



Virtual Clinic with Markus Holst

Practical Exercises For All Disciplines

By Markus Holst with Kip Mistral

Article II of III

Giving Clear Direction To Your Horse

Introduction

In this second lesson of our series, we use a simple exercise to see if you are giving your horse clear direction about where you want him to go.

That sounds easy, right? You might be thinking, "What is he talking about? Of course I steer my horse where I want to go and my horse goes just fine." Yet, I meet comparatively few riders, even highly experienced ones, who have fully accurate control over where their horse is going. And comparatively few horses are truly clear about the destination their riders think they are indicating for them. Yet, if your horse isn't heading to the spot that you have chosen, and he isn't placing his feet where you have asked him to, then he isn't performing the exercise you want him to.

You must be able to get your horse to the point you want, and not six feet to the left, or however much you might miss the point by. With a ranch horse working range cattle or a bullfighting horse, you can guess what six feet to the left can mean. With a dressage horse, six feet to the left means you miss your letter. And for the show jumper, it is just as obvious. And if we cannot steer our horse accurately in a calm riding arena, we cannot steer him with confidence in a challenging situation.

One of the benefits of giving clear direction is that it encourages the horse to be "forward." A forward horse is well-balanced in all gaits, easy to get into collection for "action" and eager to serve the rider. To be forward is to move toward and to something. Obviously, encouraging forwardness is a

critical building block in a horse's conditioning and training. Yet the horse can be forward only if we give him a direction. We can also be too reactive and over-steer a horse.

So how do you know when you are giving "understandable" direction to the horse that will accurately steer him toward the point where you want him to arrive? In this lesson we will practice how to successfully send a horse in a desired direction without under-controlling or over-controlling him. My simple "riding the line" exercise helps you 1) practice giving the horse a line to follow, and 2) learn to recognize when the horse does or doesn't follow the line you give him. You can combine "riding the line" with the counted step exercise you practiced in our virtual clinic last month. You can do it in the arena or wherever you happen to be.

Virtual Clinic Lesson II: Riding the Line

A great metaphor for the "riding the line" concept is found in the process of learning to ride a bicycle.

The first time you rode a bike, remember how undeveloped your balance was? In order to stay upright, you undoubtedly found yourself wiggling the handlebars wildly to compensate for your lack of coordination. You probably anxiously watched the ground through your tightly-clutched handlebars and over-corrected the front wheel with jerky movements to stay on course. The more you over-steered, unfortunately, the more you wobbled your bike and lost your balance. But when you stopped watching the ground and

eventually started looking toward your destination at the same time that you peddled, you found your handlebars magically straightened themselves and you could peddle where you wanted to go.

In succeeding in learning to ride that bike, you didn't master the bike so much as you mastered the line to your destination. You weren't sitting on the bike as much as you were sitting on the middle of the line you wanted to follow, the imaginary path you created to take you wherever you wanted to go.

So...don't think of yourself as sitting on the middle of the horse. Sit on the middle of the imaginary line that leads to your destination. As with riding the bicycle, as long as you the horseback rider follow that line with your body and weight, most of the time the horse underneath you will follow the line, too.

As with riding a bicycle, if you don't steer the horse precisely you will not end up accurately at your destination. On the other hand, if you over-steer the horse in trying to be too precise, you also will not end up accurately at your destination. Your awareness of your balance, your awareness of what your body is doing, and therefore what your aids are telling your horse, all come into play.

Choose an object about 15-30 feet ahead of you that your horse can walk over safely. It can be a pebble, a leaf, a footprint, a small hole or any other small thing.

Visualize a path to the spot, but focus beyond the object

to a point behind it as if you were riding a bicycle. Ride your horse over the spot, and if you have someone there to witness the experiment, ask your witness to see if the horse passes over the object with a hoof on each side. The idea is that the horse marches directly to the spot and over it. If you accomplish this the first time, congratulations!



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Tips About Creating Direction:

Remember the metaphor about riding the bike and think of the bridle reins in your hands as comparable to your hands on the bicycle handlebars. Be aware of how much steering you are doing.

Also, it may be an assumption on your part that somehow the horse knows your destination because you know you are heading him toward this spot you have in mind. Remember that the horse doesn't see your spot, and he doesn't know it's your destination. It's just a pebble or leaf on the ground, which means nothing to him because he walks on pebbles and leaves all day.

Commentary...

So...what happened when our students tried the Riding the Line exercise?

Kip: This was a very strange experience. When I ask my stallion Val to walk directly to a point that I am looking at, he wobbles like a "drunken sailor," and I have to keep straightening him with my rein and leg aids. When I let Val just walk forward, such as out on the trail, he doesn't wobble. What am I doing different?

Markus: This wobbling walk is the result of the horse not being forward. It is easy to over-steer and command, "Left-left-right-no-I meant left." It is much harder to give him clear forward aids from the beginning. Perhaps the reason Val doesn't wobble on the trail is that the path is obvious for both of you and then it is easy for Val to be forward. In the arena, the "trail," the spot you have chosen, is hidden from him and you must be more exact in your aids. Also, a horse must trust and respect his rider, to follow the hidden path. Maybe you are overdoing your aids and over-steering him, or maybe Val is overdoing his responses to your aids. I have seen horses that say, "Oh, we are turning. OK, let's turn!" and miss the destination spot completely as they keep on turning instead of awaiting the rider's next aid, or trying to find the spot the rider is aiming toward.

