



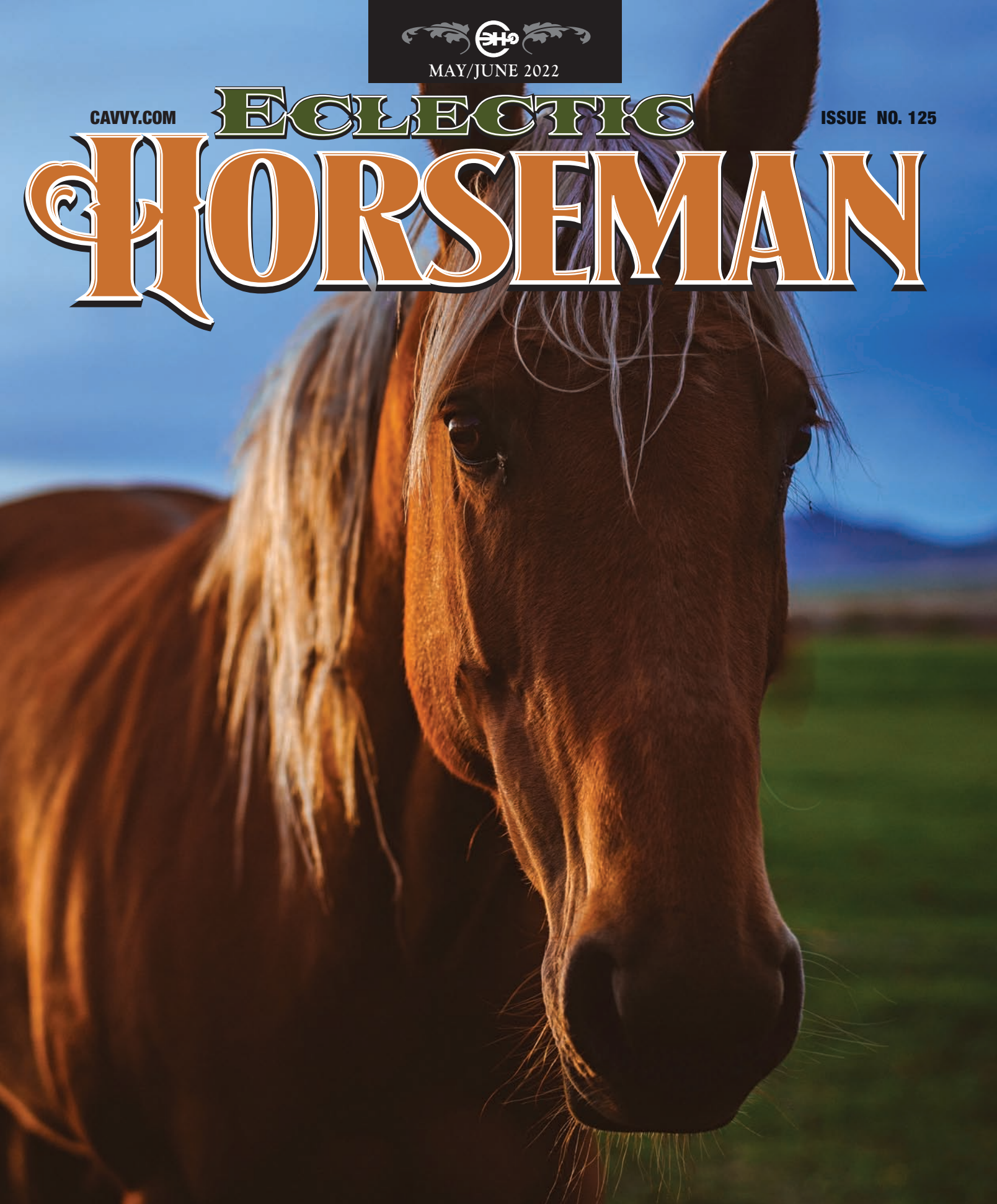
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DROPPING A SHOULDER: GETTING THE RIGHT MENTAL PICTURE

By Deb Bennett, Ph.D.

Riding instructors have a whole vocabulary of picturesque phrases, and there's none more evocative than when, in going through a corner in the arena, they hear their instructor shout "your horse is dropping a shoulder!" The question is—exactly what mental picture does that phrase provoke?

This is the bottom-line test as to whether teaching is effective, because if the phraseology engenders the wrong picture in the mind's eye of the student, that's worse than no picture at all. I have to laugh when I hear "dropping a shoulder" because it makes me think of all the old cars I've survived owning... let me tell you about the time I dropped a tie-rod while going 50 mph on a downtown expressway in Washington, D.C. at 2 a.m. on New Year's Eve...

Well—I think we can assume that the phrase "dropping a shoulder" is not intended to mean that the horse is having a body part come loose and fall off. What, then? This is a little tricky because I am not convinced that most instructors—let alone their students—are crystal-clear on the concept. The instructor knows what he sees, and he sees the horse doing something less than desirable, something that needs to be pointed out to work on to try to change and improve; but can he describe with accuracy what he sees? Does he have a correct idea of what causes it? Unless the instructor unpacks the meaning of charming idiomatic expressions, the student will be left guessing—and so will the horse.

"DROPPING A SHOULDER" MEANS GOING CROOKED

Sometimes you'll hear "dropping in" or "falling in," but you may also hear "falling out." The contradiction between "falling in" and "falling out" reflects the prevailing confusion—a horse can't do both at once—or can he? One instructor will say, "your horse is falling out" and explain that means that he's "dropping" the inside shoulder—meaning that shoulder is carried lower than the other one. Sometimes they will say, "he's overbending (or overflexing) laterally" and that means the same thing. On the other hand, the instructor might say "your horse is falling in"—meaning that he's over flexing in the opposite direction so that he lies on the inside shoulder, giving him a tendency to fade in toward the center of the arena or the center of the circle. This horse will also be "dropping a shoulder"—but it will be the outside one, not the inside one. How confusing this all becomes when a clear mental picture is not supplied! Whichever phrase

you hear, and whichever shoulder the horse is "dropping," it comes down to the fact that he is travelling crooked.

What does "going crooked" mean? A horse has four legs, the front pair of which is separated from the back pair by a relatively long body which is laterally flexible. There is no law that says the back pair of legs has to align with the front pair when the horse is in motion. Tom Dorrance used to say that a certain horse had a "sag" in him; what he was referring to was the common tendency for horses to move forward—on what the rider was hoping would be a straight-line trajectory—with a lateral curve in their back. I think Tom was picturing an old barn that had halfway fallen down, so that it was leaning or you could say sagging to one side. Horses do exactly the same thing.

Not only do horses do this—they are extraordinarily capable of doing it, because their body lacks collarbones (Fig. 1A and B). Collarbones act as diagonally oriented struts which prevent the rib cage from slopping off to one side or the other; they keep the breastbone centered in the middle. Humans have collarbones; horses don't. Many years ago I designed and built a wooden model so that my students could see how this works in three dimensions (Fig. 1C). People get a lot out of working with the "Woody" model because (since we do have collarbones) we cannot experience what the horse is experiencing; we cannot off-center our sternum. If you go to the "knowledge base" section of my website at equinestudies.org, you can download an essay called "Lessons from Woody" that explains the model and all about what it means to travel crooked. I present the blueprint for it here (Fig. 2) in case you want to build one for yourself. To get the idea across, crawling also works pretty well (Fig. 3)—so long as you follow the directions which cause your body to work as if it didn't have collarbones.

