



INTRODUCTION TO WALK PIROUETTE

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A correctly executed pirouette is a thing of beauty, a perfect storm of collection, impulsion, suppleness, strength and balance. In canter, it is one of the most physically demanding movement we can ask of our horse. It is a test of a trainer's ability to develop self-carriage and of a horse that is completely attentive and responsive to the aids. A horse filled with power and expression, yet focused and tension free.

Before we ask our horse for the more difficult canter pirouette, training logic and progression dictates that we first teach him the walk pirouette, beginning with the 1/4, then 1/2, then 3/4 and then full pirouette.

A good pirouette is light, fluid and harmonious, it requires suppleness, strength and balance.

The FEI directions for the walking pirouette are almost the same as for the canter pirouette.

According to article 413 of the FEI Guideline for Dressage Event “The pirouette (half-pirouette) is a turn of three hundred and sixty (360) degrees (hundred and eighty -180- degrees) executed on (2) tracks, with a radius equal to the length of the horse and the forehand moving around the haunches.”

For our horse to meet the objectives listed in this definition, there are several conditions that must be in place.

First however, it is important to understand what a pirouette is, besides being a movement in a test. Pirouettes are a part of the lateral work family along with shoulder fore, shoulder-in, shoulder-in out, half-pass, travers and renvers.

These are all movements that when used knowingly can allow the rider to develop, enhance or rehabilitate his horse physically: Supple, loosen, straighten and even him out. Improve the regularity and quality of his gaits and his overall posture.

Lateral work makes it possible for us to single out specific limbs, muscles and joints. We can ask for one hind leg to flex and carry more weight individually.

This allows us to work on gait regularity and quality. We can release stiff or jammed lumbosacral (pelvis) and coxofemoral (hip) joints so our horse can collect more easily. We can unbrace the entire topline so that our horse can lower his haunches, flexion all the joints in his back and hind legs, engage his abdominal wall, raise the base of his neck and lift his forehead more easily.

Lateral work can help us gently release a tight abdominal wall and increase the freedom and range of motion of our horse's shoulders which allows the horse's wither to rise and his ribcage to swing freely instead of being pinned between two stuck shoulders.

Lateral movements allow us to shift a crooked horse's center of gravity back between his shoulders and very importantly, continue improving our horse's diagonal pairing.

I use lateral movements daily to improve my horses and the 1/4 pirouette is one movement in particular that I will ask for to test a horse's through-ness, responsiveness to the aids, suppleness and independent balance.

Asked in slow-motion, the 1/4 pirouette can also help me reconnect a horse from brain to hind and fore hoof or alert me to neurological issues.

There is no end to how essential to training lateral work and pirouettes are.

SUPPLENESS AND EVENNESS

While executing a walk pirouette, the horse's body is bent in the direction of the turn from ears to tail, in a harmonious curve. It should not be over bent or crooked with the neck going one direction and the quarters another. This requires the horse be supple and his muscles elastic enough to accommodate the extending of the horse's body on the outside of the bend (convex side) and the contracting of his muscles on the inside of the bend (concave side).

If the horse is stiff and his muscles are not pliable, this will impair the entire spinal chain and all the joints in his body. His tendons and ligaments will be tight, he will not be able to bend well longitudinally, deeply flex the joints of his supporting inside hind leg, and extend the joints of his outside hind leg to step over and around his inside hind leg.

If the rider insists, the horse will learn to dislike pirouettes and run the risk of tendon injuries in the hind legs, muscular tears in the croup, hamstrings, abdominal wall and pectoral muscles as well as possibly develop skeletal alignment issues in his pelvis.

We want our horse to already have a degree of straightness or evenness in his body before we ask for pirouettes so that he can carry his weight equally on all four feet and already be able to lower his haunches and collect. To preserve his health, we want him to be able to carry himself, bend evenly and step with regularity.

This need for bend and evenness or straightness is why we introduce the walk pirouette only once the horse has already been taught lateral work and can perform a good shoulder in, shoulder-in out, half-pass and travers.

STRENGTH AND BALANCE

Even a walk pirouette demands substantial fitness from the horse.

