

Prix St. Georges Lesson

We bring the experts to you. This month: Canter half-pirouette.

BY MARY FLOOD WITH MARGARET FREEMAN

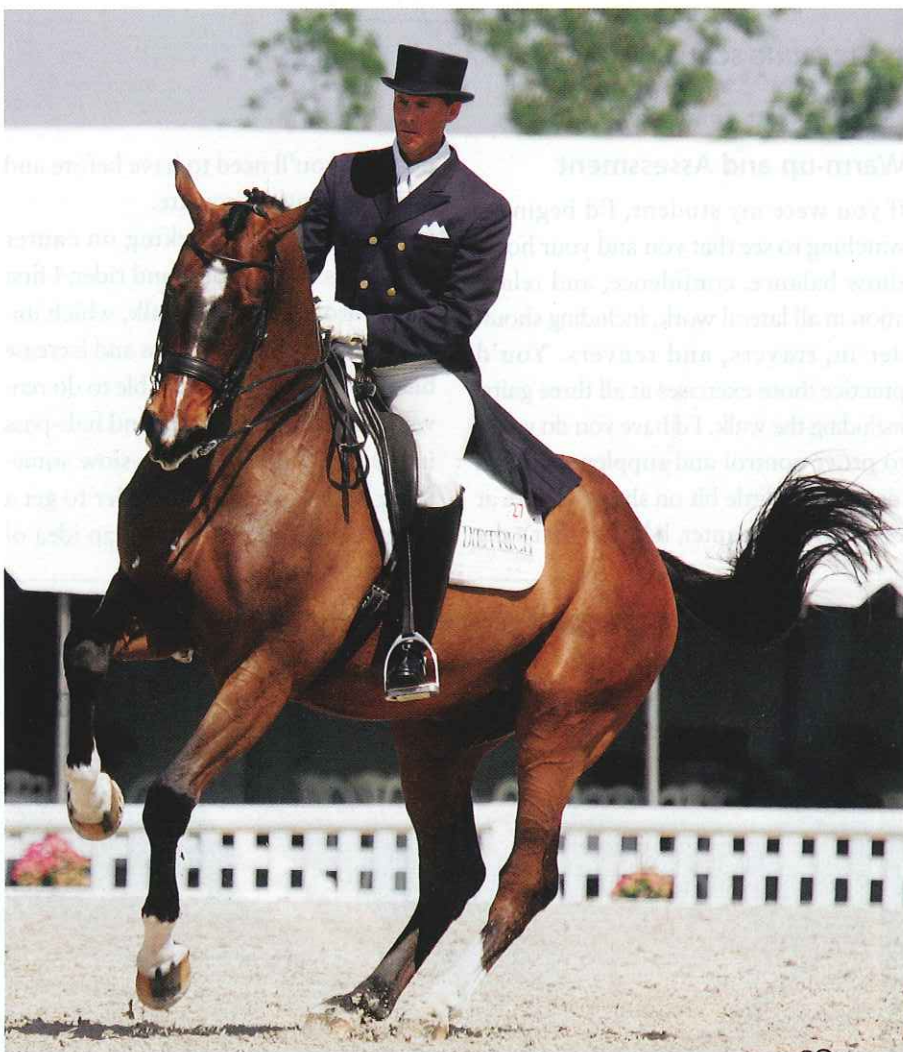
THIS IS THE SIXTH INSTALLMENT in a series of virtual lessons that focuses each month on a specific gait or movement at each level, from Training through Grand Prix. The movement this month is the canter half-pirouette, which is part of the FEI Prix St. Georges test and also is required at USEF Fourth Level and the FEI Young Rider level.

Our lessons are conducted by USDF-certified instructors. This month's instructor is Mary Flood, a certified instructor through Fourth Level who has earned the USDF bronze, silver, and gold medals. She is a past winner of the Grand Prix at Dressage at Devon (PA) and the Festival of Champions (NJ). She owns and operates Wildfire Farm in Lovettsville, VA.

Before We Begin

Before you can work on canter pirouettes, you must have an excellent foundation in the basics (refer to the training scale, illustrated on the next page). You must have the ability to precisely control your horse's lateral (right and left) and longitudinal (back to front) balance, to give effective half-halts, to sustain his lightness, and to ride using quiet aids. Pirouettes require great impulsion, speed control, and self-carriage. I would not want a student to try riding canter pirouettes until she had developed a good seat. Good "feel" and timing are musts.