If we stand in front or behind the horse, it is easy to see whether he moves with sternum off-center because the limbs and body will be off plumb. One shoulder will carry most of the weight, and the horse's head will swing over to the opposite side (just like the models in Fig. 1, and as is obvious in Figs. 4 and 5). If we look down on him from a bird's-eye perspective, it will become clear that as soon as the sternum goes off-center (to the

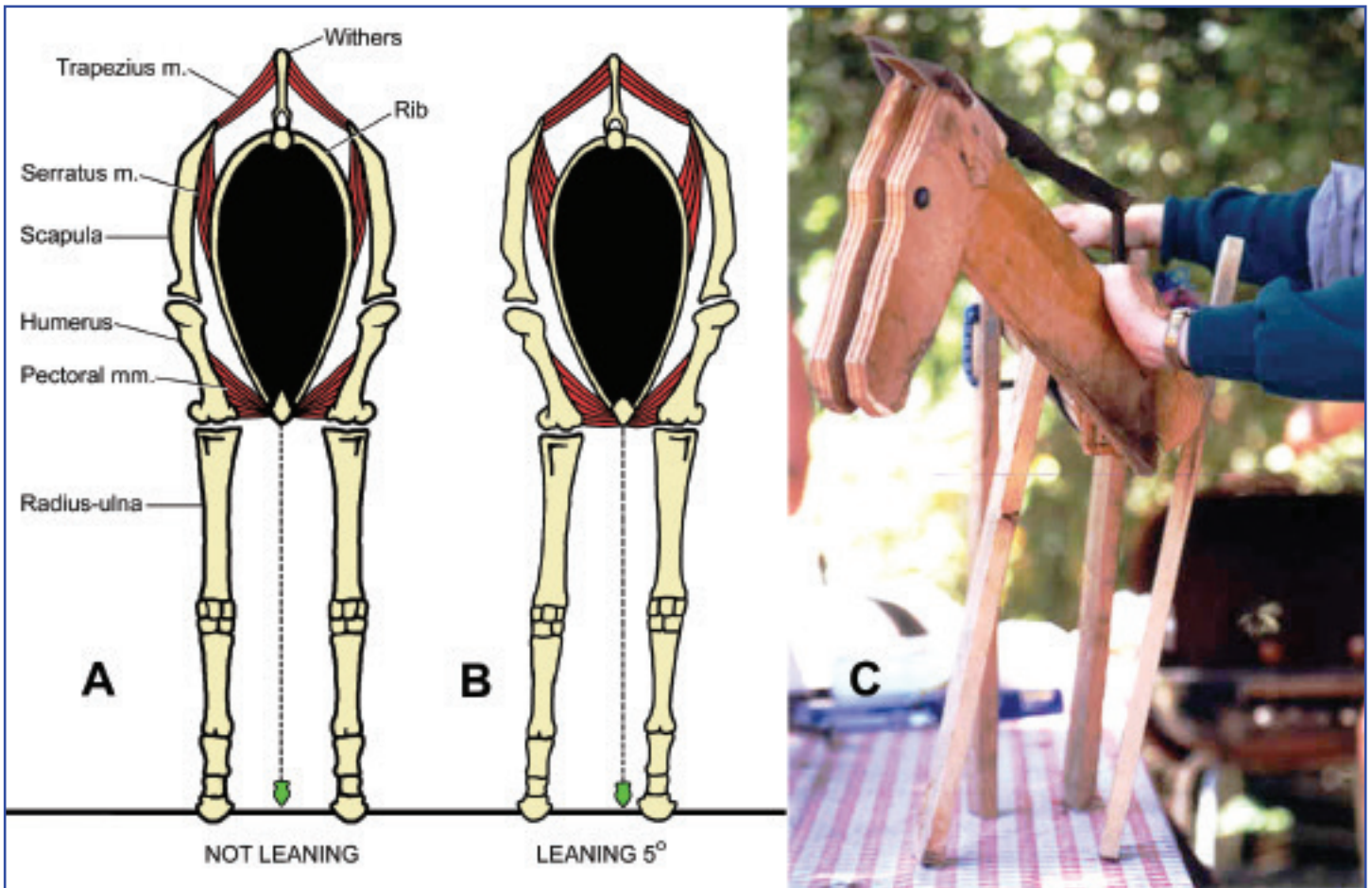


Fig. 1. The horse lacks collarbones, and it is therefore possible for him to move with his sternum (breastbone) off to one side. Views A and B show the bones and muscles that are involved, and illustrate what happens when the horse leans only five degrees to his left, as is the Woody biomechanical model in View C. When the horse leans to the left, we say he is “laying” on the left shoulder and “dropping” the right one. Notice that when the sternum moves left, the head swings toward the right.

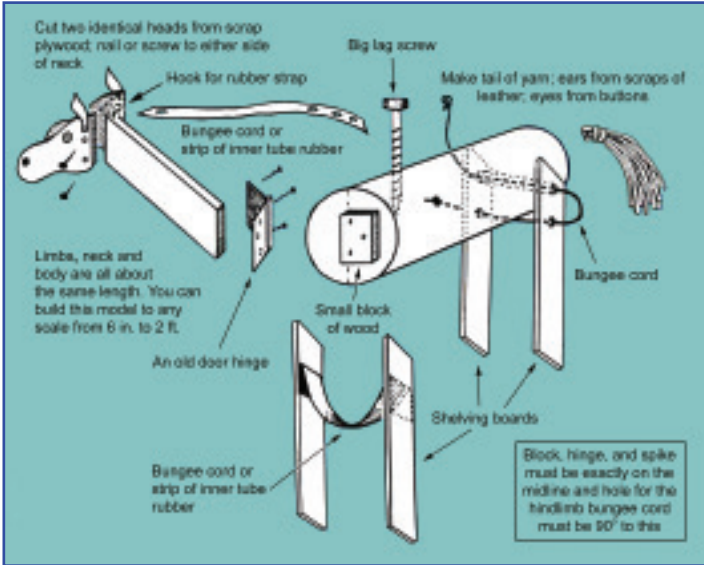


Fig. 2. The blueprint for the Woody biomechanical model. The original was built on two-foot dimensions, so if you choose to make one on six-inch dimensions then substitute rubber bands or underwear elastic for bungee cords and rubber straps, and use a twopenny nail instead of a lag bolt.



Fig. 3. A photo taken of me (on the right) showing a student how to crawl like a horse. The most important thing is to pretend that there is a board laid horizontally across your shoulders. It must remain horizontal at all times no matter whether you shift (lean) to the left or to the right, as the straight arrow over my back shows. Instead of keeping her invisible board horizontal, the student is tipping it downward as the curving arrow shows; this is not what the horse does.



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right, for example), a curve will also appear in the horse's back that is convex on the right side and concave on the left. This is the "sag" of which Tom was speaking. Once you have learned what to look for, the sag is easy to see from either the right or left side of the horse (Fig. 6). This is a key point because most people (until they are shown this) are unable to see it, so they never learn to work their horses properly either on the long lead-rope/mecate, or on the conventional longe line (Fig. 7).

Riders are also usually unable to identify crooked carriage by feel. I believe this is because they lack the proper mental picture—or indeed any mental picture—so that nothing alerts them to the fact that something is wrong with the way their horse is going. It has been easy for me to harvest numerous examples of people happily going down the road, the trail, or in the arena blithely unaware that anything was amiss (Figs. 4 and 5). They'd be more concerned, I think, if they realized that allowing their horse to move crookedly is completely blocking and preventing any hope of their being able to finish him as a fine riding horse. It also has a tendency to destroy soundness. You want to be able to do flying changes of lead? Rollbacks or pirouettes? Cut cattle? Perform quality lateral work? If so then you have to learn to teach your horse how to carry himself and you straight.

Mastering this subject is one of the most important paths to success. Yet it is not rocket science. Anybody can grasp these ideas and put them to use, and when you do, you will find that great results suddenly come easily: as soon as the horse freely travels straight, he will volunteer to round up and go properly to the bit. Continue to go crooked, however, and the process of training will be about as easy as my trying to drive sans a tie-rod, with one front tire at 90 degrees to the other.

