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The Diagonal Relationship of Rider's Legs to Hands

Every dressage rider is coached to apply inside leg to outside hand to affect the energetic shape of the horse, producing softness on the inside of his body and stretching of the horse's outside. Riders over fences maintain the integrity of their turns to obstacles with outside legs curving the horses' motion from the haunches and inside fingers massaging the rein to soften the horses' jaws. The use of diagonal aids in sequence is much more common than the use of lateral (left leg and left hand, etc.) aids in unison because lateral use can often appear to the horse as a pulling or stiffening message.

The reason for this lies in the actual mechanics of all the horse's gaits with but one exception (the pace or rack); the rider must influence the flow of motion from rear to front with connection to the natural swing of that movement. The true lateral gaits (pace/rack) are specific to hacking cross-country or showing in a large ring and are influenced mostly with the rider's seat. They are gaits considered unsuitable for jumping for reasons of safety and balance and are not used in dressage.

The horse's walk is a gait of four beats that should have *equal* spacing between footfalls and moves left hind, left fore, right hind, right fore. If the walk becomes lateral (almost two beats), it is considered ruined. Pushing the walk beyond its natural scope can create a two-beat, lateral motion.

At the walk, the rider influences the horse's energy with diagonal use of aids because the physical swing of the horse's body moves from his engaged hip to the opposite, supporting shoulder; the shoulder is releasing its supportive function as the opposite hip swings forward to take the weight and gather it for propelling onward. Lateral aids would interrupt that flow and influence the body to stiffen and begin to walk laterally out of four distinct footfalls.

On a straight line, the rider should keep

her body straight—even hips, shoulders, legs, and sitting bones. Her hips should *follow* the swinging hips of her horse and never pump at him aggressively, which can make his back sore. On the straight line, the rider flexes the horse longitudinally by kneading with one leg and then the other in rhythm with the walk, closing the fingers in a massage on the diagonal (opposite) rein. This effectively allows the horse's jaw to relax and yield as his haunches step through and gradually assume the support of more weight. As the horse's frame shortens with self-carriage and flexion, the rider must shorten her reins slightly to maintain her contact, her connection to the very energy she is shaping. This shortening is done *after* the forehead elevates and the reins slacken. The reins are shortened one side, then the other, a little bit at a time, back and forth as the horse steps through more, the diagonal leg always connected as the energy rounds.

The trot is a gait of diagonal pairs of legs working in unison. The trot is a gait of two beats, evenly spaced, footfalls sounding one distinct beat each time. On a straight line, the rider trots with her legs influencing the horse together when needed: they are applied equally and actively, with hands acting equally and actively so as not to disturb the evenness of the trot itself.

The flexions at trot are achieved through activation of the haunches and supple yielding and returning to base position with the hands.

The walk and trot are influenced similarly when ridden on circles, through corners and figures. Because both gaits can be ridden truly straight (unlike the always slightly bent canter), bending the walk and the trot requires an actual change in the rider's position and use of aids.

At walk, the actively swinging, following hips of the rider shift to a weighted inside sitting bone and a stretched outside hip to

bring the entire leg back behind the girth for the turn/bend. The inside leg actively puts the horse's inside hind leg farther underneath his body as he shortens his inside and lengthens his outside muscles. This inside leg is supported by a quietly stretched outside rein acting as a "wall" or "rail" to tell the horse where his perimeter lies. The rider's inside hand is soft and active to keep the horse's jaw relaxed and to direct the bend. The outside leg keeps the haunches from swinging around and sort of "wraps" the horse's body around the inside leg at the girth. The use of inside leg to outside hand bends the horse. The use of outside leg to inside hand creates suspension, lengthens the horse, or flexes him depending upon degree of application. These are all uses of the aids while *bending* the horse's body. These aids must be dynamic and never static; a rider's leg that just digs into the horse's side and stays there will cause him to push *against* it! A hand that pulls will make a mouth that pulls.

At trot, a bend is influenced in the same way as at walk with a bit of extra lift of the rider's pelvis to help the horse follow upward with his back. The legs "scoop" the energy upward and forward by pushing the horse's hair forward (on his sides) with loose ankles and very steady hands.

The canter is a gait of three beats starting with the outside hind, then the diagonal pair of inside hind and outside forelegs, inside (leading) foreleg, then a moment of suspension, and the sequence repeats. The horse is always slightly bent at canter simply because his hips are wider than his shoulders and his legs are working in a complex and one-sided way.

At canter, the rider is always weighting the inside sitting bone, supporting with the outside hand, softening with the inside hand, kneading with inside leg at the girth, and stretching/supporting with outside leg