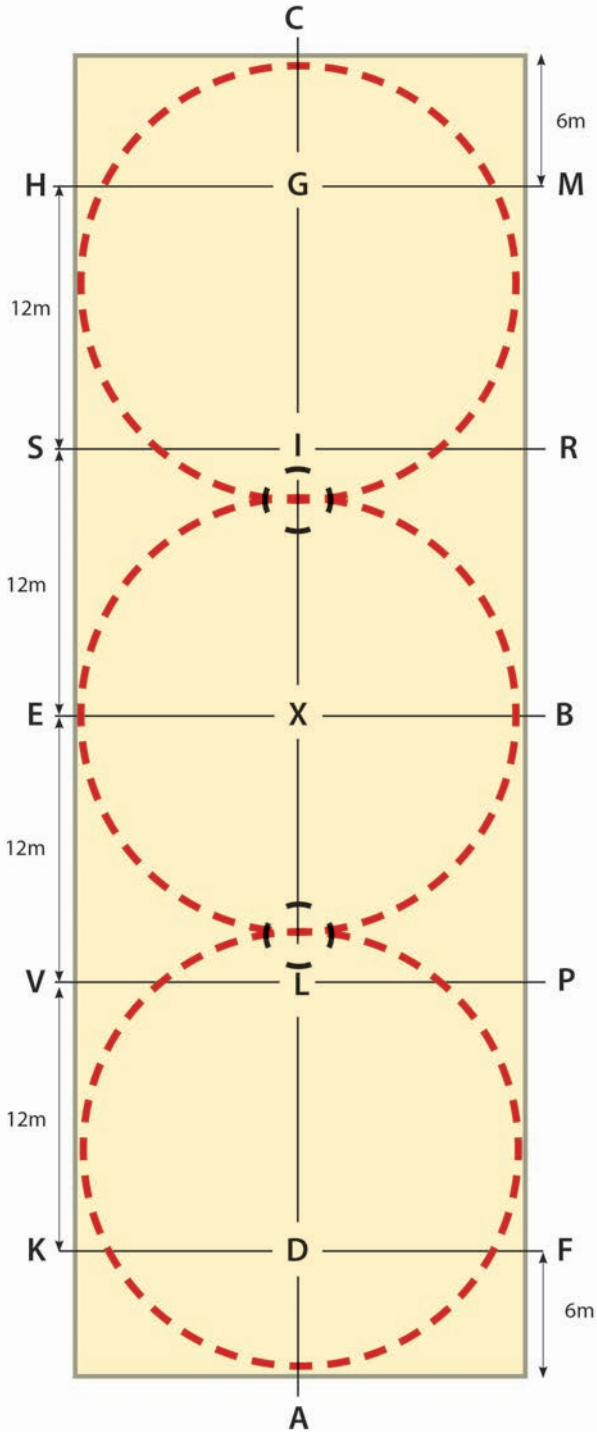


Diagram 16: The 60 x 20m arena.

The main challenges I find are that it is harder to keep your horse straight when it counts. The centre lines are much longer, as are changes of rein across the diagonals. The other issue can be balance in canter, as we have a much longer side to canter down before we have a corner we can use for balance.

When schooling in the longer arena, make frequent use of circles to keep the horse balanced and maintaining attention. I often joke with pupils that when I allow them off circles and to start going large around the arena, they have grown up and can now be trusted to hold the horse's attention!

## Transitions

Transitions should occur at the marker and you will be penalised for being early or late. To be even more exact, the transition should occur as your shoulder is at the marker. For instance, if you were to halt at A, and the letter A was on the wall at shoulder height, then the judge at C would not see the letter any more, since it would be obscured by your own body.

It pays to know how long it takes for you to make your upward and downward transitions and to practise being accurate when you make them. My view is that I first want to teach a horse how to make a smooth transition and then increase how quickly he can do it. I can still be accurate; I just have to know how long my horse will take to make the transition.

## The role of rhythm and tempo in balance and accuracy

British Dressage has rhythm as the basis of the scales of training (see Chapter 5). Outside of dressage, rhythm can be defined as a movement or procedure with a uniform or a patterned recurrence of a beat.

This definition says nothing about tempo, and generally speaking when the horse loses balance we often see a change in the tempo, rather than a loss of rhythm. In the detailed comments in the scales of training material, reference is made to tempo. Comments based on rhythm are more congruent with a horse becoming tense, perhaps the walk sequence breaking, or the horse becoming unlevel in his steps.

Having tempo control is extremely important and without it your progress in dressage is almost impossible. Why is tempo control so important? Generally horses take the path of least resistance, so if we apply our leg, the horse will choose to speed up the tempo first of all. We must have a way of saying 'No, not faster, but more energy' or 'No, not faster, but move sideways' or 'No, not faster tempo, but lengthen your stride'. All of these imply control of tempo and so rhythm (or, perhaps rather tempo) is placed as most important in the scales of training.

With reference to accuracy, I tend to talk a lot about having control of your horse's shoulders. For this to happen – particularly when it comes to correcting a horse who has fallen onto one shoulder or the other, you must have tempo control. Without it your corrections will not straighten the horse, who will most likely continue falling out, and simply speed up his tempo.

Tempo control should be uppermost in your mind as you take your horse onto a smaller circle.

## Creating school shapes

Training a horse is such great fun and involves so many diverse skills and exercises other than just going round in circles – it can really keep us busy! I have already mentioned drawing shapes, but thought a little more detail will help.

For this you will need the following items:

1. A lunge line longer than 10m.
2. A measuring tape or measuring stick.
3. Coloured electrical tape.
4. A good-humoured helper.

The purpose of this fun exercise is to draw upon the school floor the circles, turns and corners that we want to learn and perform more accurately.

For a 20m circle, mark on the lunge line the point of 10m by putting some electrical tape around it at the 10m point. Let's take a 20m circle at the letter C. Your helper will be holding onto the end of the lunge line, so

have them stand at C. You should then walk backwards down the centre line until the lunge line is taut and you are holding it at the tape line you marked. Now, with you spinning on the spot, your helper should walk around you, dragging their feet in the arena surface, whilst keeping the lunge line taut. Once your helper has gone around you twice, you should have a near-perfect 20m circle etched into the surface if your arena.

Actually, as an aside, I should mention that you should probably measure out your arena to be sure of its dimensions. Indoor arenas seem to vary in size quite a lot depending on how they are constructed. Our arena is wider than 20m so we have to put out boards on competition days to narrow it slightly.

Now you know the ‘secret’ you can do this for 10m circles too. Measure out a 5m length on the lunge line and repeat the same procedure as before. A 15m circle will be based on a 7.5m length of lunge line.



*Drawing a circle on the arena floor.*

The photo above isn't great quality, but hopefully you can see Milly at the end of a lunge line and she is walking around me dragging her feet in the ground. I also drew in the circles too to make them clearer.

Corners are a little bit trickier but they are well worth drawing into the arena floor. First you should look at the diagram of corners earlier in the chapter. It's probably worth doing a 6m corner, a 10m corner, a 15m circle and then just using the 20m circle as the corner too. With this range of

corners set up you can try each of them in each of the gaits and decide what fits your horse best. You may find that some in-between radius is better.

The best way to do a corner circle is to have yourself stand right into the corner. Your helper then moves along the short side until the lunge line is taut. Once your helper is stationary you can move out of the corner keeping the lunge line taut, and standing at 90 degrees to the short side. Once this is done, and with a little bit of repositioning, you can go ahead and have your helper draw your circle. One quarter of this circle will be used at the corner itself.