UNTRACKING: TURNING LOOSE ON CURVING FIGURES

While it's easy to picture what's happening when a horse carries itself straight on a straight track, it's more difficult to see what ought to occur when the rider wants him to track a curving line. Confusion on this point is widespread. However, getting the curving aspect straight—so to speak—is crucial because unless the horse has first been shown how to track a curve properly, it is very unlikely that he'll be able to handle straight tracks, which require the same skillset but at a higher level of precision.

The danger lies in reasoning from the straight track to the curving one, assuming that the straight track is easier. Both rider and horse need to begin the other way around, and the exercise to start with is one you have read about in these pages many times before, under the byline of numerous horsemanship clinicians: untracking. This can—and should—be asked for in all kinds of different situations, and I show several here, including some historical images that demonstrate that the importance

of untracking has been known to enlightened horsemen for centuries (Figs. 8, 9, 10). It is possible, and in the beginning necessary, to directly ask the horse to untrack—until he is very familiar with the handler or rider asking him to step under the body-shadow with the inside hind leg. He needs to be both familiar with it and glad to do it—as glad and as comfortable with it as breathing, because like breathing, untracking lies at the root of many other things.

More than breathing however, untracking has behavioral overtones, because within the horse herd the horse that asks another horse to untrack is dominant to the one who untracks. This is hard-wired into the equine consciousness, so that when you ask your horse to untrack and he promptly and softly complies like the horse in Fig. 8, he's as much as telling you that he's on board with your agenda. You've seen this over and over again in these pages, in photo series showing Ray Hunt, Tom Curtin, Buck Brannaman, Harry Whitney and others start colts, working them either from the ground or from horseback. They push their bubble into the horse's flank until the colt, who may at first be stiff and scared, gets the message to step over behind. If they're stiff and scared, those first steps will be more like hops, but it usually doesn't take long before they begin to turn loose both internally and externally.

TRACKING STRAIGHT ON CURVES: THE RIGHT MENTAL PICTURE

While we are always interested in what the inner horse is experiencing and feeling, we also ask horses to untrack to obtain its physical results, which are to cause him to round out laterally, putting a definite curve in his spine (Fig. 12). We do not bend the spine—the horse bends his own spine, and it is the action of the inside hind leg that induces the spine to curve. As the spine curves, the horse also shifts his weight from the inside pair of legs to the outside pair so that both the outside hind and fore accept more weight. The spine curve and the weighting of the outside pair of legs happen simultaneously.

The moment the horse's spine curves, he begins tracking a circular path (Figs. 11, 13, 14). The curve in the spine is the cause of the arcuate path—not the other way around. The curving path DOES NOT EXIST until the horse "cuts" it in the footing.

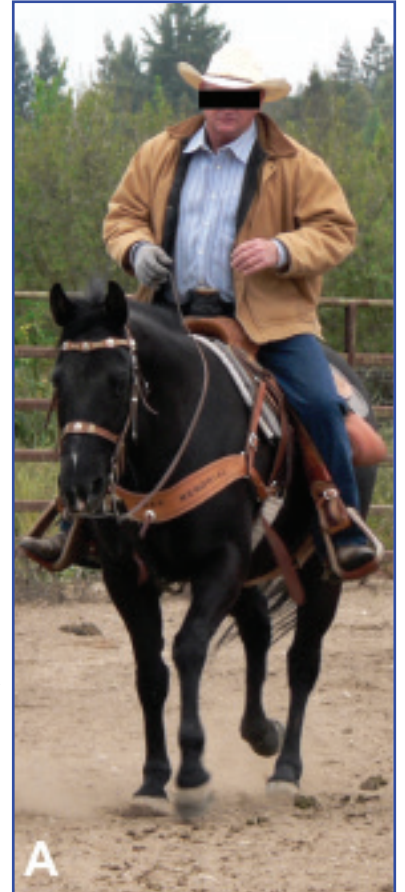
Let me tell you a story to make this clear. Many years ago when I was beginning with dressage lessons, I thought I must be stupid or else just amazingly clumsy and uncoordinated, because no matter how hard I tried to steer, I could not get my horse to track a smooth, round circle. The instructor kept telling me that I was either falling out or falling in, and that my "circles" looked like lopsided eggs or rough polygons. So I thought, OK I'm going to solve this. So I went and got a coffee can full of powdered garden lime, a stake and a length of cord. I hammered in the stake out in the middle of the arena, tied



Fig. 4. A quartet of horses moving crookedly. A and B are the same rider and horse. This student was honestly unaware of how crookedly her horse moved and completely unaware that she sat askew. When I mentioned these things to her during our first lesson, she did not believe me, so I said "OK, let me get my camera." Remarkably her so-called "certified" instructor had never mentioned this problem to her, so to her credit, after she saw the photos she totally committed to making the necessary changes, including getting rid of her regular – incompetent – instructor. View C is something you'll see in 99% of horses competing in enduro. What effect do you think overweighting the right forelimb for a hundred miles has on the horse's tendons and joints? I got image D as a telephoto shot while driving down a back lane near my home. The dude on board was having a happy time and after taking this picture, I watched him come toward me for over half a mile with the haunches off to the right the whole time. The rider neither noticed nor felt how he's sitting off to the right, how his left boot is kicked forward with the right one kicked back, or how the horse continually steps across his right foreleg and breaks over on the right sides of all his feet. What effect do you think this has on how the saddle fits? On how easy it would be to turn this horse to the right?

Fig. 5. I present so many crooked horses in order to show that this is universal – it does not matter what style you like to ride. I captured horse A by standing at the out-gate of the warmup pen at a rodeo. The horse is cantering toward my camera with the haunches continuously off to the left. Like most rodeo horses, this one got warmed up by circling in only one direction – to the left. I got shot B while sitting in the stands of the horse show at a county fair.

This rider never succeeded in getting her horse to go over close to the rail. Horses often react to the rail as if there were a force-field emanating from it that pushes them into a wrong bend and causes them to "fade" toward the center of the arena. To fix the problem, it would be necessary to teach the horse to travel straight instead of laying in or "dropping the outside shoulder"; and then it would also help to teach him to leg-yield. This rider lacks an effective seat and leg, so her only option was to try to drag the horse toward the rail by means of the reins. I took photo C, of the Peruvian Paso stallion, at a Ray Hunt clinic. See how the horse untracks with the wrong hind leg, and notice the left shoulder bulging toward the center of the arena while the horse's neck and head angle outward.





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a 20M length of cord to it, and pulled the cord out to its full length. Then, holding the cord, I went all the way around in a circle with the lime, until I had marked a circle of white lime in the sand. And then I mounted my horse and guess what! I still couldn't track that circle!

Talk about frustrating! Of course the whole fiasco was because the instructor did not know, and therefore did not mention to me, that the circle DOES NOT EXIST until the horse is softly bent. It is the bend that causes his feet to stamp a curving track into the footing, not anything you do with the reins. The more you focus on your mental picture of a circle, the more you will get in your horse's way. So in this article where I concern myself with conveying mental pictures, this is one I want you to erase from your consciousness: block out your awareness of what a circle is or looks like and replace it with your FEEL of the horse. Induce him to bend by encouraging the inside hind leg to step under the body-shadow, and the circle (or the segment of it that is the correct way to track an arena corner) will appear all by itself.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPLING

When the rider deliberately asks the horse to untrack and thereby curve its spine, and when this is done equally to both sides in alternation, the process is called "suppling." Suppling is accomplished by causing the horse to change his bend, which is to say, to change which hind limb is untracking. This should make it obvious that spinal bend is NOT accomplished by physically pushing on the horse's body. When the horse seems not to comply—when he moves reluctantly, sluggishly and heavily—the solution is NOT for the rider to push more and more firmly with the leg. Do this, and you will wind up where many dressage competitors are—at what is euphemistically known as "the bloody spur lesson."

This ought never to be necessary, and it will never even come close to happening if the rider absolutely resists any temptation to (as Buck Brannaman puts it) "pry" on the horse's body. Aids that go beyond firm are not aids—they are red flags that the horse does not comprehend what is being asked, does not accept what is being asked, or is so stiff and out of balance that he cannot comply. It is the incomprehension, the unacceptance, the stiffness, and the wrong weighting of the feet (which is what creates wrong balance) that we have to go back and address.