As its front feet and outside hind foot move around its inside hind foot, the horse's inside hind leg functions as a pivot. The pivot leg should not be stuck into the ground and the horse should not spin around it. As the name indicates, it is a walk pirouette and the inside hind leg should remain active, lifting and dropping in the same place with the same clear walk rhythm as when the horse is walking straight. The hind legs should travel on as small a circle as possible while the front legs travel on the outside perimeter of the pirouette's radius.

This means that posture wise, the horse has to bend laterally and stay in perfect balance while he raises his forehead, lowers his haunches and places more weight on his inside hind leg to turn. His pivot leg's joints have to flexion deeply to support the added mass on his hindquarters – and the weight of the rider.

The horse has to have the physical strength and muscular control to take each step clearly and deliberately. To stay balanced and connected throughout the entire movement, while on on the bit, with his nose in front of the vertical and his poll at the highest point.

PRECISION AND GEOMETRY

The need for balance, strength and self-carriage is also manifest in the pattern and size of the pirouette. The horse has to go in and out of the pirouette precisely on the same line, entering and exiting on the same spot. His transition from traveling straight to bending should be fluid without a break in the rhythm. The number of steps in the pirouette are between 6 and 8 and they must be clear and regular.

GOOD AND CLEAR RHYTHM

From the beginning, whether I am performing a 1/3, 1/2, 3/4 or full pirouette or even a counter pirouette, I pay

special attention to my horse's rhythm and having a clear four beat walk (or 3 beat for canter).

The most important thing in dressage is gait purity so I am very careful to not destroy my horse's walk by asking for work he is not ready for, or by drilling.

KEEN AND ATTENTIVE

A good, healthy canter pirouette requires an elastic and strong horse but also a horse that is able to focus and listen to the lightest aids. That is true of the walk pirouette as well.

We are asking our horse to be present with us, to collaborate with us with every stride he takes so that the pirouettes look light and fluid rather than forced and tense.

As for the rider, he must understand the movement before asking the horse to perform it. He must be balanced, able to differentiate his aids clearly and sit evenly in the saddle without getting crooked in his effort to have the horse pirouette. He must be able to create the bend, place his horse's shoulders and control his haunches as well as slow down or speed up the activity of the shoulders and haunches without blocking the horse, putting him on the forehand or confusing him.

WHEN TO INTRODUCE THE WALK PIROUETTE

I start to teach the walk pirouette when the horse is confirmed in his lateral work. I begin at the walk and in the direction the horse is most comfortable bending in.

I pay attention to my horse's overall posture and physical and mental state: is he tense, relaxed, nervous, settled, etc..

I ride my horse with his nose in front of the vertical in two light reins. I pay attention to how he reacts when I ask for a 1/4, 1/2 or full pirouette, how his ribcage, heartbeat and breath feels underneath my seat and between my thighs, how he carries his neck and head and how the contact feels in my hands. How assuredly or not he steps forward, and whether he can maintain his self-carriage and collection through the entire pirouette.

If I feel my horse bracing, the rhythm changing or my horse laboring to bend and carry himself, I adjust my training. I do not drill.

If my horse runs into the following problems, I know I have to take a step back and reevaluate whether he is straight, supple and fit enough as well as confirmed enough in his lateral work to take on the demands of the pirouette.

I watch to see if:

- He loses his balance or cadence, dives on the forehand, stays in place or on the contrary rushes on, but loses his impulsion.
- He is crooked and weighs one shoulder more than the other.
- He steps wide behind.
- He pivot leg wobbles under his mass and he steps backward or stays glued to the ground.
- His front end freezes.
- He cannot extract himself from the pirouette and over turns.
- He bunny hops with his two hind legs jumping together for one or two strides.
- He loses power while pirouetting and stops completely.
- He comes out of the pirouette crooked.
- The pirouette turns into a large circle.

- These are all symptoms that my horse is either not ready, or that I am not guiding him properly.
- If I do not take my horse's responses into account and keep drilling the same incorrect work, he will get increasingly confused. He will lose his interest and confidence and become surly. The pirouettes will remain incorrect and without expression and beauty.

