

Get him going

Dressage training with Christine Weal

IF YOU WANT YOUR HORSE TO BE MORE FORWARD AND OFF YOUR LEG, THERE'S PLENTY YOU CAN DO TO GET HIM THINKING AND MOVING POSITIVELY. EVEN IF YOUR TIME IN THE SADDLE IS LIMITED, YOU'LL SOON HAVE A MORE FORWARD-GOING AND RESPONSIVE RIDE.

WORDS PIP Hume PHOTOS Show Circuit



Transitions create balance

Transitions are so important in making a horse more forward and brighter off your leg. Riding transitions within the pace will help to make the horse more responsive to the rider's leg and seat aids and will help with engaging the hind legs, making it easier for the horse to carry himself. The horse should be encouraged to extend the length of his stride while maintaining the same rhythm and balance. The difference in stride doesn't have to be massive, it just needs to be enough to get the horse to start developing his ability to lengthen and shorten his frame.

Try it for yourself:

Ride forward for a few strides, then return to a working pace before riding forward again. Keep a steady contact with the reins and encourage your horse to lengthen his stride by using a gentle leg aid. Bring him back with a gentle half-halt.

You will be amazed at how aware you become of the slightest delay in the responsiveness your horse offers. If he's listening to your aids, he'll make transitions smoothly without losing his balance,

popping his head in the air or interrupting his rhythm.

The upward transition from trot to canter requires that the canter be the same speed as the trot, so concentrate on making the first few steps of the canter come from the hind leg. Your hands must be still, maintaining the contact and not pulling back. Your horse must learn to round up from behind. Think of this as 'squashing' the horse up to the steady bit.

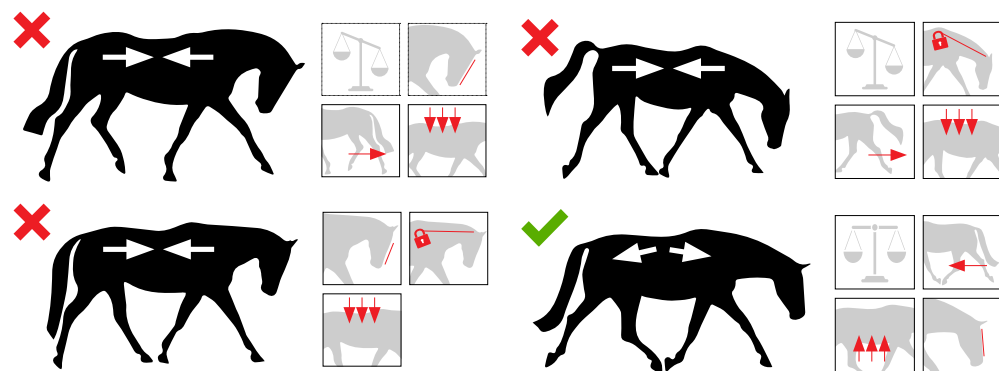
Once your horse understands this aid, he will arch his neck from the withers and reach forwards into the contact. This has the effect of lifting his back and allows him to bring his hind legs under. Once he does this a few times, let him stretch.

Problem spots

- **Rushing**
If the horse tries to run through your hands and speed up rather than lengthen, you'll need to use more outside rein to contain the energy.
- **Losing balance**
This usually happens because the rider is asking for more than the horse can offer - simply try asking for a little less.

Start with stretching

Start by aiming to loosen your horse through his back and along his topline. Try not to let him collapse or drop down in front. Even when stretching, his wither should remain higher than his back end, and his hind legs should continue to travel well forward under his body, rather than stretched out behind.



Try it for yourself:

In the early stages of a horse's training, the emphasis should be on the horse accepting the contact, rather than being in a frame. Concentrate on combining short spells of working into a steady contact with frequent intervals of stretching forwards and downwards. Allowing the horse to stretch his head and neck forwards and down while maintaining a light contact will help improve suppleness and encourage him to seek a soft contact. Ensure you have an even contact through both reins.

Next, try lengthening and shortening the stride within the pace - for example, while trotting, ask him to stretch out and give a few strides of medium trot. This will help to remove any excess tension or stiffness.

The horse must be the one doing most of the work. Give him an aid, then sit in balance in the middle of the saddle and keep a steady feel on the reins to help him engage. Before making any transition, either downward or upward, put your legs on and remind him to engage his hindquarters. Your legs give him the support he requires.

Remember to reward him with a few minutes of walking after five minutes, especially if he is not used to this kind of work.



Even when stretching, your horse's wither should remain higher than his back end, and his hind legs should continue to travel well forward under his body.

Flexion and bend

Circles are a great tool to improve flexion and bend.

To start, you need to teach your horse to flex at the poll, to the right and to the left. This is very subtle and doesn't mean hauling your horse's head from one side to the other. At the halt, flex your horse to the right by increasing the pressure very slightly with your right hand and allowing the same amount with the left. The horse should respond by turning his head to the right at the poll so you can see his right eye and nostril and the cheekpiece of the bridle. He should quietly mouth the bit, too. Even up the rein pressure, then repeat to the left. It is important to keep a soft hand that can follow the horse's mouth to ensure that the contact is consistent.