The two "case studies" presented as Figs. 15 and 16 look at this in detail. For the moment, however, let's assume your horse does not resent the leg and that he untracks readily from light touches. Let's also assume that he requires no whip or flag when being longed or worked on the long lead, but instead responds with full understanding to energy flowing from the hands, calves, and heart-center of the handler-rider. When longed or ridden in this way, the horse will track anatomically straight

on a curving track, which means he moves in balance (Figs. 7 and 15A). His weight will be properly distributed so that there is more weight on the outside pair of feet when those feet land than on the inside pair of feet when those feet land. How much more weight there is in the outside pair of feet determines the diameter of the circle; if he outweighs more, all other things being equal, the diameter of the circle will be smaller. Less differential is required for him to "cut" a track of larger diameter.

Weighting the outside pair of feet also creates lateral work, if the handler so desires it. The handler or rider creates the change between ordinary correct movement on a curve and the exercise called "expanding the circle" by making a small, or even a tiny, shift in his "aim." If the handler aims exclusively at the inside hind limb, it becomes possible for the horse to curve in too much through the anterior part of the rib cage, the shoulder, and the base of the neck (as in Fig. 8). If the handler aims at the girth area, most horses will round out nicely, producing an even bend "from poll to tail." If the handler aims at the shoulder or the base of the neck AND the horse can be trusted to continue untracking, the animal will shift instantly from ordinary circling to expanding the circle, which is the first and easiest form of lateral work (Fig. 10A). However, if the handler aims at the shoulder or the base of the neck and the horse stops untracking, the bend through the rear part of the rib cage and lumbar spine will be lost, the horse will overbend at the base of the neck, the head will come too far in, and the hindquarters will trail out behind (dressage judges call this "dragging the hindquarters").

As you see—it is always a question of balance! And the exact balance of the aids is different with every horse. I encourage you to experiment with several horses to find out what each one requires. If you run into trouble—that is, if you set everything up right, apply light aids, and the horse does not respond—then you are dealing with incomprehension or unwillingness, which as I have said, are not solvable by physical means and will only get worse if you become tempted to try to do the horse's job for him by "prying" on his body.

SLOW CORNER: THE SLINKY VARIANT

I mentioned at the beginning that a horse is a four-legged animal, in which the front pair of legs is separated from the back pair by a relatively long body. Some horses are longer-bodied than others, and some are innately quite flexible—to the point where it can feel not much different than if you were sitting on a Slinky. While there is no law that says the back pair of legs has to align with the front pair when any horse is in motion, "slinkies" are more prone to misalignment than horses with more compact build.

This is where the "Woody" biomechanical model breaks down—because ol' Woody's body is made out of a section of fence post. If we build it instead with a slinky, the difficulty

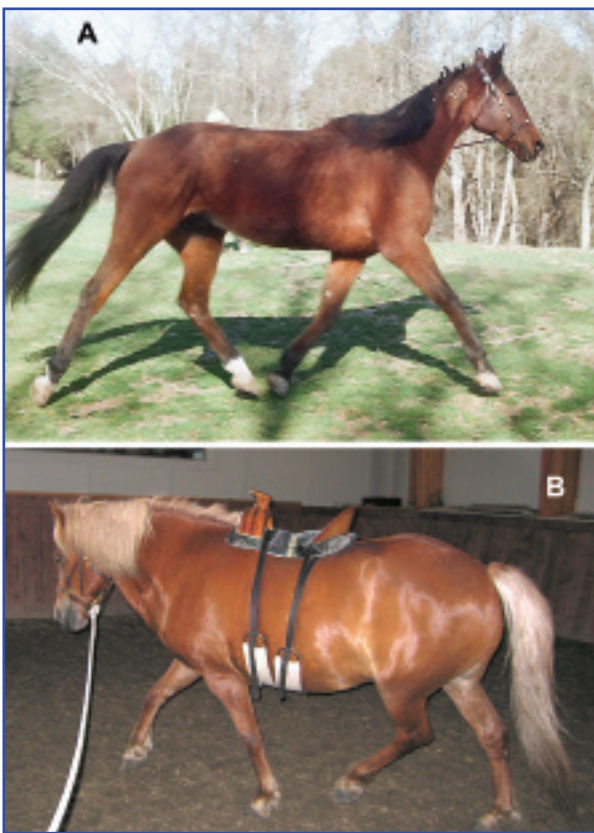
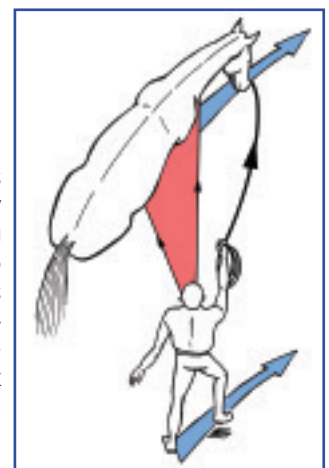


Fig. 6. Horses being longed. A is a former harness racer being converted to use as a riding horse. Standardbreds are often well-conformed, well-broken, good minded, and very athletic, making excellent prospects for jumping, dressage, western-type competition, or cattle work. However – retraining them is a project requiring thoughtfulness and skill. I have to say I admire their way of going, especially at the trot; as a result of being raced, they are impulsive and free-moving and that counts for a lot. However, they often come off the track rather stiff, as here. Notice that the longe line is tight, the neck is stiff, and—as a result—the hindquarter is tracking a larger circle than the forequarter, as evidenced by the fact that the left hind hoof is about to land to the outside of the left fore hoof. It's OK to let a horse express himself with a little vigorous movement, but the emphasis in this animal's education at this early point needs to be on work on the short rein/mecate/long lead line and at much slower speed. Only when he can untrack at slow speed will he become able to untrack and flex neck and body laterally at higher speed. Horse B is an Icelandic gelding named Tindür. The owner took this shot as he was testing a new saddle design set up with a double cinch, but the wrong bend to the horse's body is obvious. We can say that Tindür is "dropping in," "dropping the outside shoulder," "fading in," or "counterflexed" – they all mean he's travelling crookedly on a curve.

Fig. 7. Correct longeing in a nutshell: (1) Project your energy (red) toward haunches, rib cage, shoulder, base of neck or head – whichever part most needs support so that the horse moves away from you as well as forward. (2) Avoid over-driving the hindquarters and definitely eschew the whip. Use a flag or the energy that can come from the palm of your hand when first starting up, and when necessary after that, but reduce it to zero (as here) when the horse volunteers to go freely forward. (3) Use your body correctly: always step from your rear foot to your front foot as shown. Your body and your leading shoulder (the right one in this illustration) should track parallel to where you want the horse to track (blue arrows), with a little tendency to crowd the horse so that he has a corresponding tendency to take the line from you (black arrow). (4) The black arrow, or a knot tied in the belly of the line, should always move toward the horse, never toward the handler. For more details, see the longeing article in *EH* #91 issue.



Fig. 8. A student submitted this series of photos for commentary through my online Forum. Her Choctaw pony makes a great example of what "untracking" or "stepping under the body-shadow with the inside hind leg" means. The handler's work is typical of what we see many beginners doing. Generally speaking she's using her body right, but has a tendency to lead the horse around in a circle rather than driving him. She needs to begin by positioning herself more to the rear, and from that position—given this pony's great willingness to untrack—face forward and aim her energy along his rib cage and especially the neck. Because she does not face the neck—almost has her back to it—he has a tendency to come in too much with the head and overflex at the base of the neck (especially clear in A). In getting a horse to track straight on a circle, we want him neither to lay to the inside nor overflex to the outside, and achieving this is a matter of learning to balance your aids so that they meet the needs of whatever particular horse you're working with.