HOW I INTRODUCE PIROUETTES

There are different ways to introduce the walk pirouette. Some riders ask for a turn on the haunches and then make the turn smaller and smaller. Sometimes the term turn on the haunches is used to describe a pirouette. This is not quite correct. A turn on the haunches is different from a pirouette in two ways: it is asked for in a slowed medium walk instead of a collected walk, and the hind legs travel on a wider circle than what is required in a pirouette which requires the inside hind leg lifts and drops in the same footprint.

I do not use this approach because in my experience, teaching pirouette like this interferes with flexion and the correct bend of the whole horse's body. The horse goes into the movement anticipating no flexion and they do not understand the bend we are now asking for to make the movement a correct pirouette. As a result, they tend to want to take over and struggle.

Pirouette can also be taught by asking for haunches in on a 10 meter circle. I do not use this approach because it is not appropriate for a young or inexperienced horse (below Medium/3rd level). They should not be expected to maintain flexion and bend on a 10 meter circle for so long. It is too small a circle and it is physically too demanding. This exercise can be adapted and used in increments that break up the 10 meter circle but it should only be used with a horse that has extensive experience doing lateral work. Never with a young or inexperienced horse.

In all my training, I like to make the work very simple for my horse, and as easy physically as possible.

As a preparation for working on pirouettes, as previously mentioned, I make sure my horse is confirmed in his lateral work and travers in particular.

I like to use travers because it is an easy introduction for my horse to learn to move in the same direction as his body's flexion and bend. I can ask for just a few steps in the beginning in walk, trot or canter without stressing him. This is a prelude to what we will ask for half-pass and pirouettes.

To ride travers, I bend my horse so that his forehead is on the track and his hindquarters are off the track, inside the arena. I position him so that his outside hind leg crosses

over the inside hind leg and steps into the track of the inside fore leg. This increases the engagement of the inside hind leg so that its joints have to flex more deeply and carry more weight. With an inexperienced horse, I ask for this movement as I turn into the corner, from the short, to long side.

As he understands this work, I can ask my horse to do a few steps of travers, go straight and do a few more steps of travers again without needing a corner to set the movement up.

Once he is fluent in travers, I am ready to start working on my pirouettes.

One figure I like to use is a square with four square corners. Square corners I can turn into 1/4, 1/2, 3/4 or full pirouettes if I want to, or turn into a circle or ride simply as a corner, depending on how my horse feels. I use this square not only to teach the walk pirouette from scratch but also to retrain a horse who does not understand how to execute a correct pirouette but can do a bad one.

I begin by riding around the arena and warm up my horse. Then, in a good active but not over active walk, as I turn onto the long side, I ask for a couple of steps of travers.

Then I go straight, then a couple of travers steps again until the next corner.

The travers helps prepare my horse for the pirouette as it improves the crossing of the outside hind leg and creates more engagement for the inside hind leg – it has to carry more weight and its joints have to flexion more deeply.

I turn the corner onto the short side, walk straight and make a square corner right, walk straight, make another square corner to the right, go straight, slow down, turn right but I do not ask for a pirouette yet, I continue straight, and at the next corner I slow down and ask for a quarter pirouette checking that the outside hind leg stepped under and over well. Then I go straight, do a square corner without asking for anything, then straight and at the next corner I ask again for a quarter pirouette.

I consider if my horse is listening to me. I go straight and ask for no pirouette and at the next corner, I ask for a half. I go back to the long wall and ask for travers at the walk, not too steep.

I vary the walk, sometime working walk, sometimes a more collected walk, I ask my horse to slow down and ask for a quarter pirouette again, then ask for a half pirouette.

I vary the size of the pirouettes I am asking for, because I am training, not competing and I want to develop my horse's suppleness, willingness and keep his attention. My pirouettes may be a bit bigger or smaller than 3 meters and I am not concerned about it. I am not drilling, I am suppling my horse.

I do not want my horse to anticipate and brace against what comes next. I am constantly listening to what his body is telling me. His ribs against my leg..are they stiff or loose?, Is he struggling to bend or carry himself over his inside hind leg or is it easy for him? How does he feel in the contact. Is his mouth soft or is he locking his jaw and poll? If he tells me I am asking for too much bend for him today, I ask for less.

