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September 2002

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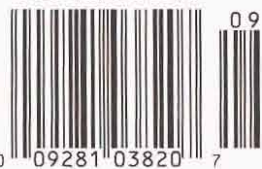
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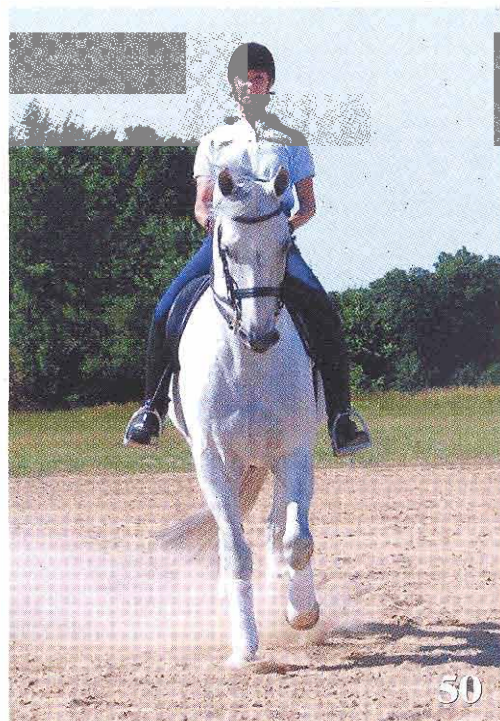
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# Dressage

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# The Evolution of Straightness



A double Pan-American gold medalist discusses the progression of straightness, explaining how daily training of it leads to greater self-carriage and collection.

*By Carole Grant with Beth Baumert*

*Photos by Equinephoto.com*

**A** rider attentive to his horse's suppleness from the beginning will find that his horse can achieve the straightness needed for better gaits, a higher level of self-carriage and a greater degree of collection. This is true for all horses, regardless of skill, conformation or breeding.

Training your horse to this level of straightness may sound easy, but it can be confusing because there are three stages: the horse's natural crookedness at birth; lower-level straightness and finally relative straightness—the goal for upper-level horses.

All horses are born crooked. Riders may change them through training, but their natural tendencies are to travel with their footprints as illustrated in diagram 1, p. 51. The implications of these footprints are far-reaching: The horse's right hind leg carries weight, but it has trouble pushing and coming under. Consequently, that is one of the reasons the horse doesn't want to draw properly on the right rein, giving an empty, hollow feeling. On the other hand, the horse's left hind leg pushes, but it has trouble carrying weight. It leaves the ground quickly, making the horse stiff or heavy on that rein.

The horse would always travel crooked if we didn't address the issue of straightness every day with suppling exercises. Through correct training, we first can teach the horse to become supple enough for "lower-level straightness," shown in diagram 2, at right. This occurs when the horse goes forward, allowing his hips to follow his shoulders like the cars of a train follow its engine.

After a horse learns this, we can train him to become relatively straight. That is, we want to position his shoulders to the inside and narrow his hind legs so that they step forward into the space between his front legs. (See diagrams 3a and 3b, at right.) The thinking is the same as what is needed when you try to push a thread through the eye of a needle. You push the thread straight through. There is no sideways activity. Similarly, there is no sideways activity in threading your horse's hind legs. Ultimately, you want to be able to narrow or "thread" either hind leg without the other leg falling out. Over time, this strengthens the horse so he can push and carry equally with each hind leg and he is taking equal contact in each rein. As a result, his withers come up and his shoulders become even more mobile. This is the degree of lateral suppleness that produces relative straightness. That's why you will hear that you have to bend a horse to make him straight. Riders who truly understand this situation when the horse is young avoid having aged horses that are *unaccepting* of the right rein and *stiff* on the left.