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of keeping the hinder parts aligned with the parts in front is instantly obvious. What happens with real horses of the “slinky” type is that when the rider or handler asks for untracking, the hindquarters step over but the forequarters remain unaffected. This gets us back to the question of “dropping” the inside shoulder; when a normal horse untracks and this causes the body to round out laterally, the curvature of the body—driven by the push from the inside hind leg—brings the shoulder along to the outside, causing the animal to unweight the inside forelimb. When the horse is being longed, we can see the inside shoulder and forelimb stop slanting toward the handler; the whole inner surface of the horse’s body, from the base of the neck back to the haunches, becomes concave rather than convex as it is in Fig. 6B. Not so, however, with a slinky-horse: the shoulder comes up only a little, or not at all. Tom Dorrance referred to this as having a “slow corner.” Viewed from above, the horse’s spine forms an “S” shape, with the part ahead of the rider’s leg concave to the outside but the part behind the leg concave to the inside.

The cure for a slow corner lies essentially with the rider or handler having a mental picture of it and realizing that, especially with long-bodied horses, it is a possibility. Then all that is required is observation; when you perceive the horse sagging inward on the inside front “corner,” you must do something to cause the horse to pick up that shoulder—to erect it—to move the front end of his rib cage more to the outside—to put more weight on the outside forelimb. Sometimes it’s best to ask less untracking, which means working on a circle of larger diameter before trying tighter curvatures. The “expanding the circle” exercise is often a big help. Sometimes it can be helpful for the rider to carry a short-handled flag or a barrel-racing bat with a big flat flapper—see how light a touch directly on the shoulder it might take to get a good response, and then next time see if you can use even less pressure to get the same response, until finally the horse will round out all the way from back to front from the touch of your leg alone.

The rider must sit correctly, too; some “slow corners” are really more about the rider sitting wrong than about the horse. Many riders unconsciously commit two errors: they sit too much to the inside, and at the same time they have too firm an outside leg. Both of these block the horse’s ability to either round out or to step forward-and-sideways to create lateral work (Figs. 15 and 16).

In order to help the horse go with more weight on its outside pair of legs, you must sit “over” the outside pair of legs. I absolutely do not mean that you are to sit more heavily on the outside seatbone. Neither do I mean that you are to shift your body toward the outside; you are to sit square in the middle of the horse, centered over his spinal chain, at all times. Your outside seatbone must be **GLUED** to the saddle, at all times, at all gaits, and through all movements and transitions except

during the flight over a jump. This is a matter of awareness and connectedness which enables the horse to feel how you want him to use his body—emphasize that it is HIM using HIS body; you suggest and direct, he does all the execution. No amount of strength will allow you to “crush” a bend into him, so please resist the temptation to do the horse’s job for him.

If you sit properly, when you want to turn all you have to do is bring up the mental picture of him landing with weight in the outside pair of legs and you will find yourself enthroned up there just as beautifully poised as a mounted bullfighter and cutting perfect, circular arena figures that just seem to flow out of the horse (I’m enjoying this feeling in Fig. 15A). The reins will have little to do except remain connected so that the horse feels your hand and you feel his tongue; and your legs will also have little to do. By a mere change in your intention, accompanied by lightening the outside leg, you can shift from straight-away circling into any exercise of the leg-yield class, including expanding the circle, formal leg-yield, or turn on the forehand. Note I said that lateral work happens when you lighten the **OUTSIDE** leg, not by increasing the pressure of the inside leg!

TRACKING STRAIGHT ON STRAIGHT LINES

From the foregoing discussion, you may have already seen why it is more difficult for a horse to track straight on a straight-line path than to track straight, i.e., in proper anatomical alignment, on a curving one: because, thanks to the fact that he doesn’t have collarbones, he can so easily shift the chest off-plumb either to the outside or to the inside. Tracking a straight line is a matter of learning to keep the chest in the middle—not rigidly confining it there, but permitting it to oscillate equally to either side, as it does at all gaits in all normal, unmounted horses. This is why suppling—repeatedly asking the horse to alternate between curving right and left, as in a properly ridden figure-8—is such important preparation. For if the horse can cut a 20M, 15M, or 10M figure-8, then we can say we have control of the position of his sternum as well as of the weighting of his feet, and therefore we have full control of the bend.

Notice that whenever we ask the horse to untrack, we are deliberately asking him to move his chest off plumb, but when he does it at our direction, he moves it in the appropriate direction (whether right or left). As speed increases, the physics laws of angular momentum and ground friction begin to be more important, so in order not to lose his footing in a barrel race, the horse may need to lean in somewhat toward the barrel. However, as Fig. 14 shows, the winner is the horse that retains some curvature instead of counter flexing. This will be the horse that has been schooled through slow-speed curves as in Fig. 11 and through medium-speed rollbacks as in Fig. 13 so that it becomes possible for him to push himself around the barrel by working primarily off the outside hind leg.

