

Inside Jobs

The role of the inside rein is both misunderstood and vitally important

By Margaret Freeman

The inside rein often seems a taboo subject in dressage, leaving riders to wonder just what they should do with it, if anything. We're continually told to ride from inside leg to outside rein, but where does that leave the inside hand? Is it overused, underused, or not supposed to be used at all?

In fact, the inside rein has many uses, both direct and subtle. It can lead, steer, bend, flex, supple, and round, depending on where the horse and rider are in their training. In this article, four USDF-certified instructor/trainers explain the many roles—both leading and supporting—of the much-misunderstood inside rein.



SUPPORTING PLAYERS: *The inside rein and the outside rein are interdependent in many ways*

Inside, Outside

“The inside rein’s first job is to create an inside,” says USDF Instructor Certification Program faculty member Rachel Saavedra, of San Ramon, CA. “The inside rein is the aid that initiates inside flexion of the poll. Without the inside rein, there is no inside and therefore there is no outside!”

“Both reins are equally important,” says Candy Allen, of Gainesville, VA, a certified instructor/trainer through Fourth Level. “While we should be able to ride circles, shoulders-in, and half-passes by releasing the inside rein and thereby proving the horse is on the outside rein, that is only achieved if at first we have an even connection. You can’t have an even connection if you don’t have two reins to straighten the horse.”

“All our aids in dressage are interde-

pendent,” says Jessica van Eyck, of Bondville, NH, a certified instructor/trainer through Fourth Level. “Our seat, both legs, and both reins are all necessary to complete the cycle of aids that allows the energy of the horse to flow through. Even though we talk about riding from inside leg to the outside rein, the inside rein has its own distinct and necessary role.”

“Either rein should receive energy from both hind legs, either directly or diagonally,” says Annie Morris, of Lebanon, CT, a certified instructor/trainer through Fourth Level. In addition, Morris says, the inside hand is for flexing the horse at the poll; bending the horse in the neck; half-halting; and keeping the jaw, poll, and neck soft and supple.

Correct Use of the Inside Rein

“The inside hand is in the correct (neutral) position when it is in a straight line to the bit, as viewed from both the side and the top, with the thumb up and the elbow by the rider’s hip,” says Morris. “On a curved line, the outside hand should be slightly in front of the inside hand. The wrist should be straight and the whole arm relaxed all the way to the fingers. The fingers can move to encourage the horse to stay flexed and have a soft feeling in the rein, rather than a dull pull, and to keep chewing on the bit.”

When the horse responds to a rein aid, the inside hand softens and returns to a neutral position, Morris adds.

Young horses are started with lateral aids (inside rein and leg), Allen explains. “At first we work toward even connection in both reins, which happens as we achieve straightness. We start heading toward diagonal aids of inside leg to outside rein with different types of leg-yields.”

The release of the inside hand can be used as a reward to the horse for something well done, as a very literal way of asking the horse to take the outside rein, and as a test to see if the horse is on the outside rein, Al-



MISUSE: Bringing the inside hand too close to the rider's body can restrict the horse's neck and block the cycle of the aids

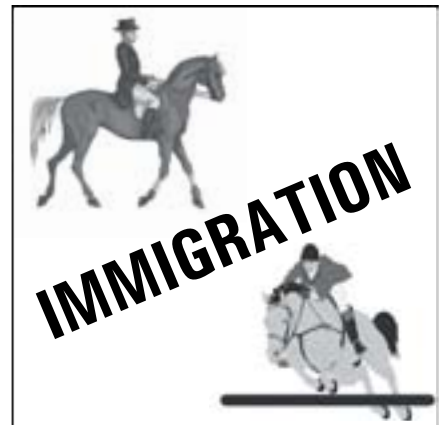
len says: "When the horse is straight and therefore even in both reins, we should be able to release that inside rein and maintain balance."

"The momentary release of the inside rein [known as *überstreichen*] should not lead riders to believe that the inside rein shouldn't be used, but that when the inside rein is used well, it can ask the other aids to cover for it, to maintain its influence during its absence for a few strides at a time," Saavedra adds.

Common Inside-Rein Faux Pas

Van Eyck identifies three prevalent misuses of the inside rein:

- Attempting to pull on the inside rein without the support of the inside leg, thereby causing the horse to "fall" on the inside shoulder and escape through the outside shoulder, rendering him crooked. Much of the time, riders who make this mistake are falling to the inside of the circle. ➔



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- Using an indirect inside rein (with the hand crossing over the withers) instead of lifting the horse up from the rider's inside leg. Doing so blocks the horse's inside hind leg from being able to step under his body. Often seen with riders who are twisting in the saddle.
- Trying to make the horse "rounder" by using the inside rein, but instead causing the horse to become crooked and breaking the "bridge" from back to front. The rider may tend to be collapsed in her body and not use her core and her back to support the horse.

Van Eyck describes a former lesson horse that would turn himself completely in the opposite direction, pretzel fashion, if the rider pulled on the inside rein with no back-up aids. Students quickly learned to use "cooperative aids" if they wanted to be able to steer, let alone keep the horse from falling through the outside shoulder.

