

Lateral Thinking *IT'S ESSENTIAL*

One of the sights to savour, at any event where Matthew Dowsley is competing, is just how correctly his horses go. Matthew's horses always show the solid grounding of athletic training, with that added extra touch of the showman that Matthew is...

We asked Matt to talk about lateral work, and how and when to use it.

Basically the first thing I want all my horses to do is go down, round and soft. I concentrate on getting the horses going in rising trot, with canter transitions; just down and round. I like the neck to be no higher than the wither when I am starting off a working session.

On a young horse I will go from the sitting trot to the rising trot, because you have got to blend the work in, they're not strong enough to carry your weight for forty minutes, so I do blend the work. But I'm not going to let the horse off totally on long loose reins when it's doing the wrong thing. I will let the outline lengthen, but the horse must remain on the bit.

You are trying to teach the horse to go in a round way of going, not like an upside down banana, you have to train in the strength for the horse to carry you with his

back up. He's not going to develop that strength standing the paddock; he's not going to develop by thinking about it. The only way you develop that strength is by working on it in the arena day by day. Once I've got the horse round and soft, I can start bending softly left and right, and then I really insist on the horse going away from the inside leg into the outside rein. Your horse must understand that before we can move on, and the exercises I am going to talk about will help you achieve that aim. I do all these exercises in walk, trot and canter. I will also describe the more difficult lateral exercises, so you know what you are working towards. Teaching the horse to go from the inside leg to the outside rein, accepting the outside rein, is how you maintain the horse on the bit. It is the beginning of almost everything. Clemens and Judy Dierks have taught me there's no secret mysterious way of training, it is just that the horse has to go on the bit, going away from the rider's legs and channelled through to the reins.

- The horse must at all times work down and round into the two reins. He must stay soft and round.

The first exercise I use to teach the horse to go away from my leg is a form of leg yielding. You must keep the horse soft and round and then you start asking for softening to the inside rein; asking the horse to move away from the inside leg to the outside hand.





I keep testing the horse. I push him away from my leg, and then I straighten him. I want to feel that the horse is actually bent around my inside leg creating lateral flexion and keeping longitudinal flexion through softness and roundness; so he's nice and deep and round and he's moving away from my leg.

The horse must go away from the inside leg and accept the outside hand; it's the accep-

tance of the outside hand that they find hard. They don't understand it. Most horses are more than happy to clunk along and hang onto that inside rein and not bend at all.

What you are really doing by establishing your inside leg and your outside rein, is just getting the horse to carry more weight on the inside hind leg.

You do this first exercise on the circle, and how you ride it depends on feel which you as the rider have to work to develop. I won't say, 'right I'm going to half halt and ask for more acceptance of leg and hand in twenty seconds time or twenty steps time'.

When you should apply the half halt is something you learn by feel. If the horse accepts the inside leg to the outside rein, I might not half halt again on a whole circle. But on other days, the horse might find it a bit more difficult to accept that leg to hand, so I would insist a bit more often.

You must keep your outside rein, and you must push with your inside leg, and as you push with your inside leg then your 'take' on the inside rein is softened. If everything goes right, then you feel the horse responding and saying, 'oh yes, I will soften on the inside'. So you can see that the neck is soft, he's looking to the inner side, you can see it looks right and you will develop a feel.

Then we could try leg yielding on the wall. Commence by riding around the full school on the left rein at the walk. The way I like to teach the leg yield, is have the forehead to the wall and the quarters in. It's easier this way because the fence helps you.

You bend your horse to the outside. So you're on the left rein, you bend your horse right, your left rein then becomes the outside rein, the horse is going away from the

right leg on the girth, the rider is deep seated, more to the right side, and left leg is behind the girth.

Now we have our horse going away from the right leg into the left hand.