To develop this ability, slow-speed figure-8’s are good and

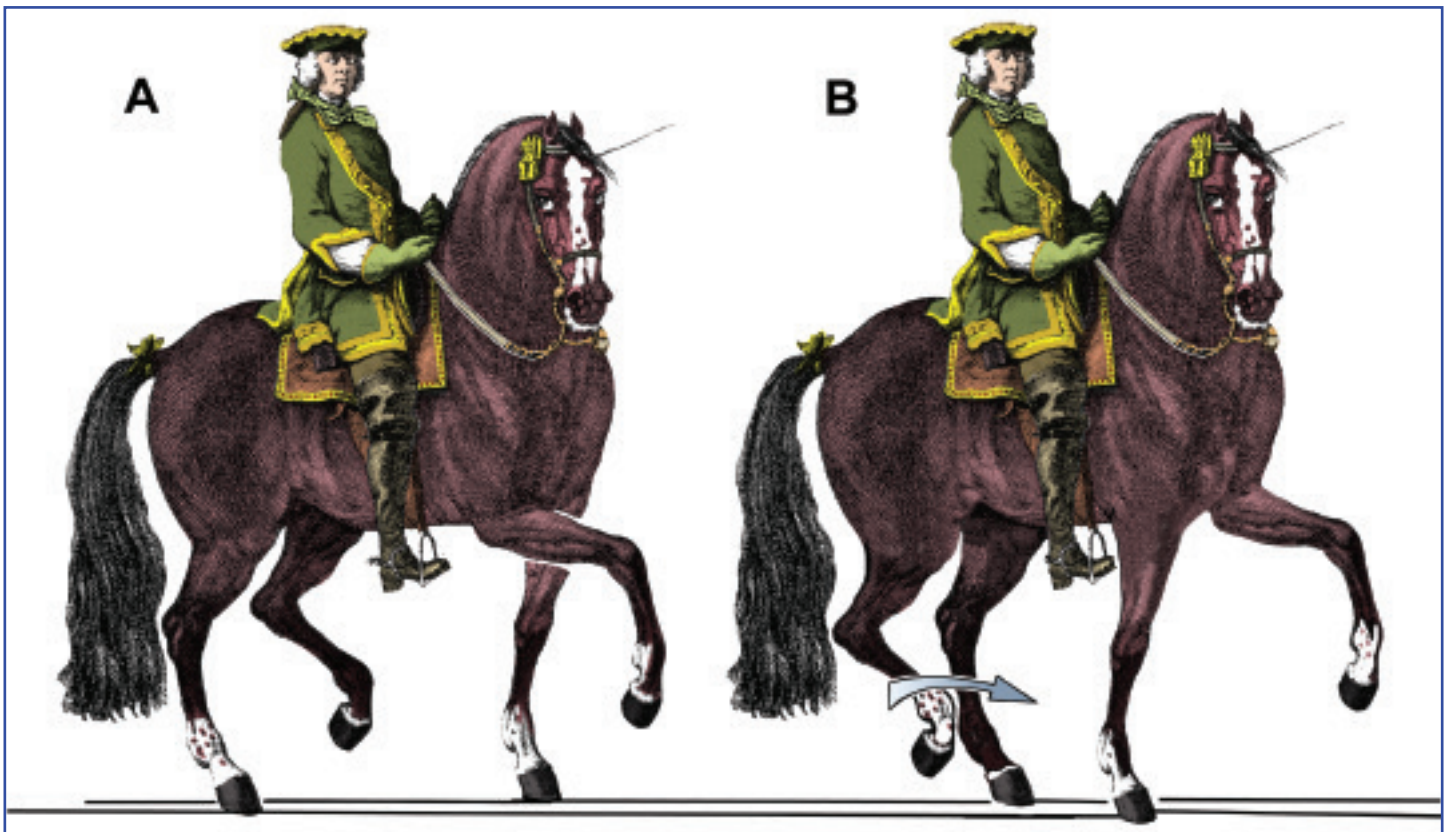


Fig. 9. Image A is taken from *École de Cavalerie*, a book of horsemanship instruction published in 1751 by François Robichon de la Guérinière. This is the famous image of "shoulder-in" as taught by the old master, but because the illustration leaves the viewer to imagine what happens in the next step, many people have not realized that untracking is the basis for this useful exercise. I supply the missing view of the next step in view B: the horse steps under the body-shadow with the inside hind leg. Untracking is the basis for teaching the horse to carry itself and its rider straight.

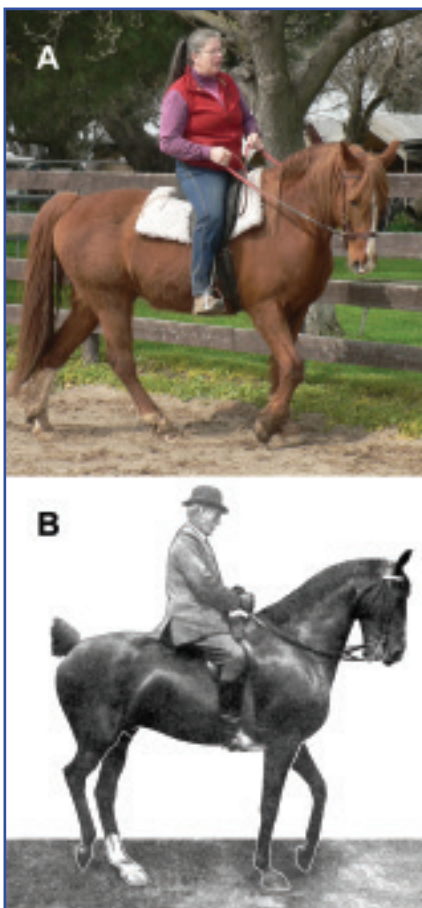


Fig. 10. View A, My gelding Oliver carrying me around a 10M curve. We have ridden across the middle of the arena and are curving on to the track along the rail. Notice the way the reins are used; the lateral flexion (head twirling) at the poll; the even and rather deep bend from Oliver's nose to haunch; my steady, soft inside leg. Notice also the big, thrusty hind step; the deep untracking; the unweighting of the inside forelimb. Notice where I'm looking – forward and over the horse's outside ear, not down and in. Notice Oliver's relaxed tail and ears and sweetly compliant (comfortable) expression. View B is Henri de Bussigny, author of "Equitation" with photos taken in the 1870's. De Bussigny was a graduate of Saumur who emigrated to the U.S. and opened riding schools first in New York and then in Boston, where he taught Baucher's methods. Here he performs a perfectly balanced turn on the forehand. The horse has untracked and the untracking (white) hind leg is weightbearing while the outside (dark) hind leg steps out toward the viewer. Because the horse untracks, the body is bent and the outside forelimb is weighted, while at the same time the unweighted inside forelimb steps to the left. The horse does not bulge out through the outside shoulder, nor does he lay on the inside shoulder, but travels straight on this tightest of all circular tracks. Note how the reins are not creating either the bend or the turn.

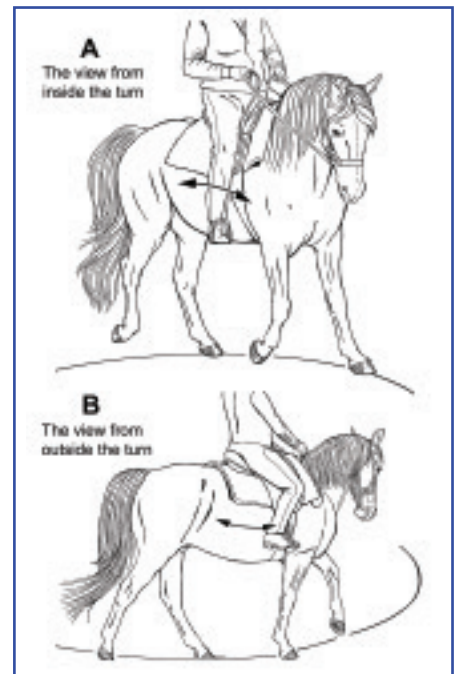


Fig. 11. What a horse looks like to the observer on the ground when he bends. Many riders do bend their horses but the bend is not deep enough for the diameter they intend to ride. Here Oliver and I are tracking a 15M circle, above at a working pace, below at a walk.

so is asking the horse to alternate from leg-yield to the right to leg-yield to the left. This zigzag exercise, quaintly called “drunken line,” is also very important preparation for riding straight lines. Tom Dorrance used to have us set up a line of six or eight barrels and ride a “snake trail” around them as we went down the line, bending first left and then right. That’s a good way to start, but I need to mention that the rider who had figured out not to just drag the horse around the barrels with the reins, but instead to untrack first with one hind leg and then with the other, got a little nod and wink of acknowledgement. In short, snaking around the barrels in any old manner was clearly not the point. Neither was dragging the horse first left and then right the point of the “weaving in and out” exercise that both Tom and Ray Hunt used to have the larger classes practice. Weaving was a lot of fun but it went deeper than that. What they were looking to praise were riders who had figured out that steering—like impulsion—ideally ought to come from the rear.

The idea was also to get away from physicality; to feel the horse so closely that you are able to direct him to make changes of bend that are of very small magnitude as well as of very large magnitude. Ray used to say, “I can ride as fast as he can run,” and that’s another part of being able to ride straight lines, because you can’t just check in with the horse every so often, but instead you need to feel every step. Sometimes you don’t have to say much to the animal; sometimes he needs more help, but you always have to be aware of what he might need. When you have a horse who does not mind whether he bends to the right or bends to the left so that when he trots there is no side-preference or bias, then he can carry you on a straight line at a trot. The line is not literally straight, however. It’s the “snake trail” reduced to its theoretical minimum.

TO GET AWAY FROM THE PHYSICAL

Mind that I said above “on a physical level” and “you want to get away from physicality.” Tom Dorrance surprised the boots off me one day when a horse showed up in a clinic that did not track straight either on curves or on straight lines. Tom and Ray had, with great care and thoroughness, already taught me how to straighten a horse by using physical aids, so I was expecting Tom to start this rider off by teaching her some of those things—but he took a completely different approach. Watching this, I probably learned more in half an hour than I had in twenty years of lessons with so-called “certified” instructors.

The horse not only would not—or maybe could not—track straight, it was also very “hard to leg on.” It did not go freely forward and did not seem to want to move much at all; it would lay its ears back somewhat whenever the leg was applied. The first thing Tom did was tell the rider to focus on a fencepost at the far end of the arena. He had her ride toward this and return several times, and the horse freed up quite a bit.