Effects of the Inside Rein

"To say the inside hand never pulls is a little optimistic," says Morris. "But when the horse yields the flexion and is going with good energy on the line of travel, the inside hand is free to receive that energy over his back, participating in the circle of the aids, and therefore can be used without taking back at all. This is the soft and effective feeling we look for."

According to Saavedra, the dressage-training progression for both horse and rider makes the effect of the inside rein more and more subtle, so that eventually the inside rein may not feel so necessary. But when you start to school something new, you'll need the influence of the inside rein again, she says.

"If anyone tells riders not to use their inside rein, they are making the task of learning to ride infinitely more difficult," says Saavedra. "For those learning or still training their horses—which is most of the riding world—the inside rein is used actively with a squeeze of the finger or a turning of the wrist to either initiate or maintain

both inside flexion, inside bend, and inside suppleness."

"No one should rule out the use of an entire limb," Saavedra continues. "There is a lot to learn about using the inside rein and using it well. It can be overused to detriment, but that doesn't mean it shouldn't be used at all. It means we should spend more time educating about its proper use."

Inside-Rein Exercises

These three exercises will help to supple your horse and develop the connection to the outside rein so that your inside rein can play a soft, supporting role, our experts say.

Exercise 1: Flexion and crest flip

How much inside hand do you actually need? Try this exercise: At the halt, with your horse on the bit, flex him slightly at the poll to the left. Your left hand (the inside hand in this example) creates the flexion. If closing your fingers isn't enough to produce the desired flexion, then your hand may come to the left; however, keep the outside rein connected. Flex just enough that your horse's crest flips to the left (this can be subtle and not easy to see on some horses; it's easier to discern on cresty-necked horses). Return to the starting position and repeat the flexion exercise to the right.

The crest flip is a dead giveaway for the correct flexion. Be sure to allow enough with the outside rein that your horse can flex at the poll, and take care not to overbend the neck (if this happens, you may be allowing too much on the outside rein or taking too much on the inside) or to twist the head (if the poll is in and the nose is out, you have too much pressure on the outside rein; if the poll is out and the nose is in, your horse is not giving in the jaw, and you may need to manipulate the bit or start again).

You will find that the amount of flexion needed to flip the crest is very small. After you find the crest-flip-flexion sweet spot in both directions, see if you can achieve it using less in-

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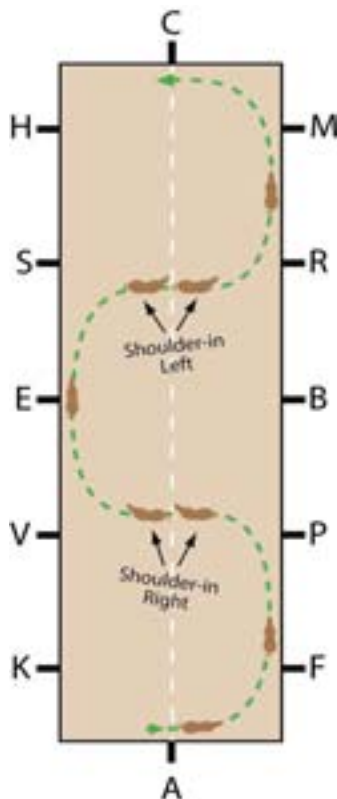


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EXERCISE 3: Serpentine with shoulder-in over center lines

side hand—perhaps just by closing your fingers. You can do this exercise at the walk and trot as well, changing the flexion slowly and trying to achieve it with minimal aids. As you practice changing the flexion, keep your inside leg (inside to the flexion) long and the gait in the correct rhythm.

Exercise 2: Corners

1. Use jump poles, cones, or other markers to make a 10 x 20m rectangle.
2. Walk the rectangle. If you use the outside rein to turn and the inside rein to supple, you will get nice corners.
3. To make your aids more subtle, trot the long sides of the rectangle and walk the corners and short sides.
4. For upper-level collection, canter the long sides of the rectangle and walk or trot the corners and short sides.

Exercise 3: Serpentes

This exercise (shown in the diagram at left) can be done in the walk, trot, and

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even the canter (with simple changes or flying changes before the shoulders-in).

1. Begin a three-loop serpentine. Focus on feeling that your horse is bent around your inside leg while your inside leg lifts him up to the outside rein so that your outside aids can turn him. The inside rein should be softly supporting the bend.
2. As you change direction after the first loop, exaggerate the change of bend by riding shoulder-in in the new direction on the straight line before starting the next loop. Your goal is to be able to lighten your new inside rein for a stride or two without losing the bend, balance, or tempo.
3. Repeat step 2 when you change the bend again after the second loop.
4. As you and your horse get the hang of this exercise, challenge yourselves by riding a serpentine with four, five, or six loops. ▲

Margaret Freeman, of Mt. Kisco, NY, is a USEF "S" dressage judge.

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