### Absolute Versus Relative Straightness

Why don't we want the horse to be "absolutely" straight on his line of travel

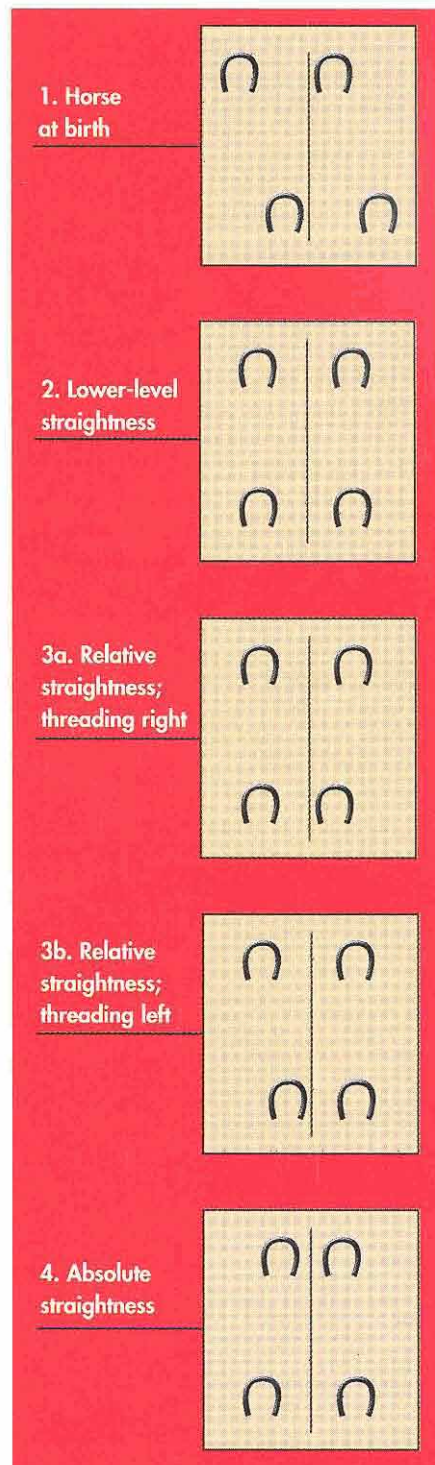
as opposed to relatively straight? We are accustomed to thinking of straightness like a ruler, but the equine version of straight is different. If a rider were to make his horse absolutely straight, the horse's hind feet would pass to the outside of his front feet—and to the outside of the center of his weight—minimizing the carrying power of his hind legs and putting him on his forehead. This is because a horse's hips are naturally wider than his shoulders. (See diagram 4, at right.) As a result of this wide hindquarter base, combined with the horse's typical conformation of carrying more weight on the front legs, we *don't* want him to be absolutely straight. We want him to be relatively straight, narrowing his hind legs between the spaces of his front legs, allowing him to carry more weight behind.

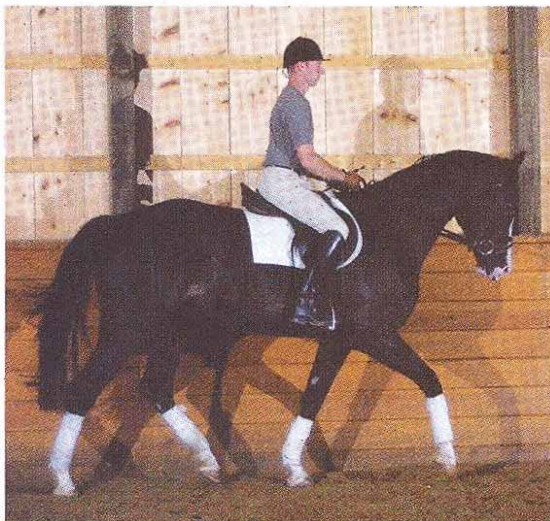
In our favor is the fact that the horse, if trained correctly, becomes straighter because he tries to please us and he learns fast. The bad news is that he learns incorrect things quickly, too. So you need to teach him correct information. In this article, I'll explain how I train my horses to relative straightness and give you several exercises to try. These are the basic tools for the horse learning to control his body.

### Exercise 1: Go, Stop and Steer

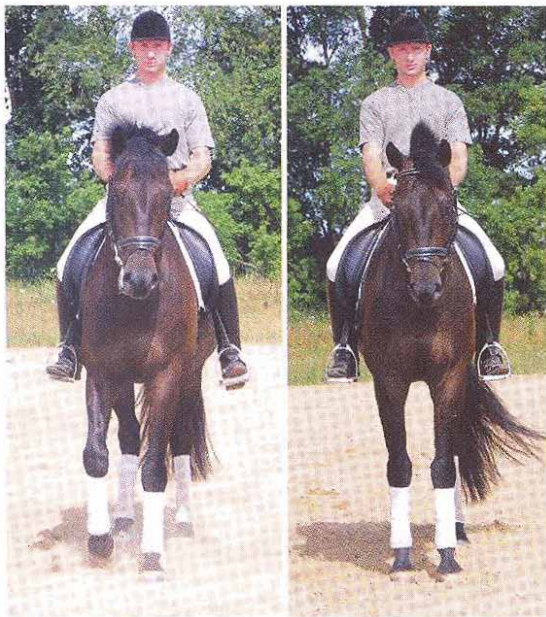
To achieve straightness, the horse must be able to do supple upward and downward transitions and follow the rein. In other words, he must learn to "go, stop and steer." This gives him balance—a requirement for developing straightness. It also allows the rider that all-important release. How can the rider ever soften if his horse doesn't stop?