There were some experienced riders there that day, too, so

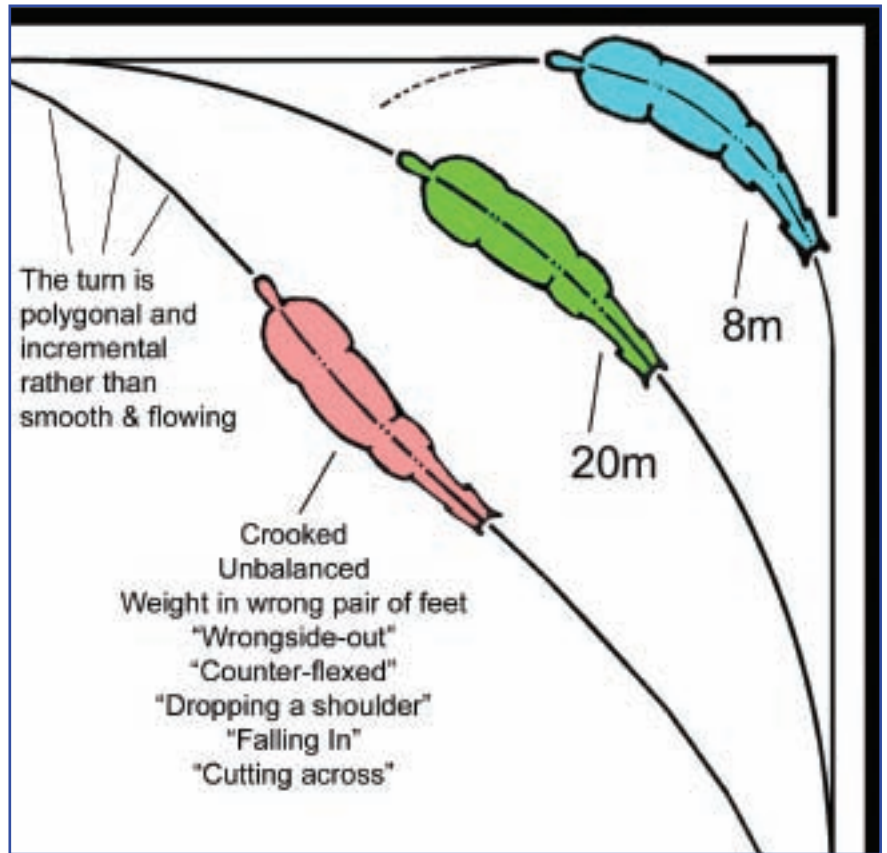


Fig. 12. Bird’s-eye view of horses passing through an arena corner. To handle corners correctly, the horse must bend which means he must untrack. The deeper into the corner you ask him to go, the more he must bend. The horse that hasn’t been shown how to bend will cut across the corner, often wobbling from one side to the other, as the crooked horse shown.

Tom put them to use. He had one of them circle by, close to the reluctant horse, cutting across his nose so as to induce him to hook on. Providing him a friendly moving target to focus on helped him start off with some interest and some life. Then Tom had the reluctant horse follow the experienced one everywhere around the arena. If the thread got broken and the reluctant horse stopped, the rider was not to kick him to go, but just wait for the experienced horse to circle back and get him hooked on again—similar to how a reluctant horse may sometimes become willing to cross a stream if another horse goes in front. Gradually the reluctant horse picked up to the point that all his rider had to do was look up and out at the horse in front and her gelding would step off with its ears forward, light and pretty.

Luckily there were also cattle on the grounds. The next day and the day after, Tom had the reluctant horse follow cattle for most of the day. He periodically checked in with the rider to see whether she knew what was happening and why. By the end of that clinic, wherever the cattle went, her horse willingly went, too, whether on curving or straight lines. This is the part that so often gets forgotten but which should never be forgotten: as Tom said to me more than one time, “Debbie—you have to ride the whole horse.” That means the horse as he is on the inside as well as the horse as he is on the outside, addressing his mental/emotional/spiritual being as well as his physical being. That’s the straight track to mastery.

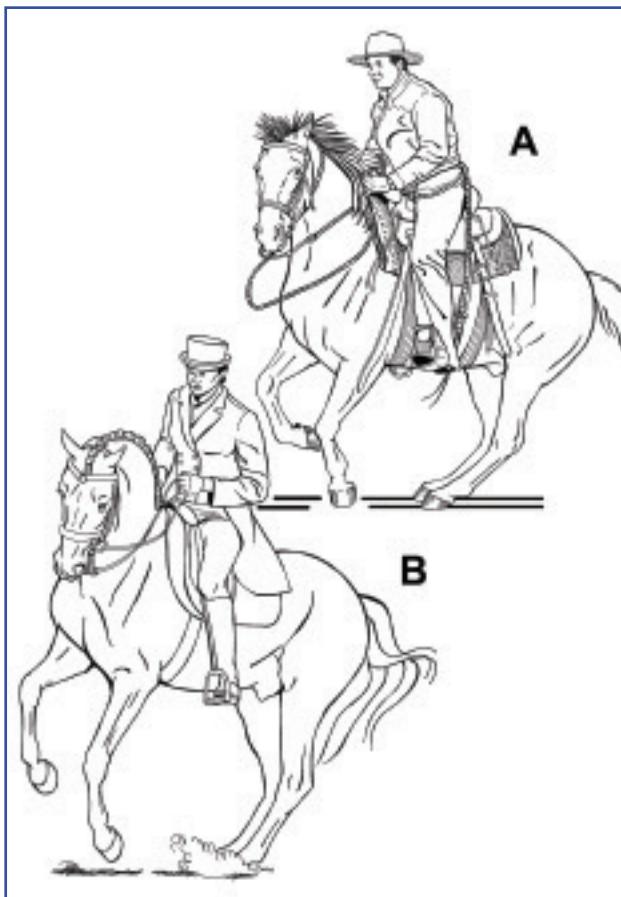


Fig. 13. The rollback (A) and the pirouette (B) are very similar exercises that exemplify bending on a small circle. Power is primarily supplied by the horse's outside hind leg. These drawings were made from photos by the author. View A is Buck Brannaman on Rambo; view B is Marie Zdunic on Prussian Dudley.

Fig. 15. Here I am coaching a student during a live session. Do you see the difference in the expression of the two horses? My student's horse is trotting, and it looks like he might be untracking – however, he's just waving a hind leg. By the time that right hind foot is set down, it will be on the gray spot—to the right of the right forelimb. This is what it means to “fall in.” Compare this with the position of the gray spot under Oliver's body-shadow.

See how I am looking up and out over the horse's outside ear, whereas the student is looking down and in. Her body is subtly shifted toward the inside; she is sitting over the center of the horse's spine, but unfortunately that is curving to the inside and that “drags her in.” See how my hands are higher; there must always be a definite bend in the rider's elbow. The inside hand directs, and if necessary it takes; the outside hand supports and/or gives. The student's “contact” merely hovers between intermittent down-and-back pulling and absence—which drives horses nuts. The student is pressing the horse's inside ribs with all her strength, as if she thinks that she has the strength to push a thousand-pound horse over. He needs instead to push HIMSELF over by properly untracking, as Oliver; my legs lie softly against my horse's sides.