Following on from flexing your horse to the right in halt, now turn your upper body (hips and shoulders) to the right. You'll notice that your legs are automatically positioned with your outside (left) leg behind and your inside (right) leg down into the stirrup.

Mix it up so you are not just hanging onto the reins with the horse leaning. Establish bend on the circle, then straighten the horse and ride him forward on a straight line, then circle again, either on the same rein or after changing the rein.

Or circle away from the track, then leg-yield a few steps back to the track to push the horse more into the outside rein, then circle again. Make sure you're riding forward and ensure that the horse responds immediately to your leg and seat.



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4 Leg-yield to create suppleness

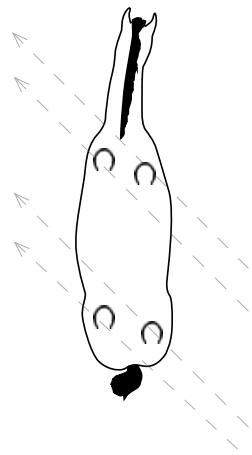
Leg-yield is a great suppling and engagement exercise that works the whole body. Being soft and supple through the body and neck allows your horse to bend without stiffness and to work freely without excess tension through his back and muscles. He can then perform movements and transitions more smoothly and with better balance, which leads to the development of strength and muscle. It will be become easier for him to engage his hind end and lift through his shoulders.

Leg-yield is a movement where the horse moves forwards and sideways at the same time, while keeping straight throughout his body. However, he is slightly flexed away from the direction of travel. So, if the horse is moving towards the right, he will be

looking slightly to the left.

The movement is an elementary lateral exercise that can be performed at either the walk or sitting trot, along the long side of the arena or across the diagonal. When changing the rein on the diagonal, leg-yielding helps get the horse onto the new outside rein and inside leg and keeps him thinking. It's a great movement for every horse, especially during warm-up at events, no matter the level.

When you practice riding leg-yield, it's important that you give yourself a definite start and finish point. If you don't have a target point you'll end up moving over more quickly on the rein your horse finds easiest and you won't even realise anything is different.



Try it for yourself:

To help your horse understand the movement, start on a 20m circle. Working on a circle will help you move the horse over and establish the idea of moving sideways off the leg. Spiral inwards, making the circle smaller until it is a 10m circle and then leg-yield back out to the 20m circle. Do this several times on each rein. When leg-yielding out, ensure that your horse is moving sideways, away from your leg. His body should follow the curve of the circle, with a slight flexion at the poll away from the direction in which he's moving, and you should just be able to see his inside eye and nostril.

Remember, you are pushing your horse off your inside leg into your outside rein. The outside rein helps guide the shoulders and maintain suppleness within the movement and must work together with your inside leg.

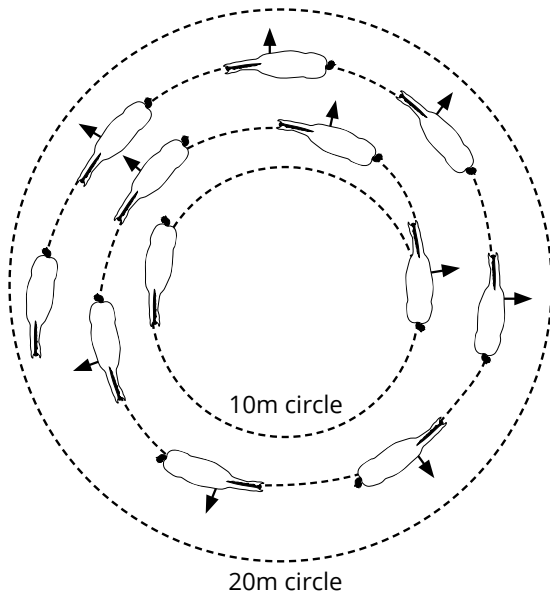
You can then add a few strides of

medium canter to make sure that the horse is staying in front of the leg, balanced and is adjustable, then come back to the 10m circle again to balance and collect him.

You can also introduce transitions whilst leg-yielding, for example changing the rein. Before X, make a transition to walk. Check that you can keep the same angle in the leg-yield in and out of the transition. Walk six strides, then transition into trot. This exercise helps you ride forward off your leg into the contact through the transition, encouraging the horse to step more under in the transitions and stay more balanced.

In the beginning, you will find one side easier than the other and this shows you how even the horse is off the leg and into both reins.

Remember that it's about quality, NOT about quantity.



If you (or your horse) are new to the leg-yield, it's best to start in walk. Only ride the leg-yield in trot when both you and your horse have the coordination sorted.



