CHAPTER

5

Stretching the Frame on the Circle

The most important part of this movement is that the horse releases his back and shows a forward and downward stretch into the contact.

The USEF test movement for Training and First Levels reminds us to ask the horse in a 20-meter trot circle to be “allowed to stretch forward and downward,” while the directive ideas call for “forward and downward stretch over the back into a light contact, maintaining balance and quality of trot; bend; shape and size of circle; smooth, balanced transitions.”

I dubbed this movement the “stretchy, chewy circle” when it first arrived in our national tests. All the other verbiage seemed to me to confuse the issue. Now, everyone on our USEF Test Writing Committee has picked up this vernacular. I think I have also bequeathed it to the USDF L Faculty!

Since this has been in our Training and First Level tests for about 12 years, more and more riders are doing it well. However, I think it is still one of the most confusing movements for judges and for riders.

The most important part of this movement is that the horse releases his back and shows a forward-and-downward stretch into the contact (figs. 5.1 A–F). How far down the horse stretches is not the issue. When the nose is at the same level as the shoulder, in my opinion, the horse is low enough. The rider should also keep an elastic contact to the horse’s mouth. The horse should relax—not speed the tempo up—and show some bending on the circle.

This movement must be trained like any other one and do not expect that on the first day your horse will show you the maximum stretch. You must be patient and allow him to get a bit lower and longer day by day. In perhaps a month, you might have the finished product. “Throwing the reins away” will never work.
5.1 A–F  In A, the horse shows stretch both out and down with his nose in front of the vertical. The question would be does this represent the horse releasing his back, or is he stiff? That can’t be answered without a moving horse!

In B, the horse is definitely stiff in the back while showing an outward and upward stretch.

The horse has dropped his neck and curled up in C, showing no inclination to stretch outward toward the contact.

In D, the horse has shown some outward stretch but lacks the downward inclination.

The horse in E is showing both an outward and downward inclination, with his nose slightly behind the vertical. However, if the neck was elevated, the nose would come in front of the vertical, so this is still okay. Compare it to D. In a moving horse, this type of stretch would most likely show suppleness in the back.

In F, the horse is showing an incorrect contact, with the middle part of the neck being the highest point, the poll very low, and the nose behind the vertical. It is doubtful that, were this a live situation, the horse would show any suppleness over the back.
Imperfections and Evasions

When you attempt the "stretch circle," your horse:
1. Curls up his neck.
2. Speeds up as if he is off to the races.
3. Stretches his neck out without lowering it.
4. Stretches without any contact on the reins.
5. Puts his head up.

I’ll discuss the solutions to these imperfections beginning on p. 46. Meanwhile, read the USEF definition for the movement (see sidebar).

How to Ride and Train

Rider’s Aids

1. **Inside rein:** Bends the horse and encourages the horse to stretch the outside of his body. Also shows the direction around the circle.

2. **Outside rein:** Half-halts against the inside bending rein to keep control of the horse’s speed. After the half-halt, slightly lengthen the outside rein and encourage the horse to lengthen his frame. How much you lengthen the outside rein will tell the horse how much stretch and lowering of the neck he is allowed. The outside rein also works with the inside leg at the girth (see below) to keep the horse from falling in on the circle.

3. **Inside leg at the girth:** This keeps the impulsion and helps to support the bend by keeping the rib cage to the outside; it also keeps the horse from falling in on the circle, along with the outside rein (see above).

4. **Outside leg behind the girth:** This is a supporting leg to keep the haunches from falling out on the circle.

I like to teach my horses this movement in the following manner. First, I teach them (as do the cowboys, I might add) that when I use the inside rein at halt, they must bend and lower their neck. They must then repeat this exercise at walk and trot.

Once they understand the inside rein, I will then use the outside rein as a half-halt against this bend. The outside rein should make the neck lower. As soon as I feel this small reaction, I give and lengthen both reins a small amount and reward the horse. The horse must stay balanced in this frame before I ask again for more lowering, and eventually he should “follow” the inside rein down as I slowly lengthen the outside rein, which allows the horse to lengthen the frame.

Some horses, because of incorrect prior training, are not very willing to perform this move-

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**USEF Rule Book**

**STRETCHING THE FRAME**

The horse gradually takes the reins, stretching forward and downward with light contact, while maintaining balance, rhythm and tempo, and quality of the gait.
ment. In this case, it will affect your warm-up. With a horse you are retraining, you may have to warm up in more of a “working frame,” or a frame that allows you to connect the horse to the bit, even if the frame isn’t what you want in the future. Once this connection has been established, you can then try to lengthen it a bit each day. This process may take a few weeks. Be patient!

**JUDGING TIP**

On the “stretchy, chewy” 20-meter circle, as a judge I allow the rider the first quarter of the circle to establish the stretch. Then I like to see the stretch maintained for half a circle. The rider can use the last quarter of the circle to pick up the reins. Be sure to keep the lateral bending as you pick up the reins or the horse might stiffen and raise his neck too quickly.

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**Cures and Solutions**

1. **Problem: My horse curls up.**

When the horse curls up (showing no forward inclination), usually the rider has lost the bend. Remember the horse will not curl when you have one side of his entire body bending with the outside of the body lengthening and stretching toward the outside rein.

A horse can learn to curl in an attempt to avoid contact due to a severe bit, too strong rein contact, or incorrect use of draw reins. Sometimes, due to poor conformation of the neck or incorrect muscling, a horse will curl up on his own. When you have a horse curling for any of these reasons, you may first have to actually make the neck shorter in order to establish the correct connection. Once you have a connection from the leg to the hand, you can work on lengthening the neck a bit at a time.

Do not expect it to happen overnight. You can ride with long reins in the hope that the horse will at some point stretch to the bit, but I can tell you it won’t happen!

2. **Problem: My horse speeds up.**

This horse is a bit out of balance. Try not going so far down for a while and keep riding half-halts with your seat or using your voice to slow the tempo down. Work a bit more with a little stretch for maybe half a circle and then bring him up for the other half. Remember, the horse is used to bringing the head and neck up to balance himself, not depending on the rider to help. You must encourage the horse to trust that you will
help him and allow him to understand that he can maintain his balance and still lower his head and neck.

3 Problem: My horse stretches his neck out without lowering it.

I call this the “swallow-the-telephone-pole stretch.” The horse is lengthening his topline but in a stiff way, while his back is not staying supple and round. Again, check to make sure you have lateral bend. This will encourage longitudinal suppleness. The other possibility is that your horse is not supple over the topline to begin with. Go back to your warm-up session and check to make sure your horse will allow you access to his topline, as well as willingly bending (see p. 25).

4 Problem: My horse reacts by stretching with no contact on the reins.

This is known as a “gravity stretch.” The rider just “throws” the reins at the horse, and the horse’s head only goes down because it weighs a lot. This is really a rider issue and the rider must be taught the correct aids for this movement.

5.2 Even a Grand Prix horse should be able to show a good stretch circle! Caryn Vesperman shows us how as she warms up Salope.
Problem: My horse’s head goes up when I ask for the stretch.

This horse has not achieved the suppleness necessary to perform his work. The rider needs to go back to the warm-up and work on loosening the horse’s topline muscles correctly. Again, this type of horse might benefit from correct longeing (see p. 30).

A final question with regard to the stretchy, chewy circle is: Should the horse be allowed to come behind the vertical or not? This issue is always under discussion among judges. The consensus is that coming behind the vertical while stretching is not a problem as long as you can visualize the neck being raised into a working frame and the nose in front of the vertical (see fig. 5.1 E, p. 44).