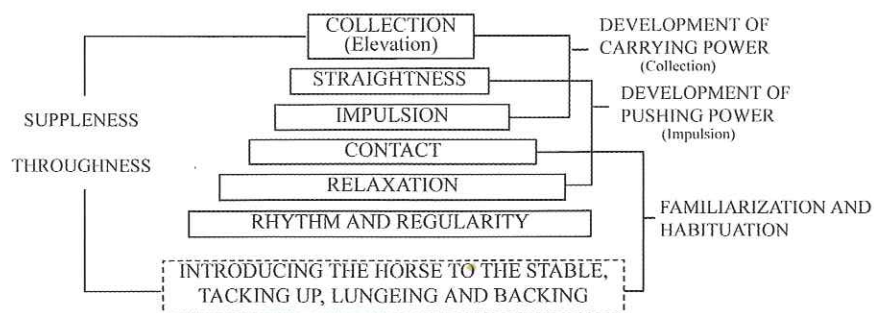
Additional prerequisites: Your horse's canter strides must be of good quality, and you must have the ability to extend and collect that gait.



PSG PIROUETTE: Good energy and bend in this canter pirouette, as exhibited by USDF-certified instructor Christopher Hickey aboard Regent

His lateral work should be solid so that you can use it to control any resistance to collection. You'll use shoulder-in to control the direction of his inside hind leg, and travers (haunches-in) to control the direction of his outside hind. He must be able to canter pretty much "on the spot" for a few strides (for more, see

April's "Clinic" on the "very collected canter"), and to make clear canter-walk-canter and canter-halt transitions. It's also critical that he be able to execute walk pirouettes successfully. He needs to understand the position and balance required for the walk pirouette before you progress to the canter pirouette. ➤



THE TRAINING SCALE or "pyramid of training"

Warm-up and Assessment

If you were my student, I'd begin by watching to see that you and your horse show balance, confidence, and relaxation in all lateral work, including shoulder-in, travers, and renvers. You'd practice those exercises at all three gaits, including the walk. I'd have you do voltes to prove control and suppleness. We'd also work a little bit on shoulder-fore at both trot and canter, because that's the

position you'll need to have before and after the canter pirouette.

Before I begin working on canter pirouettes with a horse and rider, I first teach pirouettes in the walk, which improve the horse's suppleness and increase his activity. He should be able to do renvers, travers, shoulder-in, and half-pass in the walk. Any time you slow something down, you help the rider to get a better concentrated feel and an idea of

where the horse is at every moment, stride by stride. In the walk pirouette, you can address whether he steps to the outside or the inside, loses the rhythm, or loses the bend. The rider learns the aids, timing, and feel. You can stop the moment things go wrong. The learning happens a lot faster.

There are many variations of exercises used to develop and improve walk and canter pirouettes. Here are a few of my favorites.

Warm-up exercise 1: Box turns at the walk. Box turns, also called square voltes (angled figures with their corners a series of quarter-pirouettes) show that the rider has control and that she can keep the relaxation, connection, and roundness, all with her weight in the right place.

I like to do box turns off the wall, from quarter line to quarter line in a square, because that way the rider does-

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n't have the wall to depend on. The turns should alternate between a quarter-pirouette and just a shallow turn, with two of each per "box." Sometimes I'll make the box a rectangle instead of a square, with longer "sides" on the quarter lines. This gives the rider a little more time to lengthen and then collect the walk before turning again. The basics of how, when, and where come into play. Too much bend makes the pirouette especially difficult in the beginning stages. If you lose the haunches a little bit, a bit of counterflexion will regain control.

Warm-up exercise 2: Transitions on a circle. Ride a 20-meter circle at the canter in both directions with several intervals of very collected canter and then medium canter. This exercise will test your horse's ability to "sit" as well as your control.

Next, on the same 20-meter circle, ultra-collect the canter each time you

cross the center line, returning to collected canter in between. This exercise will improve your ability to determine when and where your horse will increase the activity, which is needed for the eventual turn of his shoulders into the canter pirouette. After this exercise is successful in both directions, try riding a very collected canter as you approach the center line; then make a quarter-turn onto the center line and halt at X. When your horse increases the activity before the turn, his shoulders can easily come around onto the center line. The halt reinforces the collection needed, reminding him to stay balanced and on your seat aids.

