



Bending for Straightness

Ground Exercises to Help Your Horse Hold a Circle

Longeing In Balance Part 2

Once you and your horse have mastered the basic release techniques at rest and at a walk, it's time to put the horse's balance and flexibility to work, executing a series of in-hand serpentine that ask him to bend from tail to nose. This helps the horse practice the posture of self-carriage. He's not just tipping his nose and bending his neck in the direction he's turning, all the while falling onto his forehead and leaning into one or the other shoulder while his hindquarters counter-balance.

By helping him release tension at the poll, neck and shoulder in motion, we have made it possible for him to bend correctly, driven from back to front in a simple demonstration of impulsion. His spine is nice and supple and our gentle but stable connection with his head allows us to "waggle" our way into contact with all the joints from poll to tail. We'll put all these to work to create a really correct bend.



Bridger demonstrates a nice left bend, with Della walking in the inside position. Her torso is turned in at a slight angle for a shallow bend on a big, soft circle. Note: you might need more torso turn at first with your horse to help him understand what you're asking and to help unlock stuck areas that might interfere with his bend. This horse is familiar with this work and probably more responsive than your horse will be at first.

Lack of symmetry means one set of muscles and joints works harder than necessary, while another set does too little. Fatigue and wear make injury probable, if not inevitable.

The good news: it's relatively simple to remind a horse's proprioceptive system how to achieve straightness. Even horses with chronic lameness can achieve their own bodies' version of straightness, finding the best biomechanical solutions to minimize stress and maximize motion. Anyone, from beginner to expert and young to old, can master this simple in-hand method for ensuring correct bending.

Our goal is a horse that maintains straightness on a circle, with his hips following behind his shoulders so well that his inside and outside hind feet follow the tracks of the inside and outside front feet. When he accomplishes this, we know he is light on the forehead, neither falling to the inside nor the outside of the circle, and he is stepping through with an elastic inside hind leg and maintaining a straight hindquarter with a stabilizing outside hind.

This straightness, natural to the equine athlete, can become compromised in many ways. Lameness leads to compensatory movement habits that might prevent a horse from tracking straight. Weakness in the hindquarters can push a horse onto the forehead, and asymmetrical musculature tends to drive a horse onto one shoulder or the other. Guarding from an ill-fitting saddle or counterbalancing for a crooked rider also creates uneven posture, both at rest and in motion.

The result shows up in the horse's performance – crooked halts, cross canters, weak rollbacks, unbalanced takeoffs and landings over fences – and in the horse's long-term soundness.

First, connect with the horse by gently hooking two or three fingers down through the noseband just in front of the “T” formed by the cheekpiece. (Refer to the previous article for a photo if you need a reminder.) Then, standing so that you can easily see the horse’s hindquarters, gently waggle the horse’s head left and right of the centerline, watching to see the top of his croup also moves back and forth.

Next, take up a position on the left side of your horse at about the middle of his neck, facing forward. From the waist up, turn your torso left, orienting your back toward his shoulder while keeping a light connection with the noseband and slightly lifting your right elbow so your arm creates a shallow arc. Note your horse’s reaction. If your release efforts have worked, he’ll relax at the throatlatch so his nose turns slightly left, while his neck and shoulder release to move slightly away from you. He should weight his right foreleg, preparing to step forward with his left fore.

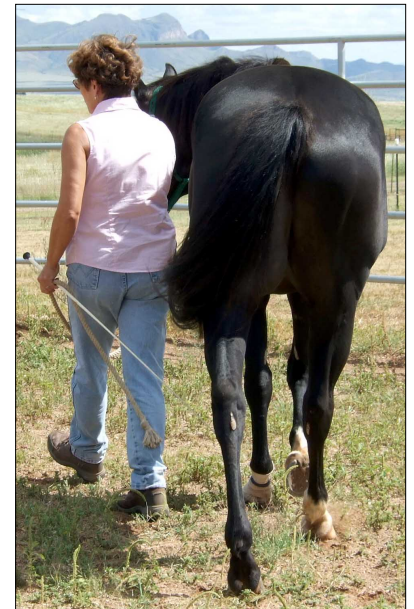
Now, waggle gently and start walking a large circle. You’ll have to step across with your left leg, crossing over the midline of your track just like you want your horse to do. Your right foot is the stabilizer for this effort, just like your horse’s right hind stabilizes him as he steps through. Keep your torso turned toward the middle of the circle you’re walking and continue to cross over each step while sending your horse’s nose around toward his tail.

