

#24 Straightness

ON THE FACE OF IT, you would expect that straightness would be among the easier things for a horse to have. Just put one foot in front of the other and you've got straightness, right? Even the basic definition makes it sound easy: straightness is when a horse tracks with his forehand in line with the hindquarters on both straight and bending lines and in all three gaits.

For example, you want to have your horse straight on the circle. While it sounds like an oxymoron, it really means that the horse's feet — front and back — straddle the line of the circle, which is straight in riding terms.

The definition sounds like a statement of the obvious, and I'm often asked why straightness is so deep into the training scale since new riders assume it's an easy task. You might think that it's like a horse being born with a natural sense of rhythm, but the opposite is true. Horses, as humans, are born naturally *not* straight.

The Lack of Straightness

To understand how this natural lack of straightness is possible, let's first examine the actual construction of a horse. It's common to think of a horse as shaped like a four-wheeled vehicle: symmetrical over an even wheelbase, with front tires directly in line with back tires. But, in fact, horses are built more like triangles, with a narrower front end and a wider back end. Have you ever tried to lead a horse out of a stall without opening the door the entire way? His shoulders made it through, but his hipbones probably bumped the doorframe.

Now add in left-brain or right-brain dominance. Just as humans are right-handed or left-handed, horses are naturally one-sided. The dominant side creates stronger muscles and the non-dominant side is looser, creating a natural imbalance in the same way that a right-handed person tends to have a stronger right arm.

This lack of straightness is called “natural crookedness.” Just as most people are right-handed, the vast majority (between 80 and 90 percent) of horses are naturally crooked to the right, meaning that when they track right, they move in a crooked manner. When a horse is crooked to the right, we say his body is stiff on the left and hollow on the right.

Several Kinds of Balance

There is an unbreakable link between straightness and balance. Balance is a tricky word and concept because there are so many variations, as described below:

NATURAL BALANCE is what a horse is born with and how he moves at liberty. Like people, some horses have better natural balance than others.

ADJUSTED BALANCE is how the horse takes into account the weight and movement of a saddle and rider.

LATERAL BALANCE is how the horse handles his weight as well as a rider's from side to side. For straightness, lateral balance is the focus.

LONGITUDINAL BALANCE is from front to back and from back to front, which is also affected by carrying a rider. Longitudinal balance is also an essential part of collection, which we'll get to in the next chapter.

▼ Horses are not symmetrical.



Why Is Straightness Important?

Training a horse to move straight is at the core of turning his natural gaits into trained gaits. In the big picture, a horse can never reach his full capacity of propulsive and carrying power if he isn't moving straight. If we allow a horse to continuously go crooked, he will incur significant wear and tear on one side of his body because he isn't using it evenly.

In a serious case, he will actually suffer injuries over the course of time. Imagine a professional gymnast who only trained on her left side. Her gymnastic potential would never be reached and she would sustain injuries from the right-side weakness. You need to think of equine athletes in the same way.

Straightness is a relative concept. The more correct and thorough your riding is within the context of the training scale, the more your horse can track straight, which, in turn, improves rhythm, helps looseness, evens out contact, and creates better impulsion.

How to Improve Straightness

Before you gear up to focus on riding your horse straight, it's important to recognize that, without the other elements of the training scale significantly in place (rhythm, looseness, contact, and impulsion), a horse will find it very hard to travel straight. The horse must be quick to accept the seat, leg, and rein aids. Even if you are working at a very basic level, you can still mix elements into your daily rides that will

help your horse develop better straightness.

Use Bending Lines

Since the overriding goal when working to improve straightness is to balance the muscles on the left and right sides of the horse's body, good training includes bending lines and other work that requires your horse to bend through the rib cage. Take note that while the term "bend

through the rib cage" is common in training, it's really the muscles that bend and stretch, not the bones themselves. The skeleton can't actually bend. (See page 118–123 on flexion and bend.)

