

TRAINING MYTHUNDERSTANDINGS

Lateral Work: Progressing To Shoulder-In

by Nancy Wesolek-Sterrett, Dressage Department Head, Meredith Manor International Equestrian Centre

As a young horse progresses up the training tree, we add lateral movements to his repertoire of gymnastic exercises. Leg yielding and shoulder-in are basic lateral exercises that strengthen the horse's hindquarters, develop his balance, and stretch and 'straighten' his body by developing his muscles equally on both sides. To ride these exercises correctly, the rider needs to understand the corridor of aid pressures that asks the horse for a particular exercise. Then the rider needs to coordinate the application of those individual aids correctly, in the moment, for a particular horse at its current level of understanding.

Leg yielding (covered in a previous article) asks the horse to move forward and sideways at the same time while his spine stays parallel to the rail. Shoulder-in is the first lateral movement that asks the horse to bend through the ribcage as he moves on a straight line.

To perform a shoulder-in correctly, the horse must not only bend through his ribcage but also stretch his inside hind leg further under his body. As the inside hind leg stretches and reaches under the body, the horse's inside hip drops more than it does in a normal forward stride. This requires a greater muscular effort as the horse shifts his weight onto the inside hind leg and moves forward. So, as he works in both directions, the young horse gradually develops the stronger muscles he needs in order to engage his hindquarters, stay in balance and move straight along a track. For this reason, shoulder-in is also considered a collecting exercise.

Standing in front of a horse performing a shoulder-in, an observer should see the horse's feet moving on three tracks: the inside front foot on one track, the outside front foot and inside hind foot on a middle track, and the outside hind foot on a third track. If the horse is moving along a rail or wall, the observer will see the horse's shoulders moving at about a 30-degree angle to the wall. Another way to visualize this is to think of the horse taking the first step of a 10-meter (just a little less than 33 feet) circle then holding that 'shape' or degree of bend as he continues moving down the rail.

A young horse with underdeveloped muscles may try to evade the demands of shoulder-in by angling his shoulders out too far so he can leg yield on four tracks rather than engage, bend and move on three tracks. He may try to bend his neck without moving his shoulders away from the wall; a novice rider may also encourage this by asking with incorrect aids. Depending on his personality, he may slow down or quicken to avoid the new muscular effort. In the beginning, the rider's coordination of the corridor of aids for shoulder-in will be constantly correcting and adjusting the horse's position until his muscles develop enough that he is physically comfortable performing a shoulder-in.

Leg yielding on a circle is one exercise that helps the rider coordinate the aids correctly for a shoulder-in. As the horse travels on a circle, the rider gradually enlarges the circle by leg yielding or spiraling out. Once the horse does this comfortably, progressing to a shoulder-in along a straight line becomes much simpler.

It can be difficult for novice riders to 'feel' a correct shoulder-in. An eye on the ground or a mirrored arena can help the novice figure out just what a 30-degree angle looks and feels like (most novice riders attempt too great an angle when they begin riding shoulder-in). Again, think of the first step of a 10-meter circle but instead of continuing on that circle, hold the shape that the horse takes and continue riding parallel to the wall.

The rider should sit slightly heavier on the inside seat bone with the inside leg driving at the girth and the outside leg slightly back to keep the haunches from falling out. The

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rider should feel the horse's inside hip drop as he reaches under and across. At the first step of shoulder-in, the rider's torso and shoulders should begin to spiral as though they are riding a 10-meter circle. Then they should stay parallel to the horse's shoulders as the horse continues along the arena wall. The inside rein positions the head slightly to the inside. The outside rein redirects the horse's motion from continuing on a circle to going down the rail at a 30-degree angle from it.

Many novices make the common error of pulling on the inside rein to position the horse's head and neck, bringing the head and neck over to the inside rather than moving the horse's shoulders over. If the rider peeks down, the horse's neck and head should still be aligned with the center of the chest. If the neck is bent but the shoulders are still parallel to the wall, the rider has not coordinated the corridor of aids clearly in a way the horse understands. Remember, the shoulder-in is simply the first step of the circle. Go back to the basic circle when the shoulder-in falls apart. Try to maintain the circle shape and move the horse from your inside leg.

The rider must maintain correct hand position on either side of the horse's withers when asking for shoulder-in. A novice rider may cross her outside rein over the horse's neck in an effort to keep the horse from falling back to the rail. If the rider maintains a straight line from elbow to bit, she has a better chance at controlling the horse's shoulders and maintaining the shoulder-in. Many riders draw their inside leg up as they apply it. When this happens, they come off their inside seat bone and shift their weight onto their outside seat bone. Then, as their horse shifts his balance to compensate for the rider's shift, his shoulder falls to the outside, and then the rider usually ends up pulling on the inside rein in an attempt to maintain shoulder-in.

The rider must maintain energetic forward movement and a consistent rhythm when asking for a step in shoulder-in. If the rider does not maintain forward energy with a driving inside leg, some horses will shorten their stride to avoid dropping their inside hip and reaching under. If the rider does not use outside leg to keep the hindquarters in alignment, the horse may throw them to the outside and leg yield (four tracks) instead of performing a shoulder-in (three tracks).

When shoulder-in is not working, regroup by riding a circle. As the circle touches the wall, take one step along the rail and then go back to circling. Gradually increase to two steps along the wall, then three, etc. Go slowly in asking a young horse to increase the number of steps in shoulder-in. A novice horse or rider will increase in understanding of the aids with each attempt. □

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