**Go Forward.** At first, your horse may





**GO FORWARD:** The first step in training a young horse to go straight is to make him go forward. Marcel Van Der Burgh uses the arena wall to help go forward, opening his outside rein and leading 4-year-old Mugsy to the wall. At first your horse may not be able to step to both reins equally, but the only way to work toward straightness is to go forward and keep asking him to step toward the bit.



**HALT:** Halting improves a horse's balance, a requirement for developing straightness, but this only works if the horse's shoulders are in front of the hips. Like most young horses, Marcel's 4-year-old Dutch Warmblood Rubens stopped in a crooked way (left photo). To correct him, Marcel brought Rubens' shoulders and neck to his left (right photo) in front of his hind legs. This skill of moving the horse's shoulders is the key to straightening him.

not be able to step to both reins equally, but the only way to work toward straightness is to go forward and keep asking him to step toward the bit. Use the arena wall to help by opening the outside rein and leading him to it—even if his hips fall in. Focus on asking him to go forward into receiving hands. If your horse breaks into the canter, that's great because it shows he's getting the idea.

When training a horse, we must always remember not to hold him back while sending him forward and not to drive him forward when holding him back—minding the old saying, “legs without hands and hands without legs.” Sometimes it appears that we use our legs and hands together because we are using the aids for go and stop very closely together, but the leg and hand shouldn't actually be used at the same time. If the horse is truly forward, the rider can put the horse's nose in front of the vertical at any time.

**Stop.** The reins make the horse stop and, ideally, the tension on them puts weight on the horse's hind legs, improving his balance. But this works only if the horse's shoulders are in front of his hips. If his hind legs have fallen left, you need to bring his shoulders and neck in front of his hind legs and ride forward. Moving the shoulders is the key to straightening your horse, and we will address that skill when we ride the turn on the forehand and the square.

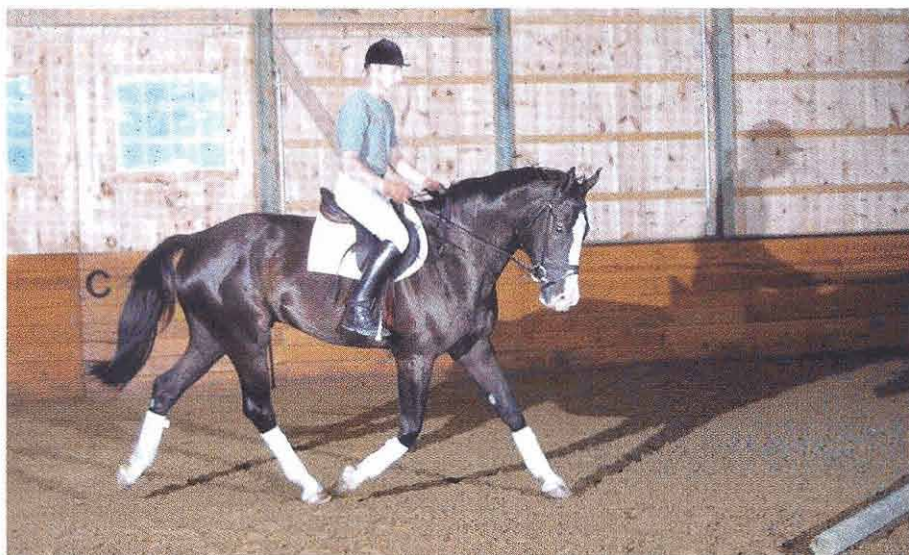
**Turning right.** Jumping riders aren't plagued with difficulties turning right as much as dressage riders because they often ride over cavallettis and little jumps. Turning right over a cavalletti will teach a developing horse to push and carry with his right hind leg and take more contact on his soft, right side. As he comes around the corner to the pole, squeeze with your legs to ask him to engage and come under and push forward with his right hind leg. Open the right rein, bringing it to the right, to lead his shoulders to the right. Then use both legs, asking your horse's right hind to push and drive his body immediately into the turn. Equalize the contact by taking more on the soft, right side and softening more on the stiffer, left rein.

