



THE CANTER PIROUETTE

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The canter pirouette is a high level movement, a very difficult exercise that requires balance, suspension, suppleness, listening and collection from the horse. To have a good canter pirouette, we must have a good...canter.

We must have a pure three beat canter and be able to collect and lengthen the horse's body without struggle. We must be able to go from gallop to medium to collected, to very collected canter and out again without the horse losing power, balance or willingness.

In the canter pirouette, the horse has to bend through his entire body and spine in the direction of travel for six to eight strides. He has to turn on a small diameter circle and his inside hind leg has to act as a pivot, lifting and dropping in the same hoof print with every stride. His outside hind leg has to travel on a bigger diameter circle around the inside hind leg.

Unlike in the walk pirouette where his outside hind leg crossed over in front of his inside hind leg, in the canter pirouette, the hind legs do not cross since the inside hind foot stays in the same footprint. Instead, it is his outside foreleg that crosses over his inside foreleg.

The horse's shoulders have to travel around his haunches and if we have conditioned him well, his lower back, croup and hindquarter muscles will act as stabilizers so the base of his neck, chest, withers and neck can rise as he carries equal weight on each shoulder and steps over and over, stride by balanced, even, stride.

To execute the pirouette with cadence, in a slow rhythm, the horse must be very fit and strong by the time we begin the canter pirouette as the rhythm must remain unchanged throughout the whole pirouette. This demands great coordination and strength from the horse who has to perform without getting crooked or losing his balance.

The horse has to be able to collect, flex his hind joints deeply and evenly so that his canter strides, which have slowed down, show a clear bend through his entire body. He must be able to turn in place, and maintain his regularity of stride. We should consider the great body control this asks of the horse, especially as he carries us.

The pirouette from entrance to exit should be fluid and seamless, a thing of beauty. It is a test of strength and

balance. This effortless beauty cannot happen without understanding the role of conditioning and the role of the rider's balance in his ability to prepare and aid the pirouette without blocking his horse.

More often than not, as a clinician, I see pirouettes that are asked of horses that are not fit enough, not straight, not supple, whose canters are bordering on four beat or are three beat but uneven or irregular.

With no good preparation, horses do their best to please which leads to their compromising their bodies. They lose their balance and cadence. The pirouettes are halting and struggling, the horses hop around stiffly, they travel chest down and collapse on the inside shoulder. They cannot carry their shifting mass while performing the movement and they become unstable, their hocks wobble and the inside hind leg steps wide, steps back or becomes rooted in place unable to lift and drop. An unconditioned horse may also do a "bunny hop" where he jumps with both hind legs joined together for one or two strides.

The result is that the rider starts trying to "make" the pirouette themselves. Sometimes, they look like they are carrying and moving their horses neck and head with the reins with each pirouette step. Sometimes, the riders contort their bodies, spurring forcefully one side of the horse while pulling hard on the other. These pirouettes are four beat, the horses look frazzled and their bodies become disconnected.

Twisting the horse's body affects the rider's ability to straighten the horse in time to exit the pirouette at the same exact spot where he entered it.

Sometimes, a horse will simply run out of power, and walk or even stop, or it will shuffle in place.

The least damaging thing that can do to the horse is that the pirouette is simply too big which is not good dressage geometry, but not so bad for the horse.

This is why the pirouette is such an important milestone in a rider's journey. Learn to ride it and train it properly and it will create a relationship and a dynamic between you and your horse that can take you to Grand Prix.

If the rider's balance is imperfect, if their torso does not rise without tension and turn lightly to mirror the horse, if their arms and hands, their seat and legs are not tension free, if their neck is stiff and their head sits crooked on their shoulders - then they are blocking their horse instead of being his dance partner. A partner that should gently guide their horse without grabbing, holding or unbalancing him.

Blocking, over bending, over flexing, show clearly a rider does not have independent balance and has not prepared and conditioned the horse properly. These are the most

common mistakes I have seen prevent riders from obtaining beautiful pirouettes.

WHEN IS THE HORSE READY FOR THE CANTER PIROUETTE

When the horse is balanced, supple, strong and able to shift his weight onto his haunches, when he can flex his hind joints deeply bearing weight equally on both hind legs, when he can push off the ground and carry himself without faltering, when he is listening to our aids and he can collect without strain for several strides and lengthen his frame again seamlessly than he is ready for canter pirouettes.