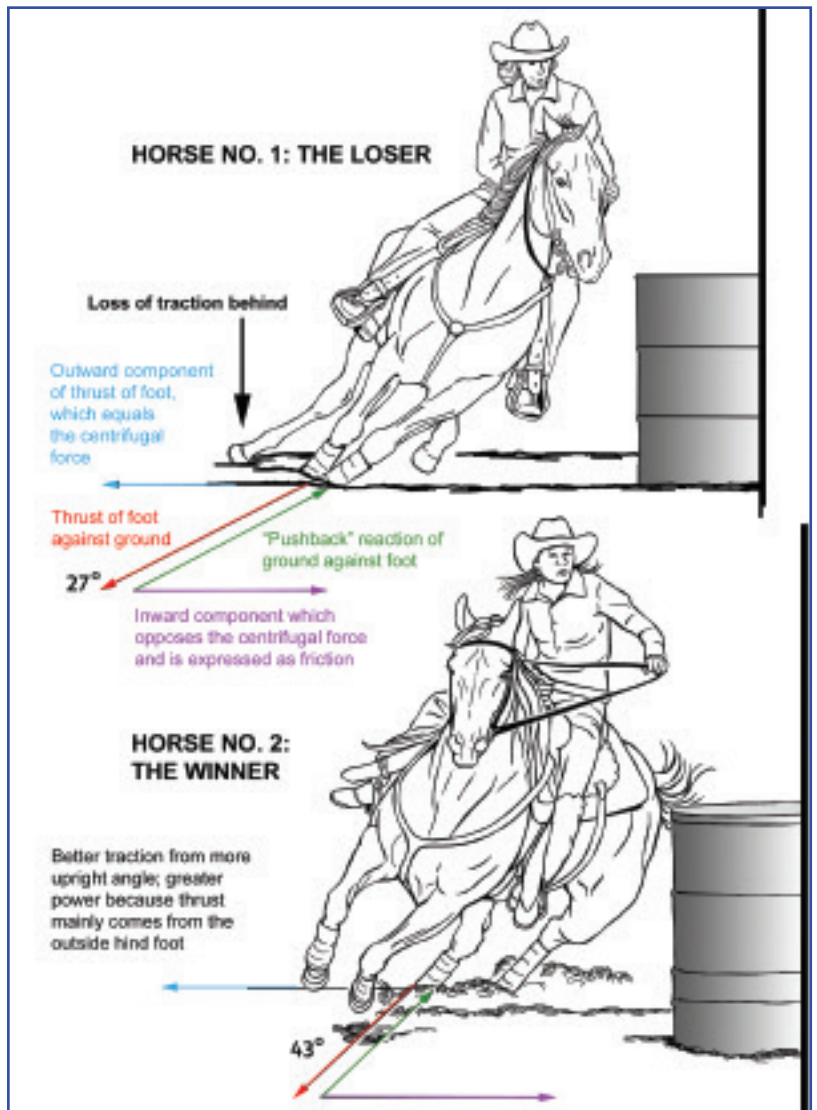
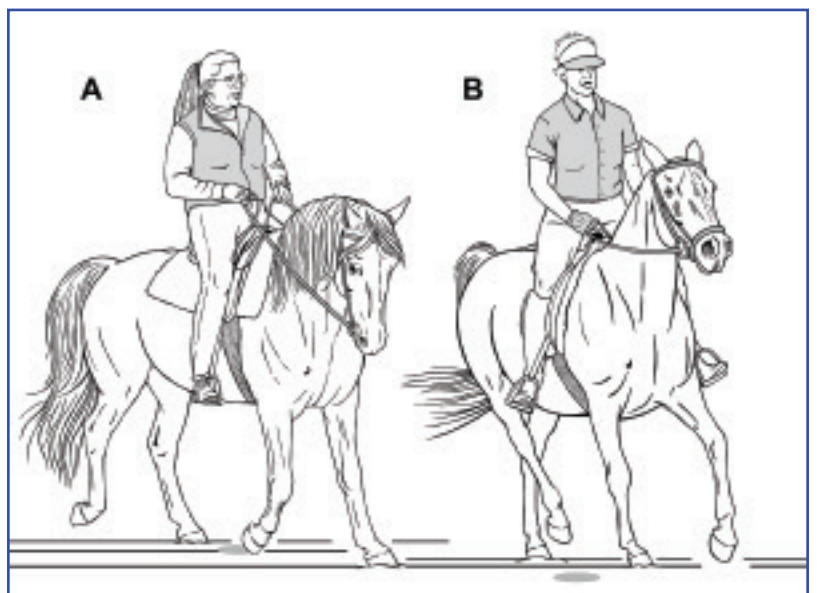


Fig. 14. Physics principles come into play when the horse turns at high speed; to counteract centrifugal force, the horse must lean in toward the barrel to some degree. However, the winner still bends correctly. She does not sacrifice speed because of loss of traction or because power is primarily supplied by the front legs, and she can also track a path tighter in to the barrel. Raw speed is not what wins a barrel race; turning ability is what makes the winner.



BOGUS IDEAS IN HORSEMANSHIP

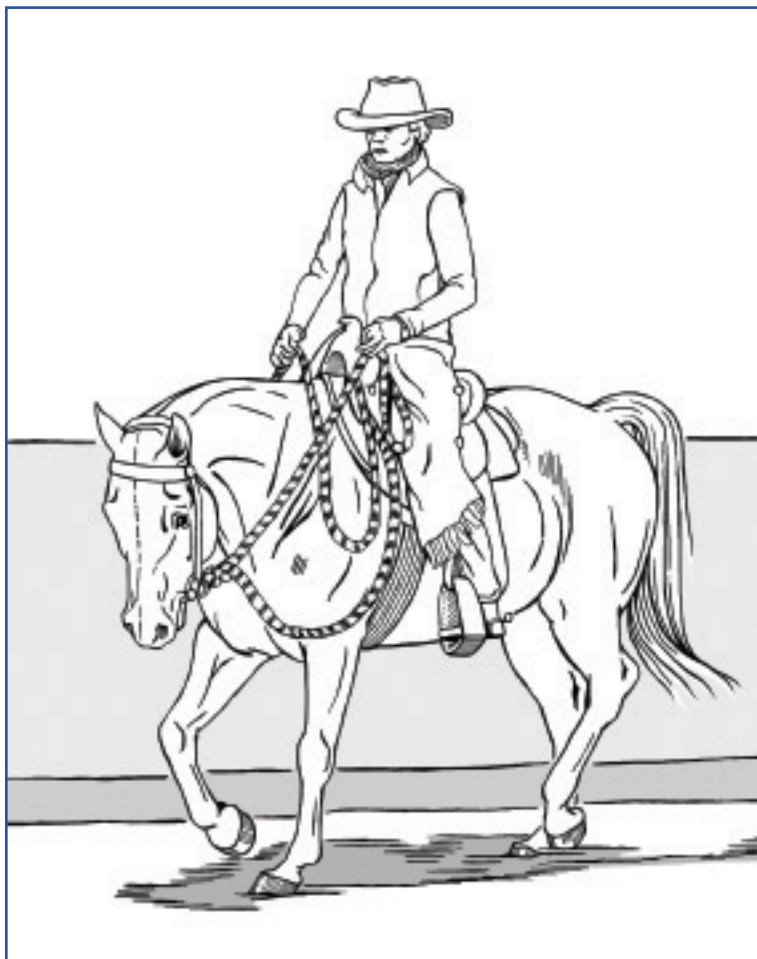


Fig. 16. Here's another student. After studying the previous image, you will probably pick up on the fact that although they are of lesser degree, they are the same thing: this horse is still "falling in," still not sufficiently bent, and is therefore cutting the corner. This rider is quite experienced; she sits well and uses her hands correctly, and the horse's expression is better than Fig. 15B. However, I had to tell this student to quit trying to ride with her toes facing forward. Observe her foot "floating" above the stirrup tread, the result of her pinching with the knee—and by now you know why that knee pressure sneaks in there. I coach this student via my online Forum; she brought the horse to someone we respect and he told her, "the horse does not understand the leg and to a degree he fears it and resents it"—and he suggested that she go back through her groundwork, putting special emphasis on teaching the horse to understand and accept thumb pressure in the leg and girth area. I would also suggest practice riding to a target and riding after cattle.



Fig. 17. This is a really cute image of Canadian student Adam Till on his Icelandic gelding Tindür. This is the same horse that was going crooked in Fig. 6B—falling in—dropping a shoulder – while being longed, but he sure isn't going crooked here. When a horse hooks on, a line of spirit-energy materializes that connects his inner being to the inner being of the creature he has hooked onto. The calf moves forward, that pulls on this "thread," and the thread pulls the horse straight. This is the deep way to teach a horse to carry himself and his rider straight. Both this way and the physical way have their place, but the deep way is more important and more powerful (photo by Sue Loosely, courtesy Adam Till).