

A Lesson in Leg-Yielding

A certified instructor tackles common problems

BY JENNIFER BAUMERT WITH JENNIFER O. BRYANT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUSANJSTICKLE.COM

Ashley Perkins, assistant trainer at Cloverlea Farm in Columbia, CT, is taking a lesson with USDF-certified instructor Jennifer Baumert. Ashley is riding Remy Martin, a twelve-year-old Oldenburg gelding owned by Denise Sarnoff. As the pair incorporates some leg-yielding into

their warm-up, Baumert spots some common faults.

The issues: Incorrect positioning; lack of correct connection.

Baumert says: Leg-yield is an elementary lateral exercise introduced in the First

Level tests. The horse's body is supposed to be almost straight, with only slight flexion at the poll away from the direction of movement. Many riders focus so much on "sideways" that they overbend their horses' necks, which causes the horse to lose his straightness and to "pop" his outside shoulder (see photo, page 27). If the rider also draws her inside leg back and pushes too hard—another common mistake—she'll interrupt the forward motion and can cause the haunches to lead in the leg-yield, further disrupting the horse's straightness and balance.

Today's lesson will focus on:
Exercises to improve the rider's understanding of the leg-yield.

Intro to Leg-Yielding

Leg-yielding is a suppling exercise in which the horse's inside legs pass and cross in front of his hind legs. It is useful in teaching the horse to step forward and sideways at the same time. It also helps teach the rider to coordinate the forward and sideways driving aids, and to improve the connection between the inside leg and the outside rein.

The leg-yield can be ridden at the walk and the trot. The movement can be performed on a straight line, on the diagonal, and along the wall of the arena.

Before a rider and horse attempt the leg-yield, they should be able to ride on straight lines away from the wall. The horse needs to understand the concept of moving sideways away from the leg, as introduced through simple exercises such as the turn on the forehand.

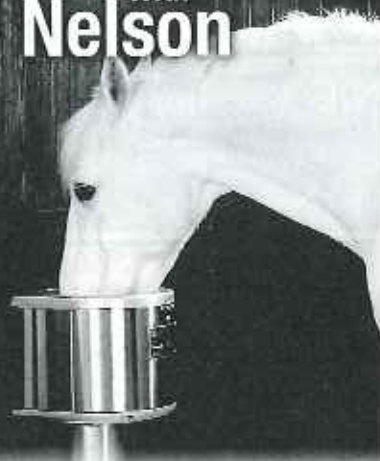
OK, Ashley, with that theory under your belt, let's do some exercises to help improve the leg-yield.



ALIGNED AND SUPPLE: Ashley Perkins rides Remy Martin in a leg-yield right with good balance and positioning

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EXERCISE 1: LATERAL FLEXIONS

Let's start by getting a feel for correct lateral flexion. Flexion is a slight movement from the horse's poll joint, with lateral (to one side) flexion being to the left



TOO MUCH: Ashley overbends Remy's neck to the inside to demonstrate this common mistake. In this position, Remy wouldn't be able to leg-yield in balance.

or to the right. It is *not* neck bend. If you take one rein too strongly or if you hold the rein aid for too long, Ashley, Remy is likely to turn his head and bend his neck. The rein aid is very subtle.



JUST RIGHT: Correct lateral flexion (here, to the left). Remy is flexed only at the poll, not in his neck. Ashley can see his inside (left) eye—no more and no less.

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At the halt, try flexing Remy very lightly to the left. The rein aid comes just from turning your wrist, not by pulling back with your arm, opening your arm to the side, or crossing your hand over the withers. Good—that's enough—now come back to straight for a moment before you try flexing him to the right. You'll know you've achieved sufficient flexion if you can just see his inside eye (the eye on the side he's flexing toward). The crest of his neck may also "tip" slightly toward the direction of the flexion. If you can see more of the side of his face than just his inside eye, then you're flexing him too much.

Now, just for comparison, stay halted and use your inside rein to bend Remy's neck to the inside. See and feel the difference? His entire head swings over to the inside, and his outside shoulder "pops" slightly to the outside as a result. If you do this while trying to leg-yield, not only will your horse no longer be straight, but you'll also lose the connection between your inside leg and your outside rein. It's impossible to maintain good energy and balance in the leg-yield with this positioning.

