

The Training Pyramid's Fourth Step: Straightness

-by Annie Morris

We have covered rhythm, relaxation, connection, and impulsion—the four steps at the base of the training pyramid—in previous STABLE SCOOP newsletters.

As we continue our journey upward, we now reach straightness. “But wait,” you might wonder, “We are almost to the top of the pyramid—and only NOW the horse should be straight?” Well, not quite.

Straightness is something the rider monitors all the time and is an integral part of training. A huge aspect of straightness is expressed in suppleness, or relaxation, to be found in the second rung of the pyramid. The horse must be riding the figures we discussed for suppleness, such as circles, changes of direction, etc. with the bend of the line of travel and the hind legs following the front legs following the nose.

Straightness, as it appears near the top of the pyramid, is even more specific than straightness we might experience at lower levels. Imagine your horse. He is like a table with four legs, one in each corner. But of course, unlike a table, he has a big heavy head and neck on one end that causes more weight to be carried by the front legs than the hind legs. The horse's hips are wider than his shoulders, and naturally the hind legs step as wide as or wider than the front legs. The horse will be able to carry the rider better and be more maneuverable if he has 25% weight on each leg, just like our original table.

Now we are getting closer to the top of the pyramid where we mention the word “collection,” with the horse weighting the hind legs more and lightening the load on the front legs, achieving engagement and self-carriage. But how do we show the horse how to put the hind legs in a position where he can carry more weight with them?

This is the precise straightness that we find near the top of the pyramid, and it can also be described in another term: shoulder-fore.

STRAIGHTNESS AND SHOULDER-FORE

Shoulder-fore, contrary to some teachings, is not a lateral exercise. Ultimately, it is not even an exercise so much as a way of life.



Shoulder-fore occurs when the horse narrows the inside hind so that hoof steps under the midline. It will land right beneath the rider's center of gravity. The horse's shoulders stay on the track that the rider is on, with the outside hind following directly behind the outside front, and the inside hind stepping where it can be seen in between the two front legs.

Why do we need the inside hind stepping in such a specific spot? Underneath the rider, it can engage better and carry more weight. When carried wide, there is no leg under the horse to receive a half-halt, and you do not have the horse in a position to engage.

AIDS FOR SHOULDER-FORE

What are the aids for the shoulder-fore? The inner rein asks for a little flexion to the inside, and the outside rein is there to keep the horse straight. The inner leg asks the inside hind to narrow, and the outer leg may be passive or be used to make sure the horse doesn't step out. The rider has nearly even weight on each hip, just touch more on the inner hip to help the horse carry the weight there. Each aid is subtle, as you are asking the horse to move by inches, not feet, to find this alignment.

The best way to find shoulder-fore is to ride in the walk toward the mirror and see if the horse can step the inside hind consistently in the little space between the front legs on a straight line. When you can control the inner hind in the walk, try it in the trot and canter as well.

Good riders are looking for shoulder-fore all the time, even when they are on a young or lower-level horse, but the horse needs strength and understanding to be able to achieve it. The expectation of the horse carrying the rider with a consistent shoulder-fore is requisite for the horse to understand basic collection, and that is why straightness appears so close to the top of the pyramid.

Practice shoulder-fore where you can see in the mirror, and then continue practicing it on every long side, corner, diagonal, and in between every lateral figure that you ride. Look for shoulder-fore in your warm-up, and feel the benefits of having the inside hind right where you need it to engage in your work.