It’s helpful to imagine a line actually creating a circle from your horse’s nose to his tail. To avoid getting into a position where you are pulling your horse, producing a braced topline that inclines him to fall on his forehead, you must stay inside this imaginary line. Think of pushing your horse gently but firmly around the circle, not pulling him.

Notice that while your torso stays turned to the left and your steps cross over to the right, your horse maintains some arc to the left. When you straighten your torso and walk straight ahead, your horse abandons the arc and comes along with you. And if you straighten your torso while still crossing over your step or while pulling your horse around the circle, you can feel him fall heavily onto the forehead and brace into one or the other shoulder. It takes some practice to maintain the torso turn for more than a few steps, but that’s what creates the lightness and bend.



Now Della is on the outside of the circle, helping Bridger as he steps across with his left foreleg to start a right bend. She’ll follow through by moving a bit farther in front of her horse’s nose and bringing her left shoulder forward about another foot until she is parallel with the line she is walking.



Here’s the left bend from another perspective, where you can see Bridger is following the arc from back to front. Della’s back is oriented toward his shoulder and her left foot is stepping across her right. Can you see that Bridger’s left hind will step across toward the middle of the track, as well?

This is what I call the “inside bend” position, because the handler walks a track that is inside the horse’s circle. Practice until you can do the inside bend from both sides, sending your horse around you lightly to both left and right.

In our serpentine exercise, it won’t be practical for us to stop and change sides every time we want to change bend and direction. So now we need to practice an “outside bend,” in which the handler walks a slightly larger circle than the horse.

For this, you’ll again start on the left side, with two or three fingers of your right hand connected down through the noseband. Then you’ll take up a rather unorthodox position, moving up the left side of your horse until you’re standing just ahead of his nose. Turn your torso right until you are standing parallel with the horse.

Now, visualize that line from the horse's nose to his tail. This time you're going to stay just outside that line, but generally parallel to it. You'll walk with your torso facing the center of the circle and your right foot stepping across in front of your left on the track. Turning your hips a bit to the left (yes, opposite your torso) helps you walk without interfering with yourself.

Again, you must think of gently pushing your horse's nose around the circle toward his tail. As soon as you revert to pulling, you'll feel immediate resistance as his back tightens in response. You'll also feel more weight on your right hand, as the horse transfers weight to his forehand – just the opposite effect we want.

Practice this outside turn from both sides, taking time to monitor your horse's response to this invitation to bend on the circle.

Now it's time to combine the two exercises into one, walking big, soft S-shaped turns with the horse bending and tracking correctly both directions. It can be a bit of a challenge at first to move your body from one leading position to the other, from inside to outside, but with practice you'll be able to do it smoothly.

At first, it may be helpful to stop before you transition from one bend and direction to the other. So do a left-bend circle from inside, then straighten the horse for a few steps by straightening your body and halt. Then, move to the outside bend leading position to create right bend and walk on from there. After you complete as much of a circle as you'd like, once again take the horse straight for a few steps, halt, and reposition to the inside position for left bend. You get the idea.

Once you have mastered changing leading positions through a halt, try it with a bend, then a few straight steps, then a new bend direction. Eventually you should be able to make the change from one direction to the other without the halt or the straight step, weaving from one bend to another in the serpentine pattern are as smoothly as a quiet stream of water. You'll find this suppleness translates to mounted work, and you'll be preparing your horse for the next step, offering the correct bend on a long line, in transitions and across a pole. *Stacey Kollman*



Here's a front view of that right bend, so you can see Bridger's entire body is on the arc of the circle. Visualize that right hind foot stepping right into the track left by the right front.

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