



Virtual Clinic with Markus Holst

Practical Exercises For All Disciplines

By Markus Holst with Kip Mistral

Lesson III of III Developing Suppleness and Bending

For our final lesson in the series, we will ask our horse to walk forward and laterally at the same time on a small circle. As the horse walks forward on the circle with his forelegs, yet is asked to making a curving turn by yielding his hindquarters to the rider's inner leg, his hind legs must walk on a circle almost twice as big as the front leg circle. In doing so, he must turn his inner hip forward, taking a longer step with the inner leg to reach the point of weight. This is a bending that is visible even through the neck when performed correctly.

Over time, and performed on both sides, this type of lateral exercise is invaluable to help the horse stretch his outer back muscles and outside hip and learn to balance on his inner hind foot, which helps his coordination. The ability to bend his body is the result of becoming supple and can be a test of obedience if the horse does not willingly obey your leg, or finds it more difficult to stretch one side of his body, which is very normal. For this reason, it is important that the rider should not try to force the horse to bend.

About Bending and Aids For Bending...

The main aid for lateral exercises is the pressure of the inside leg to "bend" the horse. Think of riding the bending, curving horse as if you are looking at the curve of a banana. No matter which direction you ride, inside the horse's curve is your inner leg; outside his curve is your outer leg.

If at first he doesn't bend, keep asking with your inner leg until he does. Worry less about the perfection of your

horse's bending than about the perfection of his obedience. The bending and suppleness will come, when your horse is obedient and willing to move forward, and laterally, at the same time.

I call the two following exercises "First Barrel Dance" and "Second Barrel Dance" because we use a barrel to serve as a center for the exercise. A barrel provides a comfortable diameter to circle around, and is moveable so you can place it where you have clear space all around it.

Virtual Clinic Lesson III: First Barrel Dance

In the first barrel dance, the front legs do no yielding. The horse should not cross his front legs, but instead just walk forward on a small circle around the barrel, with rather small steps. The hind legs take longer steps on their larger circle. This is a much more forward exercise than it may at first appear and should not be confused with teaching the side pass. Our goal is to use only one aid, the inner leg, which asks the horse to move his hindquarters laterally.

Bring your horse's shoulders beside the barrel, about three feet out. If you keep the horse's shoulder beside the barrel, you can be sure that he is following your forward aid and that his front legs do not cross over.

Using your inner leg as a base aid, ride him round the barrel with the hindquarters on a slightly larger circle. At all times, his inner shoulder should stay beside the barrel about three feet out.

Repeat on both sides.



Photo Courtesy of Markus Holst

Markus rides Diamant, whose outer foreleg steps forward and inward as he walks forward around the barrel, with a nice inside bend.

Important: This exercise can be strenuous stretching for horses that are not used to it. If your horse is stiff on one side,

he may resist the bending because it may be uncomfortable.

If your horse is struggling with this exercise, don't try to ride a whole circle. Ask for a quarter circle instead, just a few steps at a time. Praise him when he tries for you!

Don't ask for more than two or three rounds at a time.

Short exercise periods make the horse more willing to work, as he knows there is an end to the session if he does well. After a couple of rounds of each side, ride away from the barrel to do other things, and then later return to the barrel for a few more rounds.

Troubleshooting:

At first it is unlikely that the horse will perform the exercise well enough to stay close to the barrel. You will find the barrel in front of, or maybe under, your horse's nose, or beside his hip, or beside your leg. The horse's different positions with respect to the barrel during the turn show his different attempts to understand, or perhaps disobey, your aids, especially if you have not done lateral work with him before and he is not sure of yielding to the leg. If he:

- walks forward around the barrel with shoulders about three feet away and hindquarters walking forward and laterally on a larger circle, without problems, he is going like a pro. Congratulations!
- faces the barrel as he moves sideways, he is not forward enough. He is turning his hindquarters out without walking forwards with his forelegs. Check whether you are using your outer leg. If you are, he will think that you want him to go forward into the barrel. This is a standard problem



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the first times one rides this exercise, and demonstrates why I prefer this larger turn around a barrel, than the traditional “turn on the forehand” exercise where the inner foreleg stays on the same place. The best thing to do is to take the correct position beside the barrel, and start all over. When the horse understands that the exercise asks him to walk around the barrel, not into the barrel, he will begin to bend nicely.

- gets in front of the barrel or keeps it beside his hip, he is pulling on the bridle too much and pushing forward with his hind legs because he is resisting or can't manage the lateral movement easily. This horse either does not have an obedient mouth and needs more of the counted step exercise of Lesson I to learn obedience, or he cannot understand the difference between the aid of one pushing rider's leg as we are using in this exercise to request lateral movement, and the aid of two pushing rider's legs which request forward movement.

Normally I just stop this horse with my rein, and when he stands, I turn him with my inner leg, supported by the whip if necessary, and ride him back to the barrel for continued exercise. If this won't work and he still doesn't understand your inner leg, you can face him into a fence so he cannot walk forwards. Then, try to turn him with your inner leg. In this case, we make it impossible for the horse to “escape” forward, and he has to listen. Praise him when he turns!

It is not important to always perform a perfect exercise. The horse cannot learn if he can't make a mistake. If we won't let him do wrong, we cannot reward him when he does right. To do “wrong” is the horse's way to test the exercise. If we won't let him do wrong, he will not dare to experiment with new exercises, either. He will soon prefer to get the reward – that is, to do the exercise the way we want him to.

Virtual Clinic Lesson III Advanced Exercise...the Second Barrel Dance

The beauty of the advanced “dance” is that it requires just one additional aid. You already have the hindquarters to the side, so now give the shoulders a new direction. That creates a shoulder-in, which is the most effective exercise to create obedience and suppleness.