Problem spots:

- Hollowing**
 Just encourage him to soften by playing gently with the bit.
- Too much neck bend**
 Make sure your contact is even and that you have enough outside rein contact. You only need to see the corner of your horse's inside eye for the leg-yield, anything more and you are bending too much.
- Falling through the outside shoulder**
 Reduce the bend in the neck and keep your horse straight, using your outside rein and outside leg.
- Loss of rhythm and balance**
 It's easy to lose rhythm and balance so remember to ride forward into the movement and use half-halts to correct him and carry on. If he loses rhythm and balance, don't keep pushing him on because it will make the problem worse. The half-halt is my best tool if I need to ask the horse to really listen to me.
- Too much sideways movement**
 So that you don't get back to the track too early, set yourself a marker to ride to and keep riding forward throughout the movement.
- Too little sideways movement**
 Make sure you are not blocking the horse in any way, and apply a little more inside leg pressure.

Leg-yield is a movement where the horse moves forwards and sideways at the same time, while keeping straight throughout his body. However, he is slightly flexed away from the direction of travel. So, if the horse is moving towards the right, he will be looking slightly to the left.

Outside hand provides support and controls speed

Inside hand asks for slight inside bend

Outside leg controls the sideways movement

Inside leg moves behind the girth to ask the horse to move across



Every time the rider uses a hand or a leg aid, the horse must respond. Try not to nag the horse as he will eventually desensitise to your aids.

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Shoulder-fore

Shoulder-fore is the introduction to shoulder-in for horse and rider. In both movements, the horse's forehand is brought towards the inside of the track, while the hindquarters remain on the track. However, in shoulder-fore, less angle and less bend are required.

Shoulder-fore encourages the horse to take more weight onto his hind legs and step more actively underneath his body with the inside hind leg. It also helps to supple the shoulders.

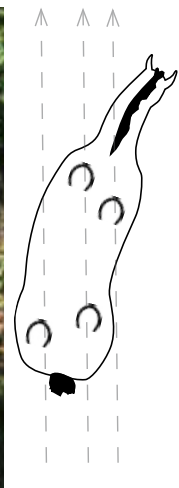
When you ride shoulder-fore, your shoulders should be parallel to your horse's shoulders. If your horse falls behind the leg and slows, or falls onto the forehand and rushes, half-halt and ride a circle to rebalance him and start again. Whatever gait you're riding in, try to keep a regular rhythm.

Try it for yourself:

Start with this exercise in walk and once you feel satisfied that you and your horse have a clear understanding, try it at trot.

As you come onto the long side of the arena, imagine you're going to ride a 10m circle in the corner, but as your horse takes the first step onto the circle make a half-halt and use your inside leg to ask him to keep going down the side of the arena. Use your outside rein to support your horse's outside shoulder.

Maintain the correct angle with your inside rein.



Shoulder-in

Following on from shoulder-fore, this is another lateral movement that is useful in helping your horse to become supple through his whole body. It also helps the horse collect and become more uphill and is a tool for straightening your horse.

Shoulder-in promotes control of the horse's inside hind leg, which is critical to the correct execution of several upper-level movements. The movement requires more than just bend as the horse is required to stretch the inside hind leg a little farther sideways than normal, which causes him to lower his inside hip in collection.

This movement is performed on three tracks. The horse should be slightly bent around the rider's inside leg and should be looking away from his direction of travel. His inside foreleg passes and crosses in front of his outside leg, while his inside hind leg is placed in front of his outside leg. The ideal angle of the bend is 30 degrees.

The goal is to have the neck supple, allowing the horse to be put in a position willingly without being forced.

Try it for yourself:

Ride a 10m circle, two or three times in the same place, at the beginning of a long side in the arena, following the rules above for flexion and bend. Then start another circle, but as soon as your horse takes the first step of the circle, half-halt and maintain the angle as your horse brings his forehand one

Make sure you don't ask for too much (or too little) bend when you ride shoulder-in.

Shoulder-fore is the mini version of shoulder-in. The rider asks for less angle and less bend in the shoulder-fore. The rider looks to the inside track and turns her upper body and shoulders where the shoulders of the horse are to be placed. The inside rein opens slightly and brings the horse's nose in, while the outside rein closes against the neck and brings the shoulder in.



Add in some leg-yielding or shoulder-in while out on a hack rather than in the arena to keep things varied.

Hacking out

Do plenty of hacking out of varied types. You can hack out for hours or minutes at whatever speed you feel like. I try to hack each horse out twice a week or use hacking to cool down my horses. It is beneficial to all horses even if it is just used as a bit of downtime for both of you. I always want my horses to finish their work in a relaxed easy manner after they have tried hard for me and a short hack is a nice way to do that.

Pace work

Pace work is great for improving your horse's fitness and is essential to both overall health and performance. If your horse is relatively fit, trot and canter up medium hills to improve the suspended movement. Don't overdo it - 15-20 minutes of trotting and relaxed pace work is generally enough. It's about getting the horse to stretch through his body and take a longer stride after

spending time in the arena taking a shorter stride, rather than trying to make him tired. Lots of walking and trotting up hills is great to improve strength in the back end, and it also helps with the horse's coordination and balance. Don't forget to work on straight lines or very gradual bends to help your horse find his own balance when doing hill work.



Pace work is great for improving your horse's fitness!

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