

Real Horses with Real Problems

Training doesn't always go by the textbook. Here's how to use dressage to help horses with their issues. Part 3 of a series.

The Crooked Horse

By Kathy Connelly and Beth Baumert
Photographs by Brigitte Voelk

The goal of this article series is to help readers with the not-so-perfect horse. This month, we tackle “the crooked horse”—the horse who is misaligned so he is unable to carry himself straight. He is usually heavy on one rein and elusive on the other because his hindquarters and shoulders are not aligned.

to go through both sides of the horse in the same way so that we have the same feel in each hand, left and right. When the young horse has this basic training in straightness, he'll use his body with ease as he develops collection. He'll become an elegant horse, able to engage and travel “uphill” in his carriage.



KEYS TO STRAIGHTNESS: *Correctly ridden corners followed by shoulder-fore positioning help to develop symmetry in the crooked horse. Tasha Zubrisky rides her eleven-year-old Oldenburg gelding, Furst Hans (Furst Heinrich x Romancier), in shoulder-fore after the corner at M. The shoulder-fore positioning prevents “Hansi’s” haunches from swinging to the inside, which would cause him to become crooked.*

The wise trainer tries to develop straightness in the horse, regardless of the discipline. Every athlete should be as balanced and symmetrical as possible. We want each hind leg to have equal carrying power and equal thrusting power. We want the energy

If straightness is a serious problem for your horse, the first order of business is to check with your veterinarian to be sure that your horse is able to be straight. Be sure he isn't restricted as a result of a physical issue.

Having said that, horses are not



SHOULDER-FORE: *In this positioning, the horse's shoulders are correctly aligned, slightly to the inside of his haunches*

straight by nature, so a certain amount of asymmetry is normal. Here's why:

First, a horse's hindquarters are wider than his shoulders, thereby naturally putting his balance onto the forehand. As a horse travels down the long side of the arena, even an unschooled observer can see that the width of the hindquarters causes the horse's inside hind leg to travel toward the center line of the arena rather than under his body (see photo on the facing page).

Second, horses are naturally left- or right-sided, just as humans are left- or right-handed. One side is more supple, stronger, and more versatile. Most (but not all) horses are inclined to travel with the right hind leg in a wider arc than the left. When a horse steps to the left or right of the center of gravity, he travels in a way that makes him even more crooked. That wide hind leg pushes the horse onto the forehand and onto the opposite shoulder.

Riding in shoulder-fore is one of the keys to straightness. This posi-



FROM CROOKED TO STRAIGHT: A horse's hindquarters are wider than his shoulders, so unless the rider changes his alignment he will travel with his inside hind leg toward the center line of the arena (photo 1). Positioned correctly in shoulder-fore, Hansi's body is now aligned and his inside hind is no longer tracking to the inside of his shoulders (photo 2).

tioning requires the horse to bring his hind legs closer together and to step directly under his center of gravity, which allows him to carry himself straight.

Before we discuss shoulder-fore in more detail, familiarize yourself with the concept of the balance box (see "The Balance Box" on page 27).

Shoulder-Fore

You need to be your horse's physical therapist and straightness trainer in order to achieve the symmetry required in dressage. The best way to help a horse become straight is by riding shoulder-fore with correct aids so that he learns to step under his center of gravity.

Don't think of shoulder-fore as an "exercise." It's the way you ride your horse all the time. In shoulder-fore, you align your horse from back to front. Here's how:

For purposes of explanation, let's begin shoulder-fore with your horse

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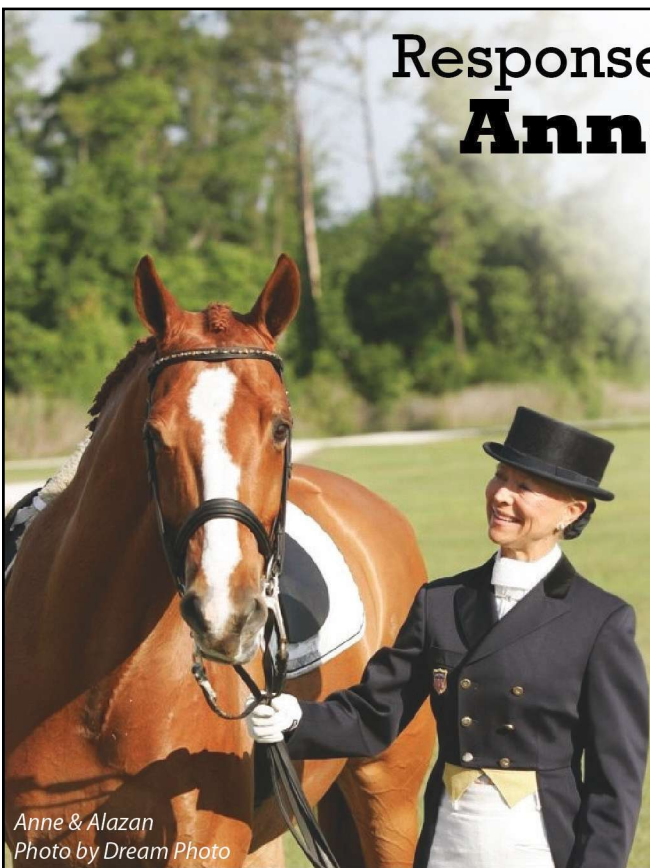
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tracking left in walk toward a mirror if you have one. Otherwise, ask someone on the ground to give you feedback.

Step 1: Ask for slight flexion to the left. Although you'll need your inside leg and inside rein to achieve this slight flexion, the primary aids for shoulder-fore are the inside leg and outside rein.

Step 2: Ask your horse to travel with his left (inside) hind foot on a track that steps between the two front legs. His outside (right) hind steps in

A horse becomes much easier to ride as he becomes straight. He goes forward more easily because he can. It feels as if his meridians have become clear to allow the flow of energy to come through his body from back to front.

the same track as the outside fore. He mustn't step wide to the right as he may be inclined to; your outside supporting leg will prevent that. The left fore travels on a track by itself. The shoulders are placed slightly to the inside of the haunches to achieve this.

Step 3: Practice shoulder-fore right in walk.

Step 4: Try riding shoulder-fore in trot and canter in both directions.

Caution: A common mistake is to make shoulder-fore into a lateral movement. Shoulder-fore is a straightening tool, so there's no side-ways element.

Advice: Be persistent. When you're successful, your horse will feel better balanced and you will both like the feeling.

When you're successful, you can start your "corner training" in earnest.

Corner Training

"Corner training" involves a very simple exercise that works for horses at every level. The exercise is easy once your horse understands the pattern and the program. We'll begin in walk.

Step 1: Walk around your arena in shoulder-fore. Before each corner, ride a downward transition to halt, riding from your inside leg into



CORNER TRAINING: Tosha halts Hansi before the corner. She'll proceed through the corner, riding from her inside leg to her outside rein. As a result of this exercise, Hansi has become very straight and has halted square.

Nutrena/USDF Adult Clinic Series



Featuring
Hilda Gurney

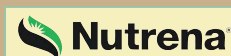
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Hilda Gurney earned an Olympic Team bronze medal in 1976. She also earned an individual gold and silver, and three team gold medals at the Pan Am Games, and 6 USET National Grand Prix Championships on the legendary, Keen. Both Hilda and Keen have been inducted into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame.

Hilda is an 4*/FEI Dressage Judge, a "R" Dressage Sport Horse Breeding Judge, "S" Dressage Judge and continues to actively train and compete several horses at the FEI Level. In addition, she is a dedicated teacher, instructing a generation of students from the grass roots to international levels.



9 Clinics in 9 USDF Regions Upcoming Dates and Locations

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Hosted by Potomac Valley Dressage Association

October 4-5, 2014
Idaho Horse Park
Nampa, ID
Hosted by Idaho Eventing and Dressage Association

April 19-20, 2014
Reins of Life
Michigan City, IN
Hosted by Michiana Dressage Club

For current details on these and future clinics visit www.usdf.org

The Balance Box

By Kathy Connelly

Horses vary in their degree of crookedness by nature, just as riders do. Very few horses or riders come close to being ambidextrous without significant training. The "balance box" is a term I developed to describe how the rider's balance and the horse's balance are interrelated.



MAJOR INTERSECTION: Depiction of the balance box, where the rider's vertical axis meets the horse's horizontal axis

The balance box is located where the rider's vertical axis intersects the horse's horizontal axis. The rider's balance and the horse's balance coincide in the balance box, thereby enabling straightness. The balance box is created by the rider's straight posture and correct aids: Her effective seat creates the connection to the hand and, therefore, into the rein. This connection directly correlates to the connection of the horse's hind legs stepping forward to the bit as the rider half-halts forward to the bit.