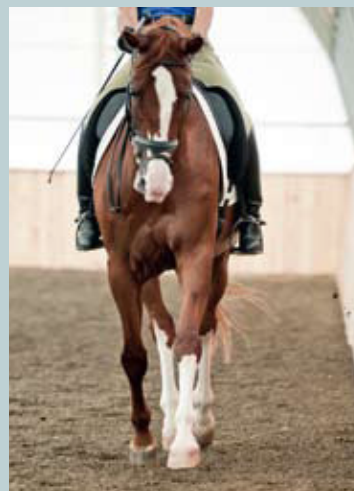
When riding bending lines, pay attention to whether your horse is falling toward the wall with his outside shoulder or falling in with his inside shoulder as you move off the track into the bend. Also take particular care about where your horse is

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Picture a horse who's tracking to the right and moving with his right hind foot inside the track of the right front foot. Biomechanically, he is not using his right hind leg very much. He's overusing his left hind leg and working harder on his left front leg, too. When the horse tracks to the left, the dynamics switch and he feels stiff in that direction because he lacks bend and flexion on that side of his body.

The rider feels this problem as an imbalance in her seat and unevenness in the reins. When the horse tracks to the right, he feels heavier in the left rein and has looser contact in the right rein, rather than having equal contact on both reins. Achieving equal contact requires a horse to be correctly balanced, and that means he must have muscles evenly developed on both sides of his body, which, in turn, requires straightness.

▼ Horses are naturally crooked, as seen on the left, and must be trained into straightness, as seen on the right.



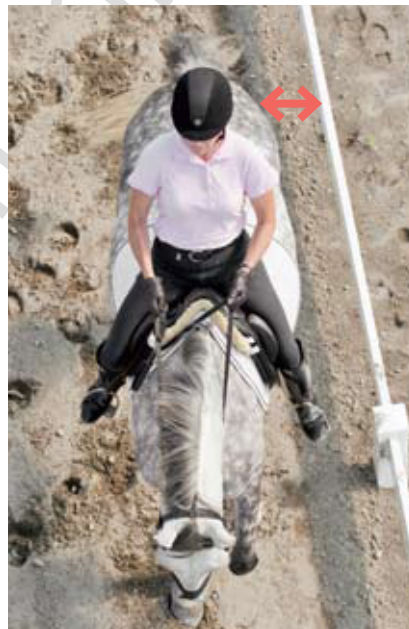
putting his back legs in relation to the front legs. They should be tracking in line with the front, not forming a new track. Think of it as riding on a railroad track. Even as that track bends, the horse must stay on the track with his shoulders and all four legs or he'll be derailed.

Work Away from the Wall

In your daily work, develop the simple habit of riding off the wall more than on it. This requires you to be thoughtful with your outside aids, as most horses appear to have a magnetic force pulling them back to the wall. Leg yields can be very useful for straightness, especially if you have your horse move off the wall and toward the quarter line. A counter canter is a more advanced movement, but it's very helpful for straightening a horse.



▲ Tracking crooked with haunches falling in



▲ Inside shoulder lined up with inside hip

LATERAL TERMINOLOGY

For the purposes of this chapter we'll dive a little deeper into dressage theory with a preview of lateral work. Shoulder-in is considered a straightening exercise, and involves riding your horse's shoulders to the inside at a 30-degree angle to the track. The hind legs stay on the main track.

Shoulder-fore, often thought of as a baby shoulder-in, is when your horse's shoulders are moved to the inside at a 15-degree angle. It's also a straightening exercise.

With all of these suggestions, always try to think of straightening your horse with your leg, not just your reins. Merely flexing the neck is the wrong way to use the reins. Your real goal is to get your horse more evenly into both reins by riding the body into straightness.

Advanced Straightness

At a more advanced level, achieving the desired straightness involves riding your horse's inside shoulder in front of his inside hip. With this more complicated idea, it's important that we ride the forehand in line with the hindquarters and not the other way around. Remember that impulsion comes from the rear engine; so does straightness.

This concept can be confusing because different trainers call it different things, but all mean the same thing. The common terms are "position-in," "in position," and "first position." Riding in this manner (inside shoulder in front of horse's inside hip) basically means riding your horse with just the slightest hint of shoulder-in. (See box below for more detail.)

By riding in the slightest hint of shoulder-in, you are asking your horse for just a bit of engagement of his inside hind leg. It is easiest to begin this work in the walk and trot. Canter is more difficult because your horse is always slightly bent at this gait.