At this point, your horse may try to drift left, but don't worry about it. Continue to ride him forward. Don't try to prevent the drifting by blocking your horse with the left rein and leg. Experienced riders know that holding the horse's 1,200 pounds on the left rein is not an option. Utilize your horse's natural ability to push with his left hind and allow it to swing in its full arc. He needs to learn to push with both hind legs before he will stop falling left.

**Turning left.** Turning left is often easier, but it can be a problem because the horse may want to fall on the left shoulder. He doesn't want to engage and carry weight on the left hind, and his right hind pushes insufficiently—the combination making him stiff on the left rein.

When turning left, some people take too much tension on the left rein. This blocks the left hind, making it leave the ground even faster than it already wants to. The left hind should be encouraged to leave the ground more slowly with a soft, non-blocking, left rein.

To turn left: Open the left rein and encourage the horse to follow that rein by asking him to push with the left hind forward into both reins. Take contact on the soft, right rein and soften on the stiff,



**TURNING RIGHT** Marcel teaches Mugsy to push and carry with his right hind leg by turning him right over a cavalletti. As they approach the pole, Mugsy engages and pushes with his right hind leg. Then he will push evenly with both hind legs to get over the pole.

left rein with a give-and-take action of the left wrist. This will encourage the horse's left hind to leave the ground more slowly.

### Exercise 2: Turn on the Forehand

After your horse has learned to go, stop and steer, you want him to learn body control. With this, you will be able to place his shoulders in front of his hips—necessary for riding to straightness. The turn on the forehand appears to do the opposite because it mobilizes the hindquarters, but it improves the rider's ability to control his horse's shoulders separately from his hips. This helps the young horse and rider learn body control.

To prepare for the turn on the forehand, flex your horse's jaw either to the left or the right—toward or away from the direction of hindquarter movement. Then bring the active leg slightly back and push your horse's body around his front legs. Ask him to keep the rhythm of walk. (See photo, p. 55)

Evasions in the turn on the forehand are normal. Your horse might try to run away in front. Stop again and repeat your leg aid. Next, he may want to back up. Go forward, then halt and try again. As his trainer, your job is to keep telling your

horse to do the turn by stepping rhythmically forward and sideways—marching in front—without moving to the left or to the right with his shoulders.

### Exercise 3: The Square or Rectangle

At this point, the young horse is going forward and accepting the contact, but he may not be technically "on the bit." He's had a good beginning because he's going naturally forward, and his body follows wherever the rider positions his shoulders. Through good training, he has learned to push with his right hind leg and make contact with the right rein. Riding the following exercise on the square or the rectangle will improve his balance by asking him to go forward and then bringing him back to a stop. It also will teach him to keep his forehead aligned with his hindquarters in the downward transition and, in so doing, it will help him put more weight on the hindquarters.

1. Start this exercise on a 20-meter square going to the right in walk.
2. Before the corner, halt by using both reins equally or slightly more with the outside rein. This should put more weight on the horse's hind legs because



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his forehead is in front of the hindquarters. However, many times the horse won't keep his shoulders lined up with his hips.

- If his shoulders fall to the right, open the left rein to bring them back to the left. Line up his left fore with his left hind. A mirror or a groundperson will help you, or you can look behind you.

- If his shoulders fall to the left, open the right rein and bring them to the right. The rule is to always bring the horse's shoulders in front of the haunches and then move forward into them.

3. Ask your horse to walk and, in preparation for the corner, open the right rein and turn him to the right.

Ride the square in both directions: When your horse can do this exercise with walk-halt transitions, try to do trot-halt transitions. Frequently turn your square into a rectangle and go straight down the long side to refresh the forwardness of his gaits. In time, if your training has been correct, he will keep his shoulders aligned with his hindquarters during all transitions.