In riding outside the arena, much of the time it is obvious if you are heading in the right direction, for instance if you have to jump a fence, pass through a gate, follow a path, or some similar activity. But in the arena, we choose directions that are not obvious to our horses and many, if not most, riders forget to tell the horse what direction to follow. Then the horse cannot obey. It takes being given a clear command in order for the horse to be able to obey. When a rider forgets to command the horse, naturally enough the horse is confused, and if he is confused, how can he be obedient? So he is perceived as disobedient. This is the confusion that you feel when Val wobbles. You tell him a direction that he cannot see, and it takes a lot on his part to find the hidden path just by your aids, with no destination visible to him. It takes some commitment from you, the rider, to visualize the hidden path and communicate the line of direction to the horse.

Kip: Should I use the counted step exercise to break up the "journey" into small steps so he doesn't fall off the straight line so much?

Markus: That could be a good solution to try. But sometimes it is better to just give him energy with your aids to remind him of the last command, which was walk. Most of the time, that is the best way to get a horse forward again.

Katie: My mare, Laullie, has always been forward, sometimes too forward. So, I thought the riding the line exercise would be fairly easy since being forward helps achieve your goal. Wrong!

I chose a rock as my object ahead to do the exercise. I felt we were fairly straight until we got closer to the rock. I noticed the closer we got to the rock, the "wavier" Laullie felt. She still felt forward so I needed to figure out what I was doing wrong. I decided my problem was that I was focusing on the rock itself instead of looking beyond the rock, but still keeping it in focus. When I tried that, it did help with straightness. I do a lot of suppling exercises with Laullie such as shoulder-in, haunches-in and haunches-out. She has become very sensitive to my aids and sometimes anticipates them, which makes her crooked at times when I'm trying to be straight. I hope practicing the riding the line exercise will help me to achieve straightness. I find it to be challenging for myself as well as Laullie, and it most certainly requires focus on both our parts. By the way, Kip mentions having no trouble with Val's straightness on the trail. I have no problem on the trail with Laullie, either. Whether I'm heading out or coming home, she is straight. So we will practice the exercise in the arena and see if it improves our straightness there.

Markus:

Katie, it sounds like you and Laullie really have no problem with this exercise. Just remember, speed is not always forwardness. There is a big difference between heading toward something or escaping from something. Most "fast" horses that one sees in dressage and show jumping arenas are running away from something, often too much physical or mental pressure, not towards something. This actually demonstrates poor confidence on the part of the horse, but by mistake or ignorance, the speed is often considered forwardness.

Now, try combining this exercise with all your daily exercises, like shoulder-in, extended trot, change of lead and whatever else you do. If you can do all these exercises on the "path" you want, you are a good rider indeed!

Advanced Exercise

You might enjoy an advanced form of the "riding the line" exercise that I call the "wavy way" exercise. The principles concerning accuracy in creating direction and encouraging forwardness are the same, but you can now add in complexities such as picking points along a wavy line or a circle, making a large flower shape or writing your name in the arena dirt if you like...just remember to make the exercise pleasurable for you and the horse. You should avoid making tight turns for that reason.

When you find you have a problem with an exercise and cannot figure out what it is, check whether you are giving clear aids to your horse for direction, and be sure that the horse is heading toward the spot you have chosen.

Let me tell you about a horse in one of my clinics. He didn't like arena work and ran out of the arena several times. The rider told me she had the same problem with him at home. I observed that she did as many riders do. She gave little instruction; instead she kind of followed the horse where he went instead of commanding him. When no one told him what to do, he got anxious and didn't want to be in the arena. And as he reacted by trying to escape, she forgot to direct

him and just waited for him to escape so she could tell him not to escape. The whole situation made the horse anxious. I asked the rider to use forward aids when the horse started to run out of the arena. That made it better, as then the horse stayed in the arena. Then I told the rider to ride a big wavy way-like circle in the middle of the arena. This made a big change!

Why? As the rider clearly told her horse where to go, now he had a mission and she could reward him frequently in the arena. As the horse now got precise instructions about what to do in the arena that he could obey, he didn't mind being there. The simple exercise made it possible for the horse to deliver obedience and succeed every 25 feet, and the rider could reward him every 25 feet. That made the horse willing to work. After that, the horse had no trouble staying in the arena. In my last clinic, I saw the same horse and rider again. Now a very proud and noble horse did what his rider asked, with no attempts to escape. Since the previous clinic she had practiced the wavy way exercise, always heading toward something, and that made the difference.

Next Month

For our final lesson in the series, we will ask Val and Laullie to do some light lateral work around a barrel. This will test their ability and willingness to yield, bend, and stretch on both sides. All horses have a natural dominant side, which they prefer to use since it is easier. If they are not asked to strengthen and use the weaker side, the dominant

side continues to grow stronger and more flexible, and the other side stays comparatively weaker and stiffer. Teaching yielding exercises to supple and strengthen the weaker side is very important to help balance a horse and help him to become symmetrical. This practice also helps coordination. If a horse finds lateral exercises difficult, it is also quite a test of obedience.

See you next month...

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