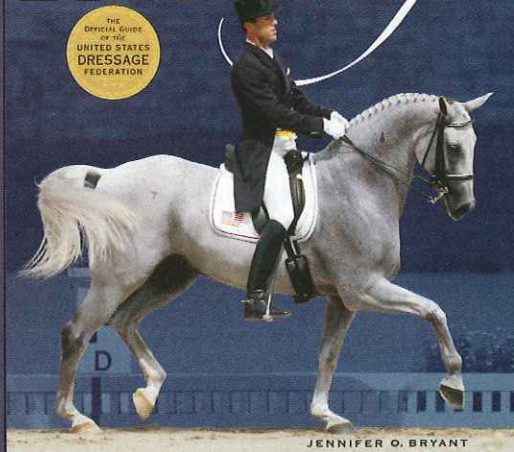
Warm-up exercise 3: Spirals. Spiral from a larger circle into an eight-meter volte at the canter, and then maintain that diameter on a clear two tracks. Then ride travers for two or three strides, keeping your horse's shoulders on the circle without coming in any

further; then go back to straight. This exercise will really strengthen him and improve his fitness. Later, you can decrease the size of the volte and make an actual pirouette, but then return to a large circle in medium canter. Really pay attention to the position of his outside shoulder. This exercise is demanding, so be sure to give him rest breaks.

The Exercises

When I school, I ride very few actual pirouettes because the movement puts tremendous stress on the horse's joints. Instead, I train the components. Perfecting pirouettes is more about refining the control and the balance. Good pirouettes are not possible without good balance and quality in the canter. Don't think only about making the turn, but also about being able to step out of the turn at any moment. The forward element is just as important as the sideways element. Too many rid-

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The author, Jennifer O. Bryant, is the editor of *USDF Connection*, the member magazine of the United States Dressage Federation.

She is the author of *Olympic Equestrian: The Sports and the Stories from Stockholm to Sydney* and co-author of *A Gymnastic Riding System Using Mind, Body & Spirit*. A longtime dressage rider and horse owner, she has competed through the FEI levels and is a USDF bronze and silver medalist.

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ers want to do the finished product before they learn the parts. The deceptive thing about pirouettes is how many individual parts there are.

Here is the FEI definition of the canter pirouette (reprinted with permission from the 2006 FEI Rule Book, Art. 413): "The pirouette (half-pirouette) is a turn of 360 degrees (180 degrees) executed on two tracks, with a radius equal to the length of the horse and the forehand moving around the haunches. ... [T]he forefeet and outside hind foot move around the inside hind foot, which forms the pivot and should return to the same spot, or slightly in front of it, each time it leaves the ground. At whatever pace the pirouette (half-pirouette) is executed, the horse, slightly bent in the direction in which it is turning, should, remaining 'on the bit' with a light contact, turn smoothly around, maintaining the exact cadence and sequence of footfalls of

that pace. The poll stays the highest point during the entire movement."

A correct half-pirouette is preceded by a couple of strides of very collected canter, followed by a turn of 180 degrees in three or four strides, with the radius roughly the length of the horse's body. Mistakes can also be made if you fail to pay attention to the quality of canter after the pirouette: Your horse needs to maintain the collected canter when he comes out of the movement. At Prix St. Georges, the half-pirouette is performed on the diagonal between H or M and X, followed by counter-canter back through the corner and then a flying change at C.

Biomechanically, the canter footfalls in the pirouette become four-beat in the turn instead of the usual three, as the diagonal pair (inside hind and outside fore) doesn't touch down at the exact same moment. Because the horse's forehand is elevated during the pirou-

ette, however, the canter appears to remain three-beat. The tempo of the canter appears to quicken as well.

Here are a few exercises that I use to develop and improve the pirouette. Caution: When your horse gets tired, you must give him a break. All of these exercises require patience and time.

Exercise 1: Square voltes. Ride the same pattern that you used in the "box turn" walk exercise above, this time making a quarter-pirouette on two sides of the square, opposite each other. If that goes well, then ride a quarter-pirouette at each corner. Maintain a slight shoulder-fore position before and after the corners.