EXERCISE 2: "STAIR STEPS"

Ashley, let's try putting what you've learned about flexion into action and try some actual leg-yield.

The longer the leg-yield line, the more likely that something will start to go wrong. Usually the rider concentrates so much on going sideways that she forgets the importance of keeping the forward energy. The horse slows, the rider keeps pushing sideways, and the horse winds up unbalanced, "falling" onto his outside shoulder or in an incorrect angle, with his haunches leading the movement. (For the horse to be straight, his forhand must always lead his hindquarters during any movement.)

Why are these things considered faults? Because they result in a deterioration of the quality of the gait. As a dressage rider, you must always keep in mind that the three basic gaits are the foundation of all training. Never focus on a



STRAIGHT START: Ashley starts the stair-step exercise by riding Remy in a nice forward trot on a straight line.



POSITION PREP: Before leg-yielding right, away from her left leg, Ashley flexes Remy slightly to the left.

movement to the point that you compromise the gait. The emphasis should be on the opposite: using the movements to improve the quality of the gaits.

A great exercise for helping to avoid these traps is to alternate between steps of leg-yield and riding forward on a straight line. Ashley, start by establishing a nice, forward working trot on a 20-me-

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THE LEG-YIELD: Remy shows good alignment and his inside hind leg is crossing well under his body as he leg-yields to the right.

ter circle on the left rein. That looks good. Now ride down the long side and then turn down the center line or the quarter line. Go straight for a few strides; then use your left wrist to ask for a little inside



COMPLETING THE STAIR STEP: After a few steps of leg-yield, Ashley rides forward to refresh Remy's energy and straightness.

flexion and ask Remy to leg-yield right, away from your left leg, for three or four strides. Keep your left leg at the girth; don't draw it back. If he doesn't respond to a light aid from your inner leg at the

girth, give him a tap behind your inner leg with the whip to remind him that he must respond to a light aid. Keep his shoulders in line with his body.

OK, that's enough leg-yield; make a half-halt with your outside rein—your right rein—to stop Remy from continuing sideways and to establish a stronger connection into your outside rein. Feel him "filling up" your outside rein as you half-halt? Good. Remember to make your half-halts short; soften your outside rein right away and immediately ride energetically forward and straight between both reins and legs. Go forward for three or four strides and then repeat the exercise, stair-step fashion, until you've reached the wall. Then we'll try the exercise on the right rein, leg-yielding to the left away from your right leg.

This exercise seems simple, but it's a real test of your coordination and of your horse's balance, obedience, and suppleness. You can practice it at the walk first to get a feel for the exercise. Later, when

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PILOT ERROR: Oops! In her zeal to push Remy sideways, Ashley has caused his haunches to lead in this leg-yield right (far left photo). The horse's forchard should lead his haunches in any lateral movement.

LEADING BY SUGGESTION: Here's another common rider error: trying to encourage the horse to move sideways by sitting to the outside of the saddle (photo at left). Ashley has collapsed her inside (left) hip and her torso is leaning to the left to counterbalance her seat, which has shifted to the right. She should be sitting centered in the saddle.



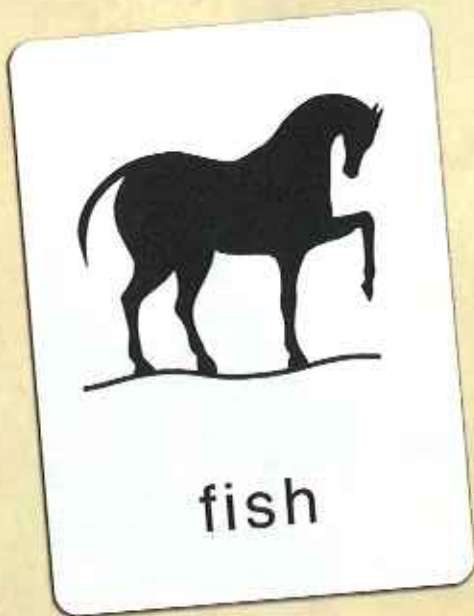
THE CREEPING LEG: The other common mistake riders make in starting lateral work is drawing back the inside leg in trying to get the horse to move sideways. The inside leg stays at the girth. If your horse doesn't respond to a light aid from a correctly positioned leg, give him a tap with the whip or a nudge with the spur.

you feel confident, try starting the exercise from the wall, leg-yielding toward the middle of the arena. This variation can be more difficult because horses tend to be drawn toward the wall and not away from it, so this really tests his responsiveness to your forward and sideways aids. (But if the wall attracts your horse like a magnet, "pulling" him sideways so strongly that he always loses his balance and gets crooked, then you might actually find leg-yielding away from the wall to be easier, not to mention more beneficial.)

