

Lesson Topic: Circles

Introduction

The instructor should realize that not all of the following information can be used in one single lesson. It would lead to information overkill and only confuse most students. In the warm-up, the instructor has to assess the student's ability and the possibilities of the horse/rider combination and decide in which area they need the most help. The instructor has to make appropriate choices for the situation at hand that will lead to a successful lesson and ideally will also give the student something to work with when riding on his/her own.

With a beginner student who doesn't yet have an educated seat, it would be quite in order to teach the correct geometry of the circle. Only when the simple task can be performed well should the instructor take it to the next level. For the beginner, it can be just as challenging to ride correct geometry as it would be for the more advanced rider to work on a more sophisticated seat. It is up to the instructor to decide on the level of progression.

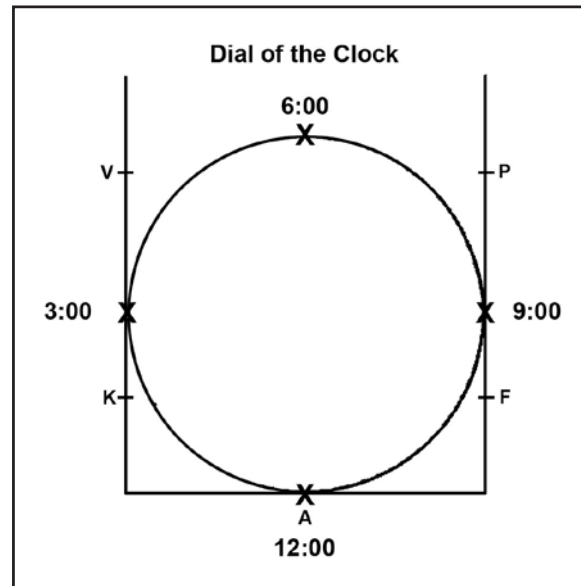
One thing, however, is certain. The position of the instructor in the arena is crucial to correct assessment and teaching: **on the outside of the circle.**

Riding a circle sounds simple; after all, we ride circles and go down the rail all the time in the dressage arena. Why is it then that we so seldom see really correct, round circles? Even a lot of FEI Level riders don't seem to manage to ride correct circles, and of course the quality of their work reflects this. If you know what to look for, the answer is simple: bend.

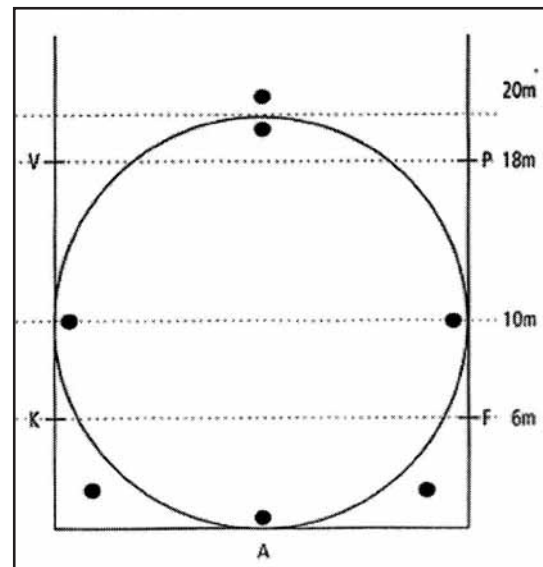
On a circle, the horse is required to go consistently on an even curvature. In the basic training and in daily warm-up, this is achieved first on a 20-meter circle. As the horse's balance and bendability progress, circles can vary in size down to a six-meter volte. Schooling the horse's bend in both directions is paramount for a dressage horse. The ability to bend and become supple in both directions is one of the key qualities of all lateral work and ultimately helps to straighten the horse and enhance collection.

It is very helpful if the horse has had correct work on the lunge line so that he knows how to balance himself on a circle without the rider. To achieve this, it is essential that the trainer is able to connect the horse reliably onto the lunge line to determine the size and shape of the circle. If this work has been done satisfactorily, even a moderately skilled rider should be able to do a reasonable circle.

When explaining to students the concept of a circle, get them to imagine the circular face of a clock. For example, when riding on the right rein (going clockwise), A or C on the short side is twelve o'clock. The next point of arrival on the track is three o'clock; the point of intersection with the center line is six o'clock; and the next point of arrival on the track is nine o'clock. Returning to twelve o'clock completes the circle.



A 20-meter circle, as a circular face of a clock.