To attain this degree of fitness, suppleness and balance requires that we work progressively, always with the awareness that asking for pirouettes incorrectly or too early can cause extremely serious, sidelining injuries to the horse's musculoskeletal mass, tendons and ligaments.

In particular, the horse can develop painful cramps from bad pirouettes. There is enormous strain placed upon the legs, pelvis and topline of the horse when the mass of the horse's body is not balanced properly and his inside hind has to carry more than it can support. His back and pelvis have to exert a disproportionate amount of force to remain stable and lift the front end over and over again.

CONDITIONING: A LIFETIME PURSUIT

In Part I of our two part of series on pirouettes, we explained the role of schooling very correct square and circle turns, travers, and 1/4, 1/3, 3/4 pirouette to progressively develop balanced and regular half and full walk pirouettes. These walk pirouettes and the work leading up to them are in turn preparation for canter pirouettes.

We continue preparing our horse, suppling and straightening him with correct gymnastic exercises. We use basic work together with more physically demanding lateral work to ensure the horse is confident and comfortable with his training.

WHAT ARE THE EXERCISES THAT I USE TO PREPARE MY HORSE

To develop the horses strength and suppleness for the canter pirouettes, I like to use the same philosophy I use for the walk pirouettes. I begin to prepare the horse by riding large around the arena asking for travers, here and there. When the horse feels ready, I pick up the canter counter, cross the diagonal and ask for a change, now and again. I do not drill. When I am in true canter, I come to the 3/4 line and ride a short diagonal in canter half pass. I go straight and alternate between working canter, medium canter and collected canter. When I feel the horse is straight AND flexible I will then ride a canter square and ask the horse to slow down,

slow down and then turn, turn, turn. Then I come out of the bend and go straight again...

The preparation is a progression.

If the horse can give me 1/4 steps easily, then I ask for 1/2 over days and weeks. We aim to build up to 3/4 and a full pirouette. I ask for only a couple of strides at a time to instill confidence and keep my horse straight and regular in his stride. In between asking for pirouettes, whether training from quarter to full pirouette I mix the training exercises so that my horse does not get overwhelmed.

I make sure that the horse is in independent balance and he is not leaning on either my inside or outside leg. My legs are gently wrapped around the horse without tension, supporting him in the same manner we discussed in the walk pirouette article. My outside leg is slightly behind the girth, encouraging his outside hind leg to step and his hindquarters to stay in place.

In the beginning, and in the schooling of pirouettes, I make it easy for the horse, I go a little larger and I go to the direction that is easiest for him. This is true when he is learning the pirouette, but it is also true when he is confirmed, and I am schooling. My daily goal is to achieve suppleness and straightness, which will lead to balance and fitness and build the horse's strength. It is the same as a pianist practicing his scale, warming up slowly and using

the familiar work to loosen his fingers and prepare his body and central nervous system for the more complex music which will require far greater concentration and dexterity. It is the same for our horse.

I work calmly because when I do, I avoid mistakes that sabotage the horse's confidence. I want to build not just his fitness but his confidence and his ability to focus. As a result, I keep the canter pirouette work very short inside the training sessions because I do not want the horse to feel overwhelmed and to feel sore.

When my horse is doing 1/4 canter pirouettes, I build up to 1/2 and 3/4 pirouettes as I did with the walk pirouette. I am very aware of the geometry of the pirouette, of the placement of my horse's feet and the alignment of his spine and the angle of his body. This is of the utmost importance.

I pay attention to where I start and where I come out of my pirouettes. I am careful not to over bend the horse's body or over flexion him at the poll or at C3. I work WITH the horse, not against him. I assist him instead of insisting. I ask for the balance and collection he is able to offer at his stage of training so that he will continue to develop self carriage and lightness without a forced frame.

SCHOOLING FULL PIROUETTES

When the horse is ready to begin schooling the full pirouette, I ride him on a bigger circle, the size of which will vary as the horse learns. It will keep varying throughout his training because I do not want to develop only one pirouette in the horse, just like I do not want to develop only one canter or one trot.