Good work, Ashley. Take a short break and then we'll try one more exercise.

EXERCISE 3: SHOULDER STRAIGHTENER

This counterflexion exercise requires excellent coordination of the aids and accurate timing, but it's an effective method of straightening the horse who tends to lose his balance and "pop" his shoulder during the leg yield.



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POP GOES THE SHOULDER: Slightly overbent to the inside (left) in this leg-yield, Remy has lost some balance and alignment, judging by his "popped" outside (right) shoulder.



CORRECT COUNTERFLEXION: At a halt, Ashley and Remy demonstrate correct counterflexion as might be used to help straighten the horse during a leg-yield right. A moment of counterflexion is a good exercise to use any time to increase the horse's suppleness; it's not only a "fix" for problems.

What you're going to do, Ashley, is to establish that nice working trot just like before; then ride down the quarter line or the center line and begin a leg-yield. Right; good. Feel how Remy begins to lose a little bit of balance and to

"fall" onto his outside shoulder? That's what this exercise will help prevent. It's important that you do this *before* the problem starts to happen. Once the horse has begun to fall onto his outside shoulder, it's too late. The challenge to you as a rider is to anticipate the problem—to feel that the loss of balance may happen before it actually begins to happen—and to use this exercise as a preventative measure. This is the kind of subtle correction that experienced riders make, both while

training and in the show ring, that when done well look as if they're doing nothing and nothing went wrong.

OK, let's try it. Ride down center line and leg-yield to the right again, Ashley. Then maintain the feel of your inside rein while carefully counterflexing Remy, just for a stride, by using your outside wrist. Don't cross your outside hand over his withers. Keep riding the leg-yield forward and sideways as you do this. You should feel his shoulder shift slightly to the inside

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as you counterflex him. It's a split-second action—don't hold the counterflexed positioning—and it's subtle. It shouldn't interrupt the flow of the leg-yield. Don't wag his nose from side to side; remember, all you should see is his outside eye the moment of the counterflexion. Then simply relax the counterflexion and return to having him straight between both reins, then slightly flexed to the inside as you continue to leg-yield. Good. Now try this exercise in the opposite direction. You'll quickly be able to tell whether you can flex your horse equally easily to both sides!

Good work today, Ashley. Walk on a loose rein and give him a pat.

Where You're Headed

Let's review what we've worked on today. You'll help to supple your horse in both directions by using the leg-yield, and you'll develop a better connection

MEET THE EXPERT

Based at her family's Cloverlea Farm in Columbia, CT, Jennifer Baumert is a USDF gold medalist and a certified instructor through Fourth Level. She is a past recipient of The Dressage Foundation's Major Anders Lindgren Scholarship and a two-time recipient of the Asmis Scholarship. A former Region 8 FEI North American Young Riders' Championships dressage team member, she now teaches and trains riders and horses of all levels.



from your inside leg into your outside rein. As you and your horse progress, you can use this suppleness and connection in introducing more advanced lateral work, beginning with shoulder-in, which is the foundation of collected work and more advanced lateral movements, such as half-pass. Shoulder-in is a bending and collecting exercise; it's more chal-

lenging than leg-yielding because it requires the horse to bend and to carry additional weight on his inside hind leg. If you and your horse are able to leg-yield easily and smoothly in both directions while maintaining energy and straightness, you'll have laid a great foundation for the introduction of shoulder-in and other Second Level work. ▲

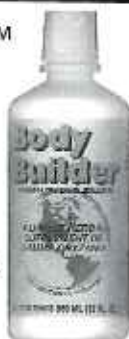
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