#### Exercise 4: Transitions

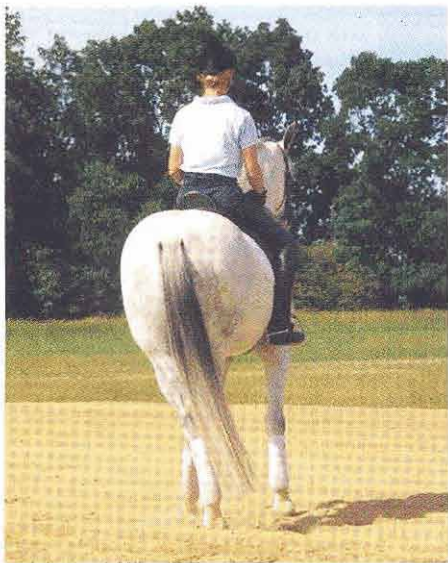
The horse learns to push when he goes up a hill, and he learns to carry and engage when he goes down a hill. It's the same with upward and downward transitions. The upward transitions teach him to push, and the downward transitions teach him to carry weight. As a result of your horse's elementary suppleness and straightness, your half halts and downward transitions will put weight on his hind legs. Your upward transitions will keep him working eagerly and stretching forward toward the bridle. His neck and back need to stay relaxed during all transitions, which helps him engage and take the contact. Trot-canter-trot transitions are the most useful in teaching young horses to push and carry.

Half halts are the ultimate form of upward and downward transitions. You

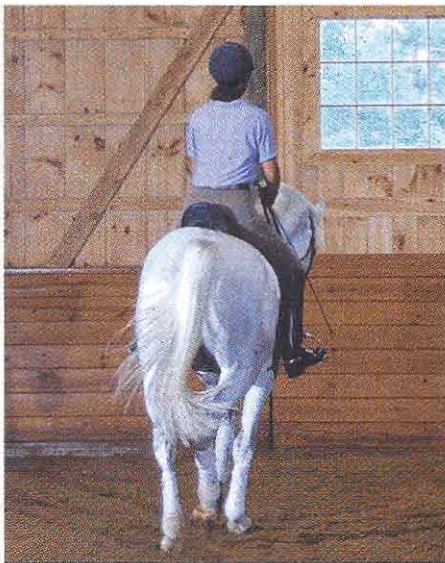
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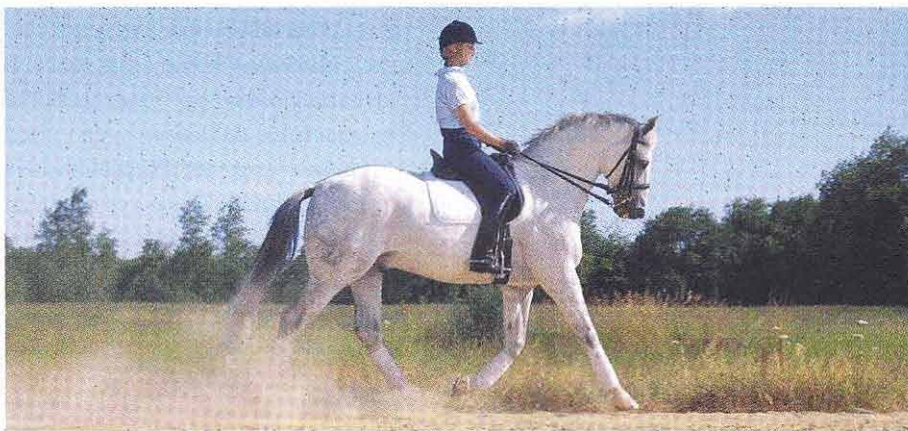
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**TURN ON THE FOREHAND:** My daughter, Mary Ann, improves her ability to control 13-year-old Hassan's shoulders separately from his hips by doing turns on the forehand. This exercise leads to body control and, eventually, allows the rider to place the horse's shoulders in front of his hips—necessary for riding to straightness.



**THREADING:** To help your horse carry weight on his hind legs and push off equally into each rein, you want to thread each inside hind leg into the space between his two front legs. My daughter, Tonya, threads 5-year-old Patrick's right hind between his two front legs. It is this degree of suppleness that produces relative straightness.



