



Go With the Flow: Structuring Your Training or Riding Session

In previous articles, I have described individual skills or movements, how to teach them to your horse, or how to perform them properly on a skilled horse. In this article, I'll describe how to organize those movements into an effective training session.

An effective riding or training session should maintain or improve your horse's skill level, while safely improving their physical conditioning. It should help a less-skilled horse learn new skills, and become better at executing them. It should maintain or improve a mature horse's physical conditioning, while fine-tuning the bond of communication between horse and rider.

Generally, the intensity level of an effective training session should follow the shape of a bell-curve, both physically and mentally. It should start with a warm-up that includes familiar movements that are easy for your horse to do, gradually progressing into more challenging ones, with the most difficult or least familiar being asked for at the apex of your session, about 2/3 to 3/4 of the way through it. All sessions should end with a cool-down that allows the horse to relax mentally, and to recover physically from the work-out.

The optimum length of a session varies from horse to horse, but typically no more than an hour for the whole process is a good rule of thumb. Keep in mind that you want your horse to have enough time to take in what you're asking of him, but not go on so long that he becomes physically exhausted or mentally frustrated.

When planning your session, decide which movements or skills you want to incorporate into it. Include familiar, easy ones, and newer, or

more demanding ones, according to the "bell-curve" format. (Remember, you want to challenge, but not overwhelm your horse, physically and mentally.) Think about the shape and balance of your horse's body as it performs each skill. Review the correct aids or cues to ask for each skill or maneuver that you plan to include. Understand and visualize the specific shape and balance of your horse's body as it moves through space with you astride, properly performing each movement.

Plan to start with a movement that establishes one or more elements of body shape or balance, that will be maintained as you add or modify others, that, when couple with your horse's momentum allows him or her to flow into the next movement. For example, you can use a balanced right circle, followed by a few steps down the short side and a bending turn right, to set your horse up to flow into a balanced leg yield to the left. Start by establishing an even flow of forward energy as you trot down the long

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side of your arena or work area. Then, circle right at the next corner, establish a slight jaw tuck to the right, softness in your horse's right ribcage, and an even lateral balance of your horse's weight, as you circle. Maintain the these elements, as you continue trotting down the short side. and through a right bending turn about 20 feet before the next corner.

As you head straight down the arena, paral-

lel to the long side, maintain your horse's forward momentum and the slight jaw-tuck to the right, as you allow your horse's ribcage to straighten partially, by moving your right leg back and opening your left rein a bit. Your horse should begin to cross his or her legs, right legs over left, moving diagonally left toward the long side, while his body remains parallel to it.

In this case you used the softness in your horse's right jaw and ribcage, (created during the right circle and bending turn), coupled with the forward momentum, (created as you came down the short side, and maintained through the bending right turn), to flow your horse into the leg yield, as you modified your right leg position by moving it back, and added the opening of your left rein. Having just finished your right turn also meant that your horse's weight was evenly balanced, or even slightly right, leaving his left side light, and open for movement in that direction.

Eventually, you can add another skill, such as a slight collection, and transition to right canter, after you reach the long side rail. Maintaining the slight right jaw tuck and softness in your horse's right ribcage from the leg yield to the left, you may add a change of leg to the left leg behind the girth, then breath and flow your horse into the transition. Your horse's momentum and balanced, upright position, enhances the process. You can transition back down to a trot as you approach the next corner, then repeat the exercise on the opposite end of the arena, then flow through a change of rein to go the opposite direction.

The variety and sequence of exercises that you can create in this manner are infinite. The exact skills or movements that you incorporate into your session depend upon your horse's skill level, work ethic, and conditioning. For ideas on structuring your training sessions, look at some training level dressage tests. (By the way, "Dressage" means "Training".) They are designed with the above idea in mind, as a means of making it as easy as possible for a horse to progressively learn more difficult movements. *101 Arena Exercises*, by Cherry Hill, also offers helpful ideas.

Using your own intuition and creativity, plan, visualize, and imagine each part of your session. As you execute it, don't be too mechanical. Instead, feel how your horse is responding moment by moment, and be ready to modify your aids or cues accordingly.

Riding and training at its highest level is an art, as well as a science, and requires as much feel as it does technique.

Next month, improving your connection to your horse through better feel!

Always remember to "Enjoy the Ride."

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