

# Lessons in Leg-Yielding

This elementary movement has several benefits for both horses and riders.

BY GERHARD POLITZ

One of the most elementary lateral movements in dressage, leg-yielding is introduced at First Level. Like most aspects of dressage, leg-yielding may seem simple in concept yet is challenging to execute absolutely correctly. This exercise can benefit your horse in many ways, and so it is worth the time and effort to learn how to do a proper leg-yield. In this article, I will explain the purpose and method of the leg-yield, the aids, and various leg-yield exercises that you can use to make your horse more supple and responsive to your aids.

## Leg-Yield Defined

When a horse performs a leg-yield, he moves on two tracks forward and sideways away from the rider's inside leg. Leg-yield is performed in the walk and in the trot. It is generally considered the easiest of the lateral movements and should be taught before shoulder-in, haunches-in, and half-pass. Some classical purists argue that leg-yielding should be referred to as a "two-track movement," not as a lateral movement, because it does not require bend. However, together with the more advanced movement of shoulder-in, leg-yielding is the best means of making a horse supple, loose, and unconstrained so as to facilitate the freedom, elasticity, and regularity of his paces and the harmony, lightness, and ease of his movements.

In leg-yield, the horse is straight (or almost straight, per the FEI rule book's definition), except for a slight flexion at the poll away from the direction of movement, so that the rider is just able to see the horse's inside eye and nostril. The horse's inside legs pass and cross in front of his outside legs. Leg-yielding can be per-

formed "on the diagonal" (FEI), in which case the horse should be as close as possible to parallel ("nearly parallel," per the FEI) to the long sides of the arena, although his forehead should be slightly in advance of his hindquarters. It can also be performed "along the wall" (FEI), in which case the horse should be at an angle of about 35 degrees to the direction in which he is moving (from the American Horse Shows Association and FEI rule books).



Leg-yielding is an excellent gymnastic exercise for all horses. Here U.S. Olympic eventing-team veteran Jill Henneberg shows her skill during a dressage phase.

## Gymnastic Benefits of Leg-Yielding

Leg-yielding loosens and supples the horse as he responds to the rider's sideways driving aids. The crossing of the legs, and especially the slightly increased lowering of the inside hip, facilitates the loosening effect. Leg-yielding is particularly useful as a warm-up exercise but also can be helpful in moments of correction throughout the work when the horse's response to the sideways driving aids is not as desired (e.g., when the haunches fall out or when there are problems in the half-pass). Leg-yielding is also a rudimentary tool to straighten the horse before he has learned shoulder-in and is ready for collected work.

Leg-yielding is also of great benefit in training the rider. For many beginners, work on the leg-yield makes them fully aware for the first time that they have two reins and two legs and HOW to use them independently from one another. They realize, for instance, that they cannot correct a slowing of the desired rhythm and tempo by using the sideways driving leg. Most important, leg-yield work makes riders aware of the cooperative effect of the aids and the way that they should harmonize.

## Introduction to the Leg-Yielding Aids

In the leg-yield, the horse is basically kept straight. However, the inside rein is shortened and flexes the horse slightly away from the direction of movement—just enough that the rider can see the top of the inside eye and nostril. (This side is referred to as the inside, regardless of whether the horse is facing the rail or into the arena.) The outside rein keeps the horse's neck straight at the shoulder. The rider's weight is

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shifted more onto the inside seat bone. The rider's inside leg is moved a little behind the girth to cause the horse to step sideways and to cross over. The rider's outside leg is behind the girth to prevent the angle from becoming too great. In principle, the inside aids create and the outside aids receive. These concepts help to promote the rider's feel for the effect of diagonal aids—from the inside leg to the outside rein.

## Leg-Yielding Aids: The Fine Points

Both reins have to harmonize in such a way that the inside rein keeps the horse sufficiently flexed and supple in the lower jaw and poll so as to avoid resistance and stiffening in the neck. At the same time, the outside rein prevents him from overbending his neck and "falling" through the outside shoulder. The correct use of both reins becomes more of an issue in the trot, when the added impulsion (which is lacking in the walk) makes it more difficult for the rider to keep the horse straight. Moreover, the rider must encourage the horse to reach somewhat forward and downward with his head and neck, and then contain the horse's outline with the outside rein. Doing so is especially important when leg-yielding in the walk so that the horse's topline is allowed to stretch and the horse becomes more relaxed and supple.

When you shift your weight onto your inside seat bone, your torso should remain perpendicular behind your horse's withers. Do not collapse your inside hip or tilt your torso to the inside; both of these faults will weaken the effectiveness of your outside leg. It may also be helpful to move your inside shoulder slightly in the direction of your horse's inside hip, as doing so puts additional pressure on the inside seat bone and supports the inside-leg aid. Your inside leg should be brought a little behind the girth and used with sufficient pressure to cause your horse to step sideways and to cross over. The aid should be given just as your horse's inside hind leg is about to leave the ground. Your instructor may have to call out the precise moment so that you can learn the correct feel.