To create a healthy body, I know I need to vary the amplitude, angles and diameter of the movements. Just like I need to vary the gaits I work in, and the variations within the gaits.

To ask for the same workout day in, day out makes horses tense, stiff and robotic. A good posture becomes a bad posture if it is fixed. The body of a horse needs to lengthen and gather, expand and contract in a multidimensional manner to function optimally and develop healthy, strong, flexible muscles.

In the case of the canter pirouette, if a horse is stiff or tense, he will try to resist executing the pirouette. In order to avoid it, he will begin to anticipate and take over by rushing the movement. To make the pirouette safe for the horse I have to ensure his body is strong and supple so that he will not torque or concuss his joints.

If the horse is able to maintain the schooling pirouette, I begin playing with the pirouettes size. Here and there, and not so many times in a ride, I ask for a smaller pirouette and then out again.

I canter and collect a couple of strides and out again, canter nice and simple to rest the horse's body, collect again a little and send him out. Now, I slow down, slow, down, slow down, turn, turn, turn. I am looking for a soft, good quality canter, with relaxation, a canter that is pleasurable for the horse.

I slow down, slow down, turn, turn, and come out to go straight in a few steps of travers to loosen the horse's body if I feel him stiffen. I am assisting the horse to him relaxed. Once we are back on track then I can ask for a half pass in canter to provide a change from the pirouette so when I ask for another one again, it will be nice and fresh.

I enjoy using the entire arena when I train, I visualize it as a grid on which I can create a multitude of figures I ride in different combinations. Having many figures to rely on allows me to work in the middle of the arena away from walls so the horse is neither supported not blocked by them.

It also keeps his mind fresh and makes it impossible for him to anticipate.

I always try to find what the simplest way to teach my horse is, and I remember to make the work a pleasure for him too.

WHAT AIDS

In the pirouette, I have to be extremely careful with my aids as without my support and guidance the horse may lose his hindquarters. I ride with my inside leg at the girth, my outside leg behind the girth aware that its purpose is to encourage the horse's hind leg to step over and the quarters to stay in place. My weight is ever so slightly on the inside of the bend and I lean slightly in the direction of travel. Not back or to the outside of the bend.

For the same reason, just like in the walk pirouette, I am aware that the horse's ability to stay straight and balanced in the pirouette depends on my own balance. I mirror his body stride for stride. My torso rotates ever so slightly so my chest is aligned with the horse's chest, our sternums one line. My shoulders mirror the horse's, my outside shoulder is slightly ahead of my inside shoulder to accommodate the outside of the bend and the longer arc of the horse's neck. My contact is equal in both reins. My inside hand is maintaining the flexion while my outside hand guides and supports the horse.

Where the horse's head goes, so will his body and so with every single stride I use my own body very carefully to tell the horse how much sit I am asking for, how much lateral

bend, what rhythm to adopt, and when to come out of the pirouette as smoothly as we went into it.

COMMON RIDER ERRORS TO BE AWARE OFF

- 1. Coming into the pirouette crooked.** The horse does not have the chance to carry his weight on his inside hind leg. His quarters have no choice but to swing out. If a horse swings his hindquarters then he is doing a 'turn in the middle' not a pirouette. If the horse falls on his inside shoulder, he will putter out of the pirouette, out of balance and poorly prepared for the next step.
- 2. Over bending the horse.** The horse will fall on his inside shoulder and he will not be able to come out of the pirouette where he came in, therefore the rider won't have his horse straight for the exit of the pirouette.
- 3. Riding the neck very short and the nose behind the vertical.** Not only does this destroy the purity of the canter but combined with forcing the horse to sit, it destroys horse's long back muscles, their pelvic attachments, the joints, tendons and suspensory ligaments. The entire body is subject to such hard demands that the pelvis and lumbo-sacral junctions can be pulled out of alignment as can vertebrae over time.

IN CONCLUSION

The success of a good pirouette results from the refinement of the rider's feel, timing and training ability. It can only be as good as the preparation that went into it and is a true reflection of the skills of the rider asking for it. Done poorly, it is one of the most potentially physically damaging movement we can ask of our horse. Done well, it is one of the highlights of the dressage riding experience. It is Art.

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