If my horse is finding the 1/4 and 1/2 pirouette easy, I ask for 3/4 and then a full pirouette. If I feel him struggle, I do not try to fix the pirouette while in it, I step out of it and go large, perhaps pick up the canter and work in a light seat forward, down and out to release and relax all his long muscles.

I may work on something else for the rest of the lesson – or come back to the pirouette after a while. Whatever I chose to do, I know I can go back to a square corner any time I want.

MY AIDS

To ride a pirouette, if I am turning to the right, I sit in the middle of my horse but because my body mirrors that of my horse, my weight is slightly to the right, in the direction of travel, in the inside of the bent.

In this direction, my horse's pivot leg is his right hind leg.

I keep my right leg closer to the girth to control my horse's activity and bend. My left leg is slightly behind the girth to prevent his hindquarters from swinging out, encourage his outside hind leg to step in front and over the pivoting inside hind leg and to prevent his hindquarters from swinging out.

My legs pulsate, they do not kick or press hard, I remember to use my walk aids. I sit without tension in my seat and all the way down my thighs, calves, ankle, heels and toes.

My upper body is very slightly turned at the waist to reflect the bend in my horse's body. My outside hand is controlling how much bend in the neck my horse has while my inside right hand guides the horse in the direction of the turn with a light opening rein. My arms follow the movement of my horse's neck and head in walk. My shoulders, arms and hands work together, and

as my torso turns very slightly to accompany the turn of my horse's shoulders, my own shoulders mirror his.

My outside rein is against my horse's neck but it is not short or tight, my outside rein is leading him in the turn but it is not long or loose. I keep a soft, accompanying contact.

As I go from a straight line in and out of the pirouette, I continue to follow my horse's movement and I ride every stride of my horse's walk.

Entering and exiting the pirouette is as important as the pirouette itself, especially exiting. It is important that I prepare my horse so that he goes from bend to straight without losing his rhythm, balance and activity.

Sometimes a horse will anticipate the end of the pirouette and step wide behind, trying to be done faster, it may rush or on the contrary, lose power – or it may lose its rhythm. If this happens, I check the size of my pirouette and the amount of bend I am asking for, it may be too small and steep for where my horse is at today.

I ride a larger pirouette and if that does not help, I go back to schooling 1/4 or 1/2 pirouettes and focusing on clear steps and balance and then I give my horse a break and try again another day.

Pirouettes are hard on the horses bodies, I do not want to teach my horse to dread them.

COMMON RIDER ERRORS

Sometimes, I see riders who become stuck and forget to ride the walk and follow it with their seat and hands. They stiffen and block the horse. They pull on the outside rein as a habit and pull on the inside rein to try to create the bend instead of using their seat and legs to channel the horse and position him properly. This creates a neck-in effect instead of a harmonious bend from ears to tail. They sit to the outside of the turn with their torso and shoulders turned to the outside of the turn.

Sitting to the outside of the turn and using the seat and leg aids incorrectly results in pirouettes that do not have enough or true, bend.

If the rider is not using his legs properly to create and maintain the bend and impulsion, the horse loses energy and the pirouette just putters into nothing.

If a rider over bends the horse, he may also find it hard to get out of the pirouette in time. And/or, the rider may rush the pirouette which is very common. The horse spins in and out of the pirouettes and loses balance and self carriage

This creates confusion, fear and upset in horses which then have to be retrained. This takes more effort and time and is not easy.

A learning rider can also get overwhelmed and become confused and upset when starting to learn how to ride a pirouette because of all the elements that have to come together: the pattern, the precision, the collection, the rhythm. The same advice for training the horse apply to the rider. Break the learning in small chunks, give yourself time, step away if you get frustrated and know that it takes a long time to perfect a good pirouette. Not days and weeks but months and years.

IN CONCLUSION

If a horse is properly prepared before beginning to work on pirouettes, and the work is introduced progressively, the rider will find it much easier to learn and teach his horse and become ready to introduce the canter pirouette.

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