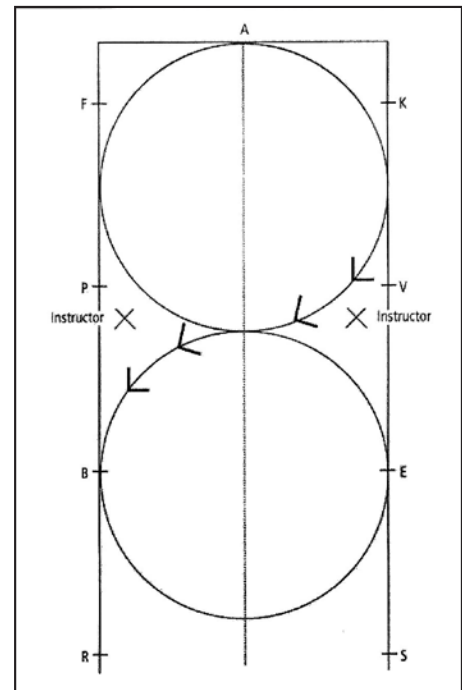
Use of cones.

It is also helpful to set up cones. You will need five to seven cones to mark these circle points on the track and make a gateway on the centerline at six o'clock. If you have an indoor arena at home paint large dots on the kick wall at three o'clock and nine o'clock, ten meters from the corners. Sometimes it may also be necessary to place a cone in each corner away from the track, and to tell the student to stay on the inside of the cone. These visual aids help to clarify the basic geometry. If students keep their horses too long on the rail at three or nine o'clock, the circle turns out more oval than round. The horse should remain no more than one horse's length (about three or four steps) at each circle point and then has to be actively turned.

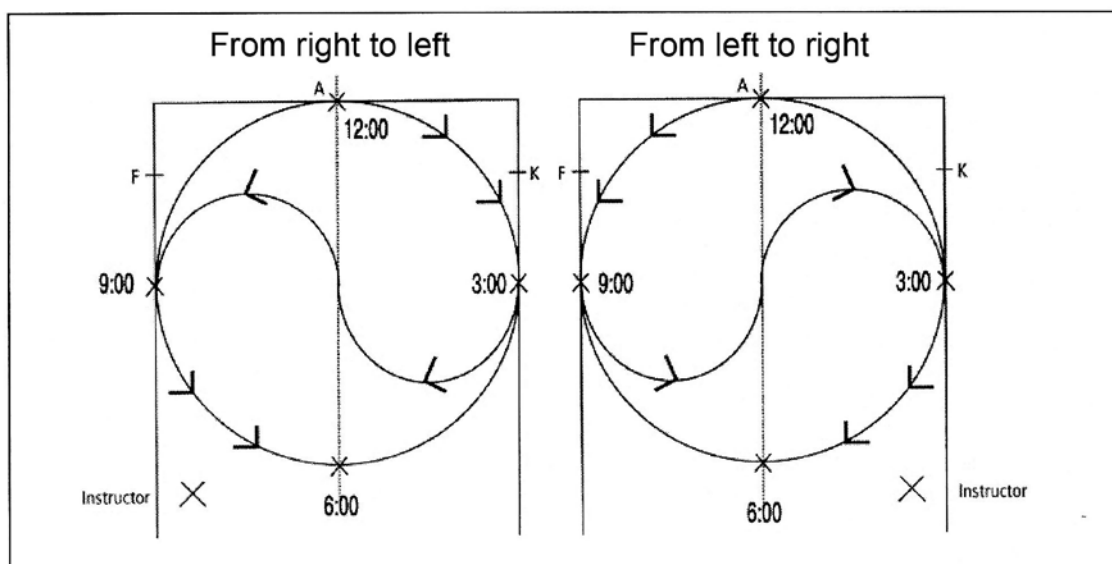
For logistics in the arena, it is important to know that the circle always begins and ends at the twelve o'clock point. Before the beginning and after the end of the circle, the horse has to be ridden into the corner. In the 60-meter dressage arena, the center circle can begin at either B or E and has to cross the center line 20 meters from A or C. Cones will be helpful to show exactly where those points are.

When you plan to start a circle at a particular point, prepare the horse with a half-halt and apply the bending aids about two to three strides before you turn. The circle points are not just helpful for achieving correct geometry, but also should be used for half-halting and reestablishing the correct bend. When each quarter of the circle is ridden with this concept in mind, it will take balance and suppleness to yet a higher level.

When riding on a 20-meter circle, there are only two correct ways of changing the rein; either "out of the circle" or "through the circle." When changing out of the circle, direction is changed at the six o'clock circle point onto another 20-meter circle, and the new circle is ridden until the rider gets another directive. In this change, the rider, upon crossing the center line or a little before the center line, straightens the horse for one horse's length, during which a half-halt is applied and the bending aids are changed to reflect the new direction. When the rider is in rising trot, he or she must of course also change the diagonal at the same time.