As your horse is quietly, correctly circling the barrel in the first barrel dance with his forelegs walking forward, and hindquarters walking laterally on a slightly larger circle, con-



Photo Courtesy of Markus Holst

In this photograph, Diamant steps laterally with his inside hind leg, but resists fully stretching his muscles to bend correctly. Therefore, his inside hind leg does not reach far enough under his belly to reach the point of weight, which in turn limits his forelegs to taking short steps with no forwardness.

tinue asking for the bend with your inner leg and now use your inner rein to “push” his shoulder out so he walks out on a larger circle, or out on a straight line while maintaining his bending. Correctly performed, you should see a very nice shoulder-in-like, lateral walk that stretches the horse's shoulders in addition to his hindquarters.

In both these exercises, you need no outer rein or leg aids until you want to stop the lateral movement, unless the horse is evading your aids or doesn't understand them. For instance, we might sometimes need an outer rein to straighten the horse up if he “overbends.” If the horse can't make his standard evasion, he has to think, and soon the understanding and obedience will come. However, such a “negative aid” should be used sparingly.

Commentary...

Kip:

After Val learned to like the precision of the counted step exercise, I know he began to take a lot more interest in being obedient, but he found the first barrel dance very confusing and difficult at first. At first he didn't really try to bend, and took my inner leg aid to mean he should fall off the circle and walk off into the desert. When I persisted, he tried walking into the barrel. This told me he didn't really understand my leg, and/or didn't want to obey it. It was also clear that he found the bending much more difficult on the right circle, which makes sense because his left side is somewhat stiff due to two injuries, and that was the side that was being stretched. He showed quite a bit of resistance on that side, in fact. Once he understood what I was asking, he still resisted the exercise and clearly found it tiring mentally and physically. As usual, your “simple” exercise was more difficult than

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it seemed...

Markus:

You describe problems that riders normally have training the traditional turn on the forehand exercise. To yield away from the barrel is another form of the same problem as when the horse faces the barrel; he is not walking forward with his forelegs. It is common that horses and riders alike think of the inner leg as an aid that moves the whole horse laterally. However, that leaves the rider no way to move only the hindquarters of the horse. So you and Val are experiencing both a steering and a lack of forwardness problem, which was the topic we discussed in Lesson II. In the first barrel dance exercise, we want the inner leg of the rider to move the hindquarter only; that is, to command the inner hind leg to lift and step under the body. If the horse follows this command only and keeps on walking forwards with his fore legs, he is forward, and the result will be a dance around the barrel.

Val's resistance may show that he is not familiar with the exercise. He is likely not sure what to do and what will happen. It takes self-confidence to relax, and of course he lacks self-confidence when he has to do an exercise to the difficult side. So he actually just shows that he is a normal horse, by not relaxing.

Since this exercise is new for you, too, Kip, you may be over-controlling Val with the reins without realizing it. With too-tight reins, no horse can bend. Try giving him his head so he can bend. Relaxed suppleness is the goal of the exercise, but don't focus on it. The bending will come when Val understands the exercise and is relaxed enough to be supple.

Katie:

I tried the first barrel dance and found it challenging! My mare Laullie knows shoulder-in, but is not always forward during the exercise. I found that we were doing shoulder-in around the barrel and then the exercise would develop into a leg yield. So I stopped, tried again and found that Laullie was losing her outside shoulder instead of walking forward with her forelegs. I stopped again and did several steps of shoulder-in. It was difficult to maintain this throughout the whole circle, especially a circle that small. Laullie tends to be stiff to the left, so I feel this exercise will really help with the bend-

ing and suppleness that we sometimes struggle with.

Markus:

This common problem, where the horse "drops," or "loses" his shoulder instead of correctly stretching and bending his body around the turn, becomes quite visible in the forehand turn of the first barrel dance. When the rider asks the horse to walk forward with his forelegs and yield with his hindquarters, the horse "overbends." That is, he follows the rein with his head but then he doesn't follow his head with his shoulders. He spreads his forelegs, pushing sideways with his outer leg to pull his body around the barrel without bending his body and stretching his inner hind leg forward and underneath the point of weight. These compensatory or evasive actions result in a wide, slow turn with no forwardness.

To correct her overbending, straighten Laullie by shortening your outer rein and pushing her forward again. Try not to use pressure from your outer leg to straighten her, because she will not learn to obey your inner leg if you use your outer leg at the same time. Once Laullie understands that you want her to bend her body and step underneath herself to get around the barrel, give her more rein and see if she will stretch and bend naturally, instead of los-



Photo: Kip Mistral

Here Laullie steps under herself well with her inside hind leg. She is farther from the barrel than three feet. However, Katie is circling her to the left which is stretching her stiff side, so in this first attempt at the exercise, it is difficult for her to bend correctly and naturally to the left.



Photo: Kip Mistral

Laullie walks correctly forward around the "barrel." The outer rein is a bit tight, which prevents Laullie from bending freely (but also may keep her from dropping her shoulder until she learns and accepts the exercise).

ing her shoulder.

This issue also demonstrates how difficult it can be to control a single part of the horse's body, for example the hindquarters, but we must be able to do it if we want to exercise the horse correctly.

Conclusion

At the end of this article series, I would like to thank you for following along. I hope you enjoyed trying these exercises with your horse along with Kip and Val, and Katie and Laullie. Also, I would like to leave you with this important thought. Always stop the exercise of the day when the horse is doing well and you have reached the goal; this is always the best reward for the horse.

Remember to enjoy your horse, and your riding! ■

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