A horse like Hassan, who has been trained to relative straightness, gains self-carriage and a greater degree of collection and becomes like a supple and strong ballerina.

ask your horse to go, stop and go again. Half halts aren't nebulous movements in which the rider goes through contortions to do them without reins. You can teach your horse half halts by being clear about the go-and-stop aids—doing simple transitions such as canter-trot or canter-walk first. Then move onto more difficult transitions within the gaits. Eventually in the half halt, you need only *think* about

walk, and your horse will carry more weight behind but keep the trot. Many people keep the half halt too long, and they forget to release—which will get your horse jammed together so he can't carry himself.

#### Exercise 5: Threading

The previous exercises have helped your horse work toward lower-level straight-

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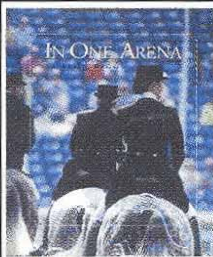
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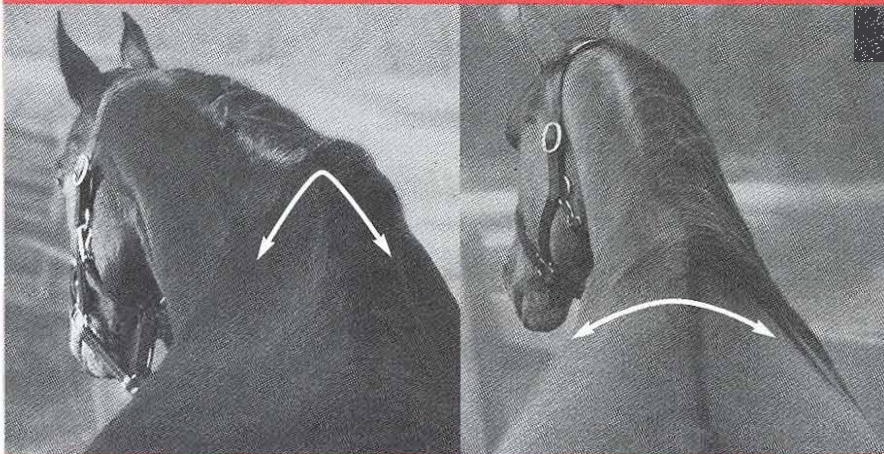
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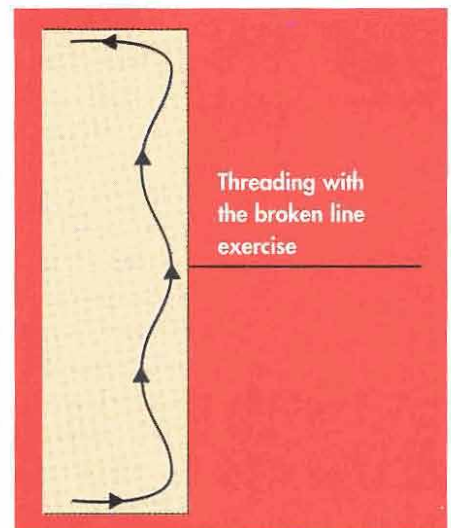
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ness. This next exercise will help you train him to relative straightness. The broken line exercise (see diagram below) helps your horse push equally with each hind leg and swing through his back. As you turn right and turn left, his body learns to push and follow his shoulders. You place his shoulders to the right, his right hind learns to push as he turns right. You place his shoulders to the left, his left hind learns to leave the ground more slowly and to carry a little bit as he turns left.

As you ride, imagine that you are threading your horse's inside leg into the space between the two front legs. Position his shoulders to the inside going in one direction, and drive with your inside leg at the girth to ask his inside hind to come under and push. Your passive outside leg is a little back. Remember, there is no sideways activity in threading. You push his hind leg forward in the space between the front legs. You want to be able to thread either hind leg without the other one falling out. This is the degree of lateral suppleness that produces relative straightness.

As your horse progresses, lateral work brings more engagement, suppleness and relative straightness. The rider's goal is to narrow the hind legs. Eventually, the horse will readily step with the inside hind into the space between the two



front legs, and the outside leg won't fall out.