Exercise 2: Triangle. Ride from H to I to M in left-lead collected canter, making a quarter-turn at I (see illustration on the next page). This pattern develops accuracy and your awareness of where to go. It also helps the rider to think of the half-turn as one quarter-

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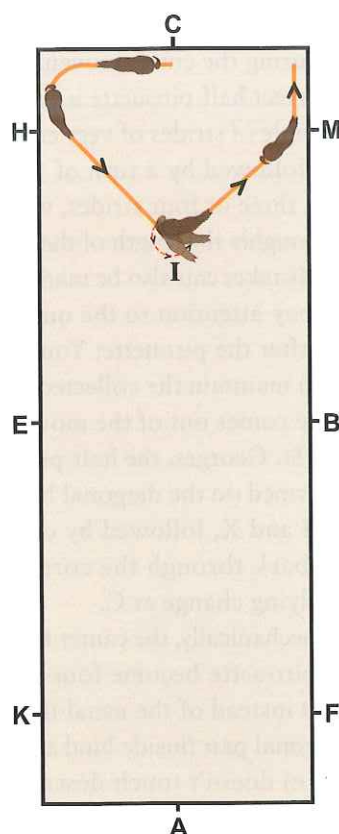
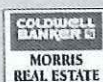


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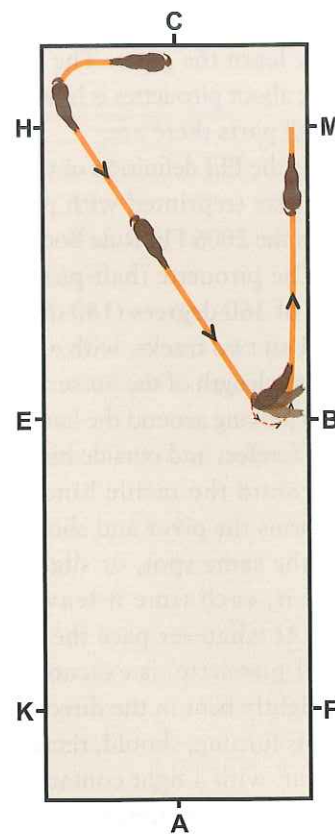


EXERCISE 2: TRIANGLE. This pattern allows several progressive variations. After you master the quarter-turn at I, you can try a one-third pirouette at I onto the center line toward C and, later, a half-turn at I heading back toward H.

turn at a time. You must feel the balance in each step and not rush. Repeat the exercise in the other direction, on the right lead.

Exercise 3: Diagonal turn toward the wall. Begin in your horse's easiest direction. Let's say it's his left lead: Ride left-lead canter from H to B. One horse's body length from the wall, pirouette left and proceed along the track, toward M (see illustration where). Repeat the pattern on the right rein from M to E. The wall helps to collect him before the turn and helps you to feel him taking more weight behind. The turn must be performed systematically, and he must wait for you to allow his shoulders to turn.

Exercise 4: Turn from quarter line. Ride down the quarter line in counter-canter, with your horse's leading leg



EXERCISE 3: DIAGONAL TURN. The wall acts as a barrier to help collect your horse and prepare him for the pirouette turn.

toward the wall. Make a half-pirouette toward the wall (essentially a five-meter half-volte at this point). Because this exercise is done toward the wall, it enables the rider to give the reins and allow the horse's shoulders to turn. The horse has to rock back, and the rider has a boundary and is less likely to pull the horse around.

Exercise 5: Over and forward. In the middle of the arena, alternate between riding three strides of pirouette and three forward strides. Then reduce to just two strides of each. This exercise is especially useful for the horse that gets "stuck" and can't get out of the pirouette because it gives the rider control of both the forward and the sideways movement.

Exercise 6: Half-pass and turn. If your horse has a tendency to lose the hindquarters in the pirouette, ride half-

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JIM DODSON

PIROUETTES ON FOOT

Sometimes it can be helpful to ask a student to dismount and walk through the pirouette on foot (this technique can be useful in teaching other movements as well) so I can stand next to her and help her master the position and the motion of her hips. I've found that if a rider can't walk a movement, she usually can't ride it. The unmounted session can really speed the learning process. "Cantering" on foot helps you to feel the action of the gait in your hips, especially when you bend your knees and make a turn. Your legs correspond to your horse's right and left hind legs. You can get the feeling of how he drops his haunches and bends in the direction of the turn.

If a student already knows the basics of the pirouette movement, then you don't need to cover this on the ground. But doing so can be a big help to a rider with a difficult horse or to someone who just doesn't have the feel or who has attempted canter pirouettes without good basics. The unmounted work helps to clarify the mechanics of the movement. I usually get an "aha" moment: "That's where my hip goes! That's where my weight goes!" The instructor can stand next to the student and position her hips and shoulders and guide her through the movement.



UNMOUNTED LEARNING: Mary Flood (right) helps young rider Kara Santmyer to get the feel of the pirouette movement while Santmyer's horse, At Liberty, looks on

pass in canter, collect, and do either a quarter or a half turn. Then ride half-pass back on the diagonal line. Do the pirouette and half-pass back again. This exercise really helps to control the horse's outside hind leg. You have to be careful, however, not to use the half-pass to enter or leave the pirouette while riding an actual test, especially if your horse has a tendency to lead with the haunches too much, because you will then deviate from the diagonal line that the test requires.