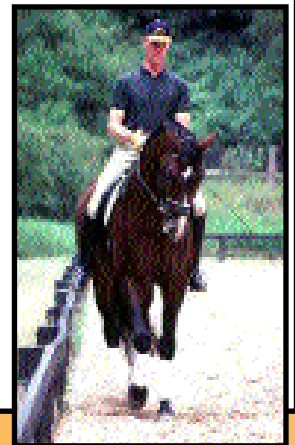
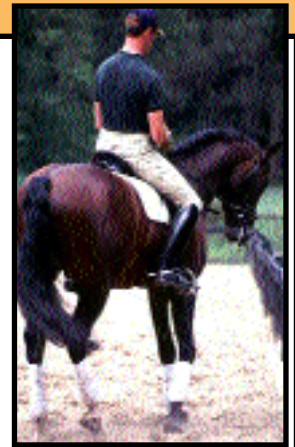
You might aim to ask for twenty metres of leg yield, but start off with less, because it has to be correct

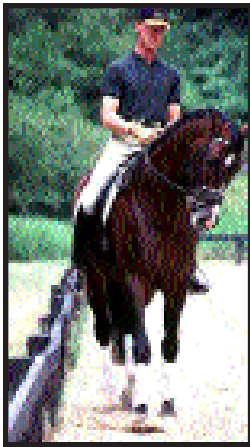
The horse has to:

- remain on the bit
- maintain the rhythm
- move on four tracks
- try for a few steps only at first and remember the most important thing is to always keep your rhythm.

The next exercise we could progress to is the shoulder fore.

Start, again at the walk, with a little circle in the corner of your working area, 8 or 10





metres, on the left rein. Maintain the bend of the circle, you're on the left rein, pushing the horse from your left seat bone and left leg into the right rein down the wall, gradually with the forehand slightly to the inner side.

This is encouraging the horse to carry more weight on his quarters and also it will correctly straighten the horse, bringing the forehand in line with the hindquarters. It's another exercise with the horse going from the rider's inside leg to the outside rein. I use the shoulder fore in the canter especially, to straighten the horse. The horse is naturally bent more to the left than to the right. It's normal for a horse to canter on a line crooked, with the quarters in. You've got to train the horse to manoeuvre his forehand in a fraction to straighten. You're not actually pushing the quarters back to the wall, you're bringing the forehand in to the inside fractionally to straighten him.

Once we've mastered the shoulder fore, the next exercise to work on is the shoulder-in, which has more bend and angle, which will increase the engagement of the quarters. The shoulder in is to be done on three to three and a half tracks.

The shoulder-in is basically quite easy when you've got the bend of the circle (as we did to start the shoulder fore) and you

keep asking the horse to go away from the inside leg.

Or you can ride a corner, then bring the horse's forehand across with your inside leg and outside rein.

Some riders make the mistake of riding a corner then pushing the horse's quarters out, that's wrong, you must bring the forehand in. If you try to ride the shoulder in that way, if you come through the corner and let the horse's quarters fall out, and then instantly the horse is on four tracks, so it is leg yielding, you lose the bend.

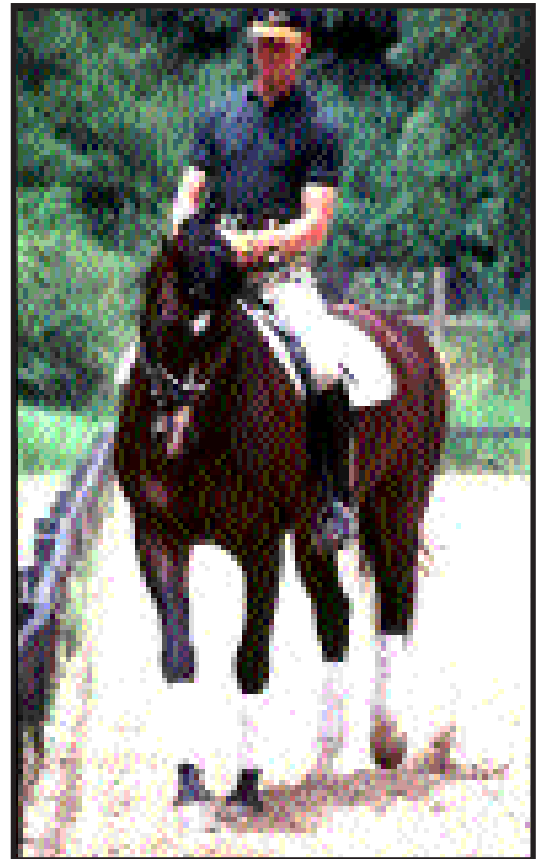
If this happens, you should circle again and activate the horse with your inside leg. The important thing is to get your horse's rhythm and impulsion back, make sure he remains on the bit, bending around the inside leg and then start again.

