

WHOLE HORSEMANSHIP
By Dianne Lindig

The Value of the Circle

"I'm not sure why, but they make them do a lot of circles," my dad said, as my first horse, Buster trotted nicely around him on a lounge line. Years before, while growing up on his family's farm, most of Dad's experience with horses was in training them to pull a plow or wagon, not in training them to be ridden. In order to feel his way through this unfamiliar process, he watched and sometimes applied what others did with their horses, even if he wasn't sure exactly what the purpose of a particular exercise was.

As the years have gone by, I've done plenty of circling myself. In fact, my better half, Peter says, "If I had a dime for every time you've circled a horse, we'd be millionaires." He's right, which leads me to analyze why we trainers do so much of it.

After all, repetitive circling is not something that a horse is very likely to do out in nature, since it's not a very effective way to evade a predator, or to forage for food. Why, then, is circling fundamental to the development of balance and agility in the riding horse?

The value of circling lies not in simply making a horse go around and around something, but in the proper, balanced, execution of this complex exercise. When a horse circles properly, its entire body, from ears to tail, will bend gently around the circle. From above, the center line of the horse's body will look like a piece of the circle, (as in the diagram), as it moves forward with steady momentum and even cadence, and with minimal leaning inward. In order to accomplish this, the horse must do all of the following:

- 1) Collect vertically in order to engage it's core muscles and lift its back, and shift a great deal of it's weight, (and its rider's), into it's hindquarters and loin.
- 2) Tuck the inside jaw, without pulling its head too far to the inside of the circle.
- 3) Allow it's inside neck and rib-cage to relax and be slightly concave, while keeping its

haunches slightly toward the inside of the circle.

4) Keep it's whole body as upright as possible, relying upon the right combination of vertical collection and lateral flexion throughout its body to create proper balance.

5) Use its haunches, and especially its inside hind leg to drive its own weight and its rider's weight forward with even energy. (Impulsion).

Amazing that an exercise that looks so simple to us, in reality requires such intense effort and skill on the horse's part. With so much effort required of the horse, it is the rider's responsibility to give it all the help possible in performing this task.

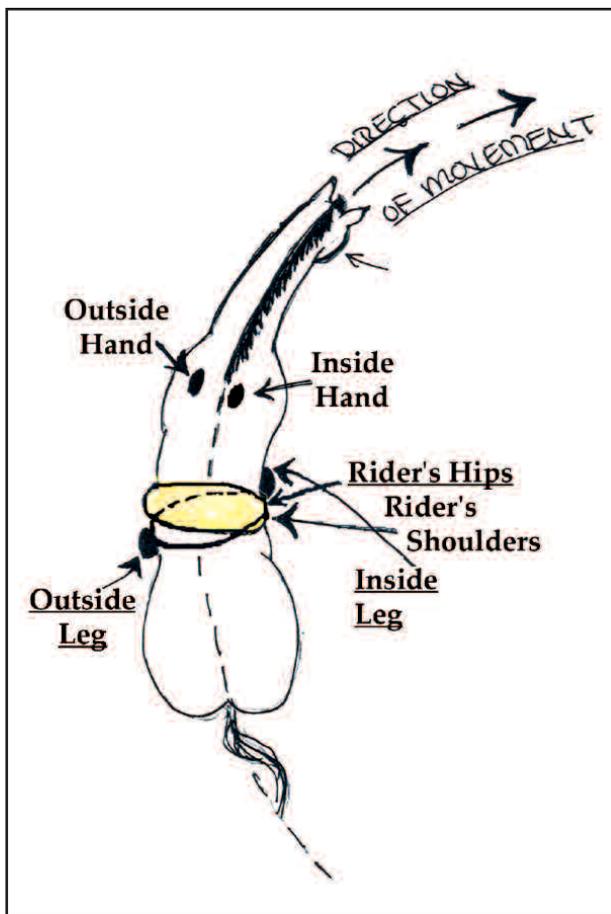
The diagram identifies the approximate proper position for each of the riders aids in this process. Here's what each one does, and how they work in combination with each other.

The rider's shoulders, (in yellow), must turn in the direction of the circle. (The smaller the circle, the more they must turn.) Meanwhile, the rider's rib-cage and body must stay firm and tall on the inside- no collapsing, or both horse and rider will be thrown off balance. The inside hand follows the shoulder back and moves toward the center of the horse's body, tucking the inside jaw, and encouraging slight concavity on the inside of the horse's neck. (It is important that this rein not be pulled too far toward the inside of the circle, since this will cause the horse to overweight the inside foreleg, stiffen its body, and slow down as it loses balance.)

The outside hand follows the outside shoulder forward, and is held slight away from the center of the horse's body, and slightly ahead of, (forward toward the horse's head), the inside hand. This moderates the inward bend of the horse's neck, and aids the horse's balance by keeping it from leaning inward or putting too much weight on it's inside fore-leg.

The exact position of the rider's hand varies slightly from horse to horse and between styles, but, the rider's hands should always be level with each other, and the outside hand should never be behind, nor below the inside hand, as this will destroy the horse's bend in the direction of the circle. If the horse needs to be guided towards the outside of the circle, the rider must increase their inside rein and leg aids, then open the outside rein toward the outside of the circle, not pull it down or back behind the inside rein.

The rider's inside leg lays over the girth, and helps keep the horse's inside rib-cage slightly con-



cave, as well as keeps the horse's weight and body lifted toward the outside of the circle. (This keeps the horse from leaning in or cutting across the circle, and helps to maintain the horse's forward momentum).

Meanwhile, the rider's hips were "left behind" as the rider's shoulders were turned toward the inside of the circle. This leaves the rider's outside leg a couple of inches further back on the outside of the horse's body relative to the inside leg. This puts it in just the right position to support the haunches, keeping them toward the inside of the circle. Should the horse start to disengage its haunches, stiffen its body, or lose impulsion, the outside leg can be moved back a bit more and additional pressure applied to correct this problem.

Just as it requires strength and skill to execute, circling is also a maneuver that develops and improves the horse's abilities in all of the above areas. The core strength, suppleness, balance, and impulsion that your horse develops through proper circling will translate into improved performance of other maneuvers. Take the time to train your horse, (and yourself!), to circle properly, and you will see it pay off in all areas of your horse's performance.

Remember to enjoy the ride! Dianne

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Photos by Emily Thomas