Change of rein out of the circle.



Change of rein through the circle.

The correct way to change through the circle is riding toward twelve o'clock (A or C), then turn away from either three or nine o'clock in a half volte of 10-meter diameter. When reaching the center line, straighten the horse and change his bend into another half-10-meter volte and arrive at nine or three o'clock, and then continue on the 20-meter circle. This change of rein should be done in sitting trot only.

The Bending Seat

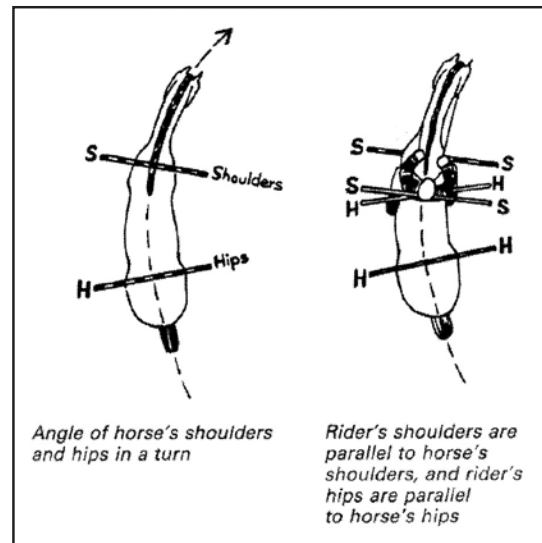
When the basic geometry is understood and the student has learned to navigate the face of the clock, it does not automatically follow that the horse also bends. Some horses actually tend to go around the circle rather like a skateboard, and many riders are totally oblivious to this. The instructor must explain the bending aids (bending seat, spiral seat).

Another analogy may be helpful here. Since the bend is initiated in the jaw and poll first, then in the neck, and subsequently in the horse's torso, imagine that the reins are rather like the railroad tracks. Inside and outside reins are actually inside and outside rails, which run parallel to each other. The inside has a somewhat shorter curvature than the outside. The horse's body has to travel within this corridor formed by the railroad tracks thus conforming to the curvature of the circle. The inside rein must be shortened to initiate the bend, and the outside rein must allow accordingly. But the outside rein must also govern the degree of curvature in the neck and must adopt a restricting function if the horse falls through the outside shoulder.

Because the horse bends the neck more easily than the rest of his body, care must be taken not to over bend the neck laterally, and the rider must learn to harmonize both reins together. In order to maintain the curvature (concavity) of the neck, it is helpful to carry the inside hand approximately two inches higher than the outside hand, bringing it slightly away from the withers to the inside so that the inside rein does not have any contact with the neck. The outside hand should remain somewhat lower and be brought towards the withers so that the outside rein has contact along the neck. This is, in most cases, a very effective method to control the shoulders. If the horse has a balance problem that may not necessarily be caused by the rider and persists in falling through the outside shoulder, this can effectively be corrected by half-halting on the outside rein. In severe cases, it is helpful to counter-flex the neck for two or three strides and then return to the correct inside bend. This method can be repeated as often as necessary but should only be practiced by riders who have a reasonably educated seat, because the inside leg has to simultaneously prevent his haunches from swinging out of alignment with his forehead.

Just like the reins, both legs have to harmonize with each other in regards to their position and intensity as well as the placement of hips and seat bones. Both legs are driving the horse forward. The inside leg is at the girth and the outside leg somewhat behind the girth and usually a little less forceful but becoming more active if the haunches are falling out. It cannot be stressed enough that the inside leg has to be at the girth and not behind it. If it is constantly applied behind the girth in the mistaken belief that it will create bend or prevent the horse from spiraling into the circle it contributes greatly to the skateboarding effect. It is important that the entire inside leg from the hip down is involved in the activating and bending process. Care must be taken not to pull the knee up and that the leg stays basically supple and does not clench. The inside seat bone and hip should be brought forward and slightly down toward the inside knee. This positions the outside seat bone and hip slightly back, thus facilitating the correct placement of the outside leg behind the girth. The rider's shoulders should be aligned to the horse's shoulders, that is to say the inside one slightly back and the outside one brought slightly forward into the movement. The rider's torso should stay perpendicular behind the withers and not lean to either side.

It is important that the rider learns this "spiral seat" so that he or she is able to gain absolute control over the haunches on curving lines on a single track, as well as be able to apply it in the lateral movements.



Position of the horse and rider on a bend.