When working with green horses, it may be necessary to position the inside leg somewhat farther behind the girth to convey a clear message. However, some horses stiffen their bodies when the leg is in an exaggerated position; others may

even kick at the leg if it is too close to their flanks. To teach the horse the correct response, it may be helpful to reinforce the leg aid occasionally with the spur or the whip. Some horses learn very well when they are first taught from the ground to cross over when tapped with the whip. Later, the trainer can apply the handle of the whip at the correct place on the horse's rib cage, to make him understand the purpose of the leg aid. After the horse has become sensitized to the aids and the rider has achieved excellent coordination, the fine-tuning may be such that an almost imperceptible shifting of the rider's weight to the inside seat bone, together with a steady leg just slightly behind the girth, will produce the desired result.

In general, the rider's outside leg should be behind the girth to prevent the horse's haunches from falling out. Haunches that are falling out will cause too much angle when leg-yielding along the rail or "haunches leading" when riding a diagonal line. If your horse slows down, however, you may have to move your outside leg closer to the girth to a forward driving position.

## Leg-Yielding Exercises

1. **Head to the rail.** This exercise is considered by some trainers to be the easiest method of introducing green horses or beginner riders to the leg-yield because the rail provides an obvious guideline for establishing the correct angle (ideally, 35 degrees; although 20 degrees may be more than sufficient at first). The shallower angle will not induce much crossing of the legs but will allow the student to learn how to apply the aids without overusing any single aid. The rail also helps the rider to be effective with the outside rein without becoming too restrictive, for the rail helps to keep the horse on the desired track.

If the angle exceeds 45 degrees, most horses will bang their knees together or step on their coronet bands, causing them to slow down or back up at best or to rear at worst. For these same reasons, base-narrow horses may have to be kept at a shallower angle.

2. **From the quarter line to the rail.** This variation is somewhat similar to a 20-degree angle along the rail. The drawback is that most horses are inclined to gravitate back to the rail, which causes them to fall though

their outside shoulders unless their riders are skilled enough to prevent this from happening. If the horse does fall through his outside shoulder, his hind legs will lag behind and there will be very little—if any—crossing of the legs.

3. **Haunches to the rail.** This is more challenging than leg-yielding with the head to the rail. There still is a clear guideline as to the correct angle, but keeping it consistent is more difficult and requires more skill in the application of the diagonal aids, particularly the outside rein.
4. **From the center line to the rail, or vice versa.** In this exercise, the horse moves more or less parallel to the rail; but his forehand should remain slightly ahead of his haunches. Riding precisely from one letter to another adds to the difficulty of the movement.
5. **Decreasing and increasing the square.** In the small (40 meter) arena, begin at the corner marker and leg-yield toward the quarter line, arriving opposite B or E. Straighten the horse on the quarter line for one horse's length (three to four steps); and then leg-yield in the opposite direction back to the rail, arriving at the next corner marker. In the standard (60 meter) arena, this pattern may be ridden to the center line. Both of these formats are similar to a counter-change of hand.
6. **Increasing the difficulty of movement 5.** In the standard arena, leg-yield from the corner marker to the quarter line; leg-yield back to B or E; and repeat the sequence, completing the movement by the next corner marker. Keep in mind that, before any change of direction, the horse must first be straightened. This exercise contains the elements of a zigzag and also can be done on the center line.
7. **On a circle.** This variation is probably the most effective format. The added difficulty of staying on a curved line induces a more pronounced crossing-over of the horse's inside hind leg and, as a result, somewhat greater lowering of his inside hip. When attempting the leg-yield on a circle, it very quickly becomes obvious whether the rider's aids are well coordinated: If they are not, the horse will fall in and out on the circle like a drunken sailor!
8. **Leg-yielding on the circle as re-schooling.** Horses with very stiff

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backs and necks require specialized work to help them loosen the tight musculature. They can benefit from leg-yielding on a circle. However, with this work, there is some significant deviation from the normal concept of leg-yielding. For example, the horse's neck should be bent quite a bit to the inside as much as necessary to encourage longitudinal stretching just in front of the withers, which will result in complete relaxation of the muscles of the underside of the neck. In addition, it is useful to activate the

inside hind leg with the whip to encourage the horse to flex the joints. Use frequent half-halts to prevent him from rushing away from the aids and to accustom him gradually to the work so that he will eventually relax and swing through his back. Patience and "feel" are required, and it is important to give the horse frequent breaks so that his muscles are not overstressed.

When reschooling stiff horses, it is advisable to consult an equine chiropractor to ensure that there is no un-

derlying physical problem that has not been addressed. Often, chiropractic work along with the under-saddle gymnastic exercises lead to significant improvement.

Instructors should not encourage students to attempt this reschooling work until they have developed educated seats. If a student does not possess sufficient skill, the instructor should take over the reschooling work, asking the student to remount and feel the results after a successful session. ○