### Straightness Mistakes

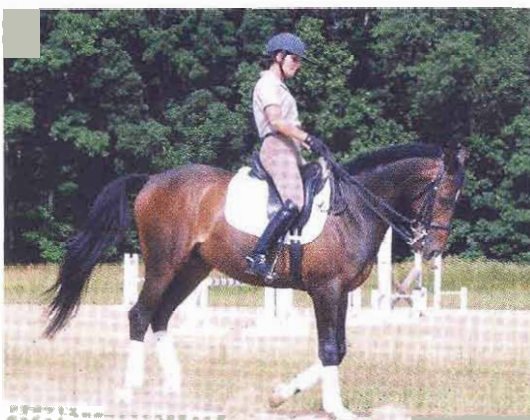
There are several challenges to training straightness.

1. Many riders trap the horse with the hand before he has learned to go forward with hind legs that are pushing correctly. Forwardness is the first prerequisite to relative straightness.

2. Many people try to half halt before the horse is supple and loose enough to go, stop and steer. Then the half halt gives the horse a short neck and hind legs that go out behind. He may appear round, but the result has nothing to do with self-carriage or making the gaits beautiful.

3. Your horse must carry his nose in front of the vertical to receiving hands. Many horses have the wrong response to the half halt: They shorten the neck or break at the poll. If your horse is going forward with a too-round neck, you've missed the point. When you touch the reins in a half halt, he should transfer weight behind without shortening the neck or breaking in the poll. He should do the same in transitions: go forward and come back—trot-canter-trot—keeping his nose out. If you feel as if your horse is just pulling forward and not going forward, do an exercise such as leg yield or shoulder-fore that will narrow his hind legs.

4. Many great horses go forward without carrying—feeling too strong and as if the rider can't stop them. This is a longitudinal suppleness problem. The rider's tendency is always to stop him—which may be necessary—but there is, again, the danger of shortening the neck and breaking him at the poll. He pulls forward because he's wide in the hind legs



**MISTAKE:** This is not the best moment of the canter, but you can see the horse has not responded to the half halt by transferring weight to his hindquarters. This will never lead to straightness. If this happens, do an exercise such as shoulder-fore to narrow the hind legs and shift weight to the horse's haunches.



**MISTAKE:** Many riders do not position their horse's shoulder to the inside, and they put their inside leg too far back for the threading aids. This incorrect leg aid asks the horse's outside hind leg to step out, which is what we're trying to avoid.

and not going forward. Do transitions or an exercise that will help him to go forward and stop and to narrow and thread his hind legs.

5. Many riders put their inside leg too far back for the threading or shoulder-in aids. This incorrect aid asks the outside hind leg to step out, which is what we are trying to avoid.

6. If you have a poorly trained older horse, you will need to go back to these



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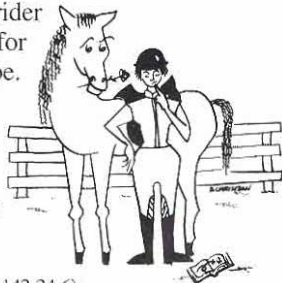
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early chapters of training. The fact that an older horse is usually stronger and has no tools of understanding unfortunately makes the job more difficult. However, when the basics are missing, you must go back and fill them in.

Your horse should acquire suppleness, which leads to relative straightness early in his life. If you've been successful, he is then trained for the rest of his life, except for strengthening. Then you do transitions and other exercises in relative straightness to help him develop more strength, self-carriage and carrying power. By Prix St. Georges, he will be more on the aids for longer periods of time, because you've strengthened him and made his physique and character more willing. You can control the hips and shoulders separately. His shoulders are up and more mobile, you have forward power, your outside rein is elastic and you can engage the inner hind more and more. Because you've threaded so often, he's moveable. He's rideable. He's on his way to being a wonderful dressage horse. 🐾

*Carole Grant rode in the 1982 World Championships, won Pan-Am team and individual gold medals in 1983 and competed in five Olympic Festivals. In 1983, she received the U.S. Equestrian Team's (USET) Whitney Stone Cup, presented each year to a rider who earned a distinguished record in international competition while serving as an ambassador for the USET and equestrian sports. Currently, Grant trains upper-level riders, including her daughters, Mary Ann and Tonya, and Betsy Rebar Sell, who helped win a 1999 U.S. Pan-Am team gold medal.*

DT thanks the following for the use of their horses in this photo shoot: Rita Heydon, owner of the Holsteiner/Thoroughbred Mugsy; Brenda Aughenbaugh, owner of the Dutch Warmblood Hassan; Linda Wanstreet, owner of the Dutch stallion Patrick.

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