Whenever you lose

- rhythm and impulsion
- the bend around your inside leg
- or your horse is no longer accepting your hand you have got to go back, make your horse soft and accepting, and start again.

The next exercise is travers.

In travers on the left rein the horse is looking left, his head, neck and shoulders parallel to the wall, with the quarters in, on four tracks. Again to establish the travers, start with a small circle in the corner, and complete the circle on the wall. The outside leg is back, the outside rein



is fixed, the inside rein is asking for bend, the inside leg is your forward driving leg, the horse will go away from the outside leg and rein, remaining bent to the left. So the quarters must come in, the forehand stays on the wall with bend, and the quarters have come in and to produce a bend to the left. You start to ride the corner, and instead of pushing the quarters to the wall with your left leg, you hold the quarters in with your outside leg with your left leg on the girth. You bend the horse to the left, sitting on your left seat bone,

keeping the horse's forehand parallel to the wall.

With the half pass, I teach my pupils to think there's an imaginary line from the wall across the diagonal.

So you ride around the corner and instead of going down the long side in travers, you go across the diagonal in travers, that will give you the feeling of a half pass. If you just ride half pass like this, as a travers across the diagonal, it helps establish more bend, and more crossing, and then you just position the forehand more to the inside for the half pass in a competition, and the half pass is always better I think.

Just imagine there is a wall from F to H, an imaginary line. You ride the corner at F and then you bend the horse around the inside leg, and maintain the bend. You start on the diagonal, but you don't let the horse's quarters go to your imaginary wall on the diagonal, so the horse is bent around the inside leg, and you just restrict with the outside

rein; you travel across that imaginary line as if there's a wall running right across the diagonal.

The horse's head, neck and shoulders are parallel to the imaginary wall and the quarters are in. Just hold the quarters in with your outside leg and use your inside leg and seat bone keep the activity and impulsion to maintain the flow.

If you are losing impulsion *ride out of it*. remember to try for a few steps only at



first. The worst thing is to lose the rhythm. You see still in a lot of horses these days at Prix St George, they can't go even half a diagonal in a half pass in a rhythm. On a horse at that level you should be able to keep the rhythm. Too often you see a stiffness, it's a lack of engagement. The horses just aren't supple from the poll to the tail, they're not loose over the back, they're not on the bit. It is quite basic. The important thing is that all these exer-

cises are ridden correctly and in rhythm - don't compromise. If you've lost your outline go back on a twenty metre circle and make sure the horse is going from behind over the back to a round outline. Check that he's accepting the bit by asking for flexion to the inside. A little bit of a push away from the inner leg, then I might go into a shoulder in on the long side, a small circle, then a shoulder in again. Maintain the rhythm through the shoulder in, circle, shoulder in.

On the next long side shoulder in, small circle, travers. I might ride the horse on the short side, and then ride him travers or half pass across the diagonal. I'm constantly using the exercises to establish the collection and engagement. If the horse is not handling the exercise, then I might take a step back, maybe two. But you don't go back to long reins in rising trot - that's what you do that at the end

of a working session.

I try not to go on and on and on about the theoretical side of riding. It's the way I've been trained. The way I have learnt is very direct. You don't need a degree in psychology. I was told to get on with it, do this and this and this, and you can do it. And it works.

Thank you to Gullit - the imported Dutch stallion for being our 'model'.