Troubleshooting

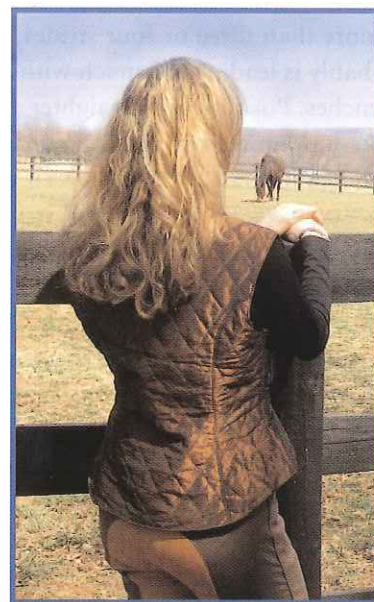
Let's take a look at the most common pirouette faults and how to fix them.

Horse comes off the bit and hollows his back. Go back to the basics. Work on throughness and conditioning. Get out of the ring a couple times

a week and do circles and transitions in the field to gain suppleness and forward energy. Strength is an important prerequisite before beginning pirouettes, and conditioning will really improve your horse's ability to perform this and other collected movements.

Horse turns too quickly. If he does the half-pirouette in fewer than three or four strides, he's lost his balance and probably isn't staying connected to your outside rein. He needs to wait for you. Return to the "over and forward" exercise as described on page 32. Make certain that you're sitting centered in the saddle. Riders sometimes use too strong an outside leg or sit too heavily toward the inside, either of which can cause the horse to spin through the turn because he's just being obedient. The rider doesn't realize the position flaw

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Pirouette takes too many strides.

If your horse does the half-pirouette in more than three or four strides, he probably is leading too much with his haunches. Position him straighter and make him more forward to your leg. In the canter, alternate between the box-turn exercise and forward strides between quarter-turns, which will help to free his shoulders.

Horse swaps leads behind. This happens when the horse isn't strong enough and has lost his balance. A horse will often switch leads in the pirouette because the movement puts too much weight on his inside hind leg, and he has to relieve that. Counter-canter work will make your horse stronger, as will shoulder-fore in the canter, which also will keep him on the outside rein. Give him more time to develop strength by alternating a few

steps in the very-collected-canter work with collected or medium canter.

Horse breaks from the canter.

Forward and collected transitions will tune him up and make him more responsive to the leg. He needs to be a little "hot" to the leg, but not tense.

Focus on keeping the balance in each step of the pirouette turn.

However, your leg-to-hand timing may be off as well, or you could be riding with too strong a leg or too strong a hand. If your horse is very responsive to your seat aids and you stop your seat to use your leg, then he may feel your blocked hips and stop. The lightness of the aids, the calmness of the rider, and the rider's centered seat all

come into play. Strive to develop an independent seat and leg so that you can combine the aids properly, using your leg to bring him up to your seat and then using your seat to direct the turn. If you push or send him around the turn, he stops and waits for you because you got behind him. As the herd leaders, we lead our horses. If you lead in your riding, you hardly ever have to send. You get a lot more cooperation.

Horse loses bend and falls in on the inside shoulder. Ride shoulder-fore to develop lateral suppleness and balance.

Horse's haunches fall in. When this happens, the pirouette gets too big. If your horse's haunches fall in, leg-yield back into the outside rein until he waits. Use this exercise to teach him to step a bit forward—not sideways—with his inside hind leg.

Know Where You're Headed

From a half-pirouette, you can move into a three-quarters turn by changing where you exit. For a full pirouette, think about putting together two half-pirouettes. Don't think of a pirouette as a whole turn. Instead, focus on keeping the balance in each step of the turn. Make small adjustments as a preventive measure rather than waiting until the movement falls apart and you have to make a bigger correction. As with all aspects of dressage training, riding pirouettes takes very good timing, quiet harmony, good communication, and respect for the horse when he tries. At no time should you lose your patience! Go back to basics. Move slowly up the training scale. Prepare your horse properly for each new degree of difficulty. Take your time, and enjoy the journey.

Next month: Courtney King discusses the Intermediate I canter "zigzag." ▲

Margaret Freeman is an equestrian journalist and a USEF "S" judge from Mt. Kisco, NY.



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