

By Dianne Lindig

Play It Straight!

Happy Spring to all my fellow horse-lovers! I hope you've all been taking advantage of this lovely Spring weather, catching up on training time in the arena, or enjoying the freedom and solitude of your favorite trail.

Here at the ranch, I've re-experienced my love of training a young horse via our 3 year old buckskin mare, Nellie, whilst being reminded of an important, and often neglected, component of training and maintenance- Straightness.

As rider-trainers, we're often so concerned with developing our horses' flexibility, that we forget this equally important skill. Believe it or not, moving straight forward while supporting a rider's weight is not a very natural movement for a horse, and can be more difficult for many than moving in a bending or diagonal line.

By teaching your horse to move in a perfectly straight line, you are developing

1) Your horse's core strength, and ability to balance in response to your seat and other aids, and

2) Your own awareness and well-timed use of your aids, in order to create and maintain the straight position and forward direction of your horse's body. In short, you will be developing your sense of timing and feel.

The following exercise will help both you and your horse to develop these important skills, fine-tuning your human-to-horse-to-human communication in the process.

Before you begin, notice that I have underlined the word seat as an aid. Often the most neglected of aids, it is the first one that your horse responds to. The first step in developing a "good seat", is to establish a neutral, balanced, base position astride your horse. This means that your weight is distributed evenly side to side, that your shoulders and hips are perfectly level, that your rib cage is evenly engaged on both

sides of your body, and that your skeletal components are properly aligned vertically. This means head over shoulder girdle, over tall, upright pelvis, over soft, long legs, with center of ankle directly below hip joint. The best way to feel whether you are in this position is bareback, but you can also do it in a saddle, if safety is an issue. Review Sally Swift's *Centered Riding I*, for details. It's the best resource for developing a centered, balanced seat, for either English or Western riding.

Next, warm up your horse at a long, free, walk, using your seat, breath, and legs, as described in my previous "Sweat the Details" articles to move your horse forward, speed up, slow down, and to stop. Then go to a long, straight side of an arena or work area, and line your horse's body up perfectly parallel to the rail or markers.

To do this, first, establish your base, neutral seat position. Then pick up one rein, evenly, in each hand, collecting your horse slightly as you apply light pressure with both legs to support your horse. (You may do this exercise with both reins in one hand as you and your horse develop your straightness skills to a more advanced level.) Look ahead, to a point exactly straight ahead of you in the distance, perhaps a spot on the rail inside the far corner of the arena. Do not look at your horse, but instead feel where your horse's body is beneath you.

Next, lengthen your spine as you breath in, staying tall, yet soft in your hips and lower back. You should now feel your horse lift its back beneath your seat as it softens at the poll and prepares to move forward. If not, bump gently with your legs until your horse responds.

Now, stay tall with lower legs on your horse and exhale. Your horse should start to move forward, preferably in a straight line. At first, it probably won't be straight, so you will quickly correct it by straightening its neck or shoulders with quick squeezes or lifts of your reins, while keeping the horse's rib cage straight with pressure or bumps of your lower legs. You can use a spur, if necessary, to get the appropriate response, but go easy with it, and try just your leg first. If your horse throws its hindquarters in or out, move your leg quickly, slightly behind where it hangs, and bump them back over in line with the rest of the horse's body. As you continue forward, feel your way through applying these aids in combination, when necessary, in order to establish and maintain your horse's straightness.

Remember to maintain your balanced seat throughout the exercise. In this situation, your seat is, in fact, providing the primary aid for balance and direction to your horse. The quick, clean corrections of your leg and rein aids are simply reinforcing this primary information.

Once you've mastered the exercise on the rail, move toward the center of the arena, set up a cone or marker at each end of your straight line, and try the exercise there. Next, try holding both reins in one hand, reaching your free hand down to squeeze one rein, when necessary, to reinforce your seat aids. (You may have to switch hands from time to time to make it all work). Both Western and English riders can benefit



1) Here, Molly steps to the inside with her right foreleg.



2) I have bumped with my right leg to push Molly shoulders back to the left, while lifting the right rein and opening the left rein slightly.



3) Here, I've moved my left leg down and back to move her haunches back into line with her front end.



4) Nice and straight!

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and each other.

There were other friends that were friends when I was on top. Great at the time, but when things went south for me, the jealousy again destroyed friendships. Trying to find another horse when I was hurting so badly inside about Rocky and worried about losing my income because I wasn't winning takes its toll. As in any kind of loss there is grief and uncertainty. Sadly, one person that I was really close too, even tried to destroy me personally as well as professionally and it was devastating to have someone turn like that, but when the "ride" ends it ends. Since this particular friendship ended, others have come forward with similar stories about this person.

Then there are those that have stuck by me no matter what. Those I treasure. Those are the friends I consider "Balcony People." There is a book by this title. I suggest you read it if you want to surround yourself with positive people who believe in you. I don't believe that every experience I have had is a terrible thing. I just learned to read people

better and choose my friends more wisely. You see, I want the people I care about to win just as much as I do for myself. That's the kind of people you need in your competitive life and life in general.

Kelly Kaminski is the two time national and two time reserve barrel racing champion. This great American horsewoman and writer continues to compete and hold clinics kellykaminski.com.

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from the one-handed exercise.

Review the following photos, then practice straightness with your horse. When trail riding, use straight stretches of trail to practice this skill. Your horse will learn to focus on your body and position more consistently, establishing a closer connection between the two of you. In the show ring, your straightness skills will pay off big-time in pattern and reining classes. (I have an iconic Bob Loomis reining tape in which he says that he will spend whole training sessions on straightness, if necessary, before proceeding to any other training maneuver.)

Happy riding, and Remember to Enjoy the Ride!

Dianne Lindig is a lifelong equestrienne, trainer, and competitor in both English and Western disciplines, and was voted Horseback Magazine Instructor of the Year in 2008. She can be reached at Hill Country Equestrian Lodge where she teaches Whole Horsemanship year-round. www.hillcountryequestrianlodge.com, or (830) 796-7950.

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