Thinking about the concept of the balance box can help you and your horse to achieve a mutual centeredness. You must first sit straight, square, and correctly and be in balance in order to influence your horse. A crooked rider cannot straighten a crooked horse.

Once in balance, if either horse or rider tips to one side laterally, there is a loss of mutual centeredness. For example, in a half-pass, the rider might sit off center to the outside or the horse might lean toward the inside rein. The same holds true for longitudinal imbalance: If the rider sits too far back, the horse will lose throughness and balance; if she perches forward, her weight will put the horse on the forehand.

It is the rider's responsibility to maintain balance within the balance box, not only by sitting correctly but also by riding correct half-halts before the horse needs it. Highly skilled trainers seem to achieve this easily, but most riders must work to maintain the balance box.

Try this mounted exercise to check your position: Walk straight toward a mirror and align yourself. Be sure that your shoulders, elbows, hands, hips, knees, and heels are at equal height and that the zipper of your breeches is in the middle of the saddle. Next, from the side, look to see whether you are in the balance box longitudinally. Your ear, shoulder, elbow, hip, and heel should be in alignment. It is important not to tip out of balance with your shoulders behind or in front of your hips.

With the balance box in mind, I combine shoulder-fore and "corner training" (see "Corner Training" on the previous page) to help horse and rider to align laterally and longitudinally.

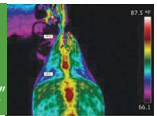


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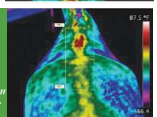


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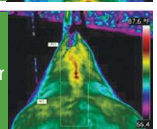
"Day 0, patient shows inflammation over the wither base, low thoracic spine and sacrum as indicated by increased heat in red and yellow regions."



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"After 7 days wearing the Back on Track sheet, the patient shows significant reduction in inflammation over the wither base, low thoracic spine and complete resolution of sacral inflammation."



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your outside rein. Then walk through the corner, continuing to think *inside leg to outside rein*. Ride every corner in this manner. You'll find that your horse becomes straighter and easier to keep connected to the outside rein as he travels toward the corner.

Note: The outside rein is the balancing rein—the rein that receives energy in turns as a result of centrifugal force. The outside rein describes and limits the degree of bend through turns. It is also the rein that the horse's hind legs harken to, or are responsive to, in collection.

Step 2: Repeat the corner training in the walk to the right until your horse understands the exercise. You can use the corner letters (H, F, M, and K) or the letters R, S, V, and P.

Horses think in finite, concrete terms, and your horse will learn to recognize the approaching corner as a finite marker. As he anticipates the downward transition, he will learn to travel straight toward the corner balanced on the outside rein. As a result

of riding this exercise, you will address the most common horse and rider issues:

The horse issue: Without specific corner training, the horse's natural instinct is to "fall in" as he approaches the corner. He leans away from the corner and banks the turn like a motorcycle. Any crookedness worsens as his shoulders fall to the outside and his haunches fall in. His inside hind leg is no longer stepping under his center of gravity, so he's not able to remain on the outside rein.

The rider issue: The reason that horses are crooked after a corner is that many riders do not complete the turn by bringing the horse's shoulders slightly to the inside and back into shoulder-fore. The symptom of the crookedness is that the haunches are in, but that is not the cause of the crookedness. It is natural for the horse to fall to the outside of the track with his shoulders after a turn, so the rider must support the horse in completing the turn, using her outside supporting

