



Access the Elements of Self-Carriage

More Ground Exercises to Help Your Horse Hold a Circle

Longeing In Balance Part 3

Once your horse is moving forward without bracing and bending both directions softly, you can easily start asking for even more balance by accessing and exercising the muscles of self-carriage.

The first exercise follows the progression of release exercises that we started with in Part 1, adding a gentle belly lift to the series that also includes bringing awareness to the throatlatch, shoulder and neck. We'll move to the next stage by working with horse's barrel, asking him to start involving his ribcage in bending and lifting. We'll encourage deeper breathing by bringing awareness to the intercostal muscles and we'll help the horse lift the base of the withers by working just behind the shoulderblade. In addition, we'll help engage the abdominals to help him lighten and him step under from behind.

To start, take contact with the noseband of the halter by hooking two or three fingers down through the noseband just in front of the cheekpiece connection. Use your release series at the throatlatch, shoulder and neck on both sides to get the horse focused and soft. (Review the techniques if needed.) Then it's time to ask for the next piece, for the horse to engage his abdominal and intercostal muscles to help elongate and raise his back.

To unlock this area while the horse is standing still, stand parallel to the horse's left side and place your right hand and forearm against the horse's side, perpendicular to the spine at the base of the withers. Push gently into the horse's side while sliding



your arm and hand forward toward the horse's shoulder. You should see the muscles just behind the scapula bunch up. Stand evenly on both feet, take a breath into your lower back, bend your knees and press in and up, holding this position for two to five breaths. First you'll probably feel your horse brace against you. Meet the pressure and wait for the horse to release, lifting his back and shifting his ribcage away from your pressure. He may feel like he needs to move his feet to do this; quietly follow him, maintaining the pressure if you can.



Then, on an exhale, slowly lower your forearm to the original position and stop pressing, but keep the connection with the horse's side. (As a rule of thumb, think of releasing the pressure twice as slowly as you applied it.) Repeat the exercise on both sides until the horse yields his ribcage and lifts his withers at least a little bit. This is a great release for horses who breathe shallowly (similar to a person who breathes only into her chest instead of accessing her diaphragm) and you may notice your horse sighing, inhaling more deeply than usual, yawning or other signs of letting go. Watch your horse's flank area to see whether an increased expansion and contraction there tells you the breath is getting back that far.

Now, it's time to put our release exercise into motion. If a horse is really sticky when asked to yield his ribcage in motion, you might need to use the forearm rib lift again in motion. Most horses, however, will respond to a bit more subtle lift after the initial unlocking. Be sure to stay balanced on both feet; because you're still facing the horse's side while you're walking, you'll need to step across and a bit forward to put this exercise into motion.

With your left hand connected to the halter noseband, stand next to the left side of your horse facing just slightly

diagonally – try aiming the middle of your chest to your horse’s right ear. Spread the fingers of your right hand wide and put a slight curve into them. Place that hand on your horse’s side two-thirds to three-quarters of the way down from his spine and just behind where your leg would hang if you were mounted. Remember to stand evenly on both feet, bend your knees slightly and breathe into your lower back.



Firmly and evenly touch the horse with the heel of your hand and the pads of each finger. Adjust your pressure until you feel through the hair, the skin, the fat layer and superficial fascia to the horse’s ribs. (This takes less pressure than you might expect. Try it on your own body for a reference.) Lifting from your legs, smoothly and evenly rake your hand in a diagonal line upward and a bit forward,

toward the base of the withers. You’re influencing the muscles between the ribs and moving the hair, skin and superficial tissue, sort of pushing it into a little wave ahead of your hand. Notice what happens to the horse’s alignment and his posture. He should bend a bit at the ribcage and lift at the withers.

Once you have a feel for this movement at rest, try it with your horse in motion. Remember to lift with your legs; relying on your upper body will quickly fatigue you and won’t have the same effect on the horse. And when you can do the rib lift from the left side of the horse, switch sides. On the right side of the horse, you’ll face toward the left ear and use your left hand to rake.



Now, let’s put this lift together with the other releases that help make it possible. First release the throatlatch, then the shoulder, then rake up the ribcage to raise the back. (You’ll notice we don’t do the neck release in this series; I’m assuming your horse has started to choose to evenly bend his neck when prompted to soften at the throatlatch and shoulder.)



So after the shoulder release, spread your fingers and place your hand on the horse’s ribcage, remembering to stand evenly on both feet, bend your knees slightly and breathe into your lower back. Rake up and forward, encouraging the horse step forward and a bit laterally across the midline. And be sure to step evenly on both feet and send the energy forward and laterally. (If you face too much to the side or the back, you won’t get much impulsion.) Continue the exercise for several steps, noticing the horse’s posture and balance. You want him to start moving lighter on the forehand and stepping through behind. And, of course, be sure to work from both sides of the horse.

Practice the release series from both sides of the horse until you can unlock your horse’s forehand easily with a very slight touch at each of the release points. You’ll find your hands-on aids become more and more subtle as the horse learns to choose this softer carriage on his own. If your horse doesn’t seem to be able to release at a point, it might be time to contact your bodyworker for a massage or adjustment.

Remember, the goal is for your horse to learn to longe in balance. The basics you have practiced so far set the stage for that. *Stacey Kollman*

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