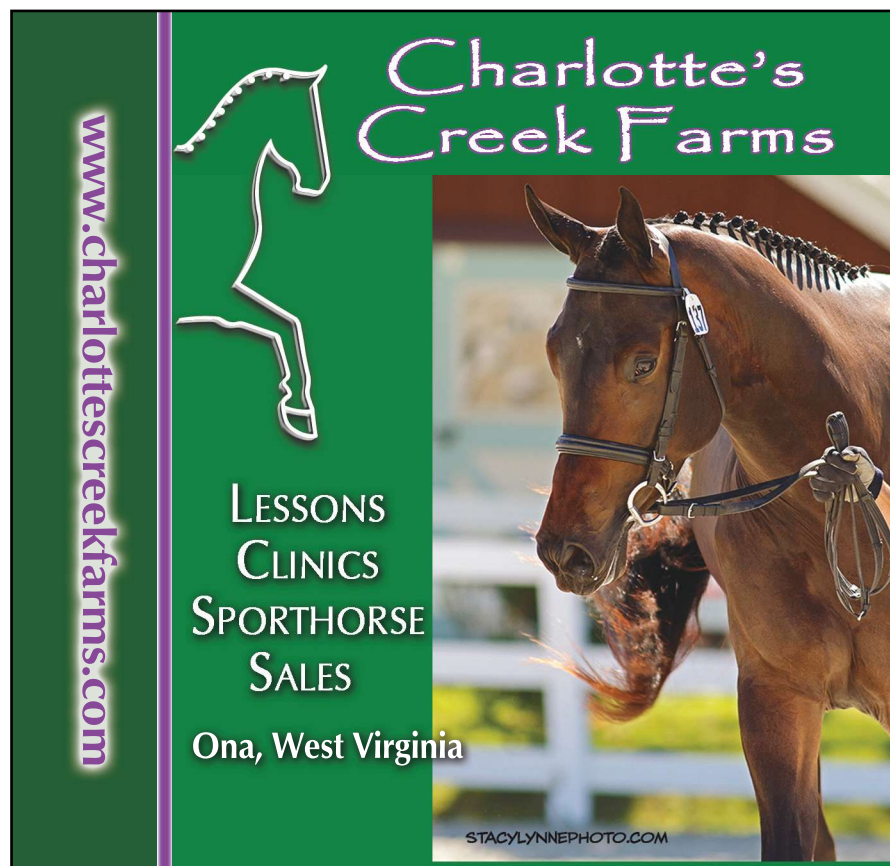
aids together with her inside rein and leg to help direct the bend.

The benefits: Corner training helps the rider to become aligned and centered with the horse; and because you, the rider, are the leader, it also helps your horse to become straight. Corner training also teaches the horse square halts because he learns to become straighter as he approaches the corner. It also helps teach him to respond correctly to half-halts as he approaches the corners. That's a lot of bonuses to a simple exercise!

Confirming Corners

Next, to confirm your corners, work on them in trot and canter.

Step 3: Once the desired result has been achieved in the walk in both directions, ride the corner-training exercise in the trot. Again, for purposes of explanation, let's begin with tracking left. Proceed down the long side H-S-E-V-K. As you approach K, walk and halt before the corner, thinking



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inside leg to outside rein. Then walk through the corner toward A. See if you can soften the inside rein without losing the flexion and bend. Then pick up trot, once again coming to the walk and the halt before the next corner. This corner work should be easier because your horse understands by now.

Step 4: If your horse is very green, don't try the exercise at the canter because he might not have the necessary balance. However, the walk and trot corner training will help his straightness in the canter. When he has learned it in the walk and trot, he will apply it himself in the canter.

When you and your horse are ready for corner training in canter, trot before the corner and then halt. Halting from the canter is unnecessary and puts strain on the hind legs. When your horse feels confident about corners, go on to step 5.

Step 5: By now, it is not necessary to halt in each corner. You may choose to halt in two of the four corners, but the goal is that your horse

responds to the half-halt by balancing himself on the outside rein and staying straight through the corners.

Be persistent about shoulder-fore in walk, trot, and canter. Be persistent about the integrity of your corners, too. You'll be rewarded with a well-balanced, straight horse who is set up for future success. ▲

Next month: The heavy and the light.

Kathy Connelly is an international dressage trainer and coach and a USEF "S" judge. She has represented the US at the FEI World Cup Dressage Final and the North American Dressage Championships, and she is a past winner of the US National Grand Prix Championship. She has trained and coached numerous horses and riders to the highest levels. She is vice-chair of the USEF High Performance Dressage Committee and a member of the USEF Dressage Committee. She divides her time between Concord, MA, and Wellington, FL.

Beth Baumert is a Fourth Level USDF certified instructor/trainer based at her family's Cloverlea Farm in Columbia, CT. She works with horses and riders from Training Level to Grand Prix. Beth was the technical editor of Dressage Today magazine for sixteen years. She is on The Dressage Foundation's Board of Directors and currently serves as vice president. Her website is CloverleaDressage.com.

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