

2023 Centered Riding® Creative Teaching Tip

*Submitted by Kathy Culler, Level III Centered Riding Clinician
(From exercises originally created in 2018.)*

Riding with “Pool Rings”

Overview:

Suitable for riders of all levels. Using a pool ring is a fun way to help riders improve arm/hand alignment, correct and/or avoid bad habits, and increase awareness. The various exercises may accelerate understanding of the interaction between their body alignment and use of center to more accurately ride the horse. For beginner riders, it is recommended that the rider already have a basic understanding of how to properly hold the reins before adding the rings to a lesson.

Many riders notice that the ring provides kinesthetic feedback that helps correct unconscious patterns and enhance “feel.” The pool ring may also enable a rider to more easily ride the horse from back-to-front. By imagining that the energy from the horse’s hind-end passes through the rider’s **Center** and out through the pool ring toward their destination. The ring can also assist the rider in more accurately positioning not only the hands, but their entire body, thereby helping both rider and horse improve straightness.

Equipment:

Plastic “pool rings.” One per rider. These rings are traditionally used in swimming pools or in children’s ring toss games.

They are inexpensive and may be purchased through Amazon.com and other retail locations. The rings come in various sizes, so check sizes before purchasing. Choose rings that approximate the normal distance between hands when holding reins. They are light-weight, may be dropped anytime, and are generally very safe to use in a riding lesson.

Pre-requisites:

Before using the rings, the rider should be reasonably aligned, with a balanced pelvis, sitting in a correctly fitted saddle with stirrups at the proper length. Trying to use the rings before addressing any rider balance or alignment issues, will not produce the same positive results.



Example of “pool rings” available on Amazon.com

Pool Ring Exercises:

The pool rings may be used for many different exercises of varying difficulty, depending on rider ability. Below are a few examples. Feel free to mix and match exercises, or come up with your own ways to use them. Remember to begin at the walk before adding work at other gaits. Slower work can allow for more insight.

Exercise 1: Introducing the Rings

1. If the rider normally rides with a crop or whip, have them temporarily ride without it until they are comfortable holding the ring and the reins. They can easily add it back in whenever necessary.
2. At the halt, ask the rider to hold a pool ring along with the reins. The ring can/should be tilted a bit forward at the top of the ring until the rider’s wrist is in a neutral alignment with their forearm. Holding the ring with level hands on either side of the ring will allow the forearms to align naturally with the radius on top and the ulna below. This will also help position the thumbs on top and the palms facing each other, rather than facing downward. The wrists should not be overly bent in any direction (in, out, up or down). The rider should still be able to maintain a straight line from elbow to bit.



Sue Valla holding a pool ring along with the reins on her horse Festin.

Exercise 1: Introducing the Rings (continued)

- Once the rider is comfortable, direct them to ride at the walk with the ring. When they are ready to turn, notice what happens. If their normal tendency is to “pull” on one rein to turn, they may find that the ring provides instant kinesthetic feedback and helps to prevent this. Are rider’s hands level? Is one hand higher (or lower) than the other hand? Is one hand always carried more forward (or behind) the other hand, regardless of direction of travel? If they dropped their hands too low, did they feel the ring rest on the horse or saddle? Is the rider leaning, twisting, or collapsing? What about the horse? Is the horse’s head tilted? Is the horse crooked through the body? The feedback from the pool ring can help bring awareness and facilitate improvement in the rider. Improvement in the rider can automatically begin to help the horse.

Exercise 2: Riding and Turning from the Center

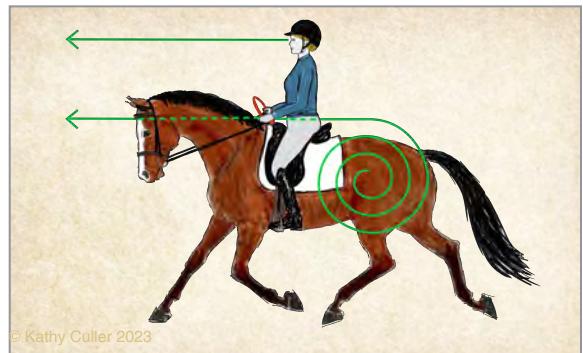
There are so many ways to teach riding and turning from the **Center**. Below is just one example. You can easily adapt this exercise using other images and methods.

- While the rider is walking with the pool ring. Remind them about **Soft Eyes**, **Breathing** and riding from their **Center**. Ask the rider to imagine that their **Center** is sending a big beam of light (or energy) through the pool ring toward their desired destination. Their **Soft Eyes** should look ahead, planning their ride as they go. They can identify a direction and/or visual target such as a dressage letter, corner of the arena, tree, etc. At the same time the rider directs the beam of light emanating from their **Center** toward the same visual target. **Breathing** while doing this allows the body to remain mobile and avoid “hard eyes.”
- When turning from the **Center**, the rider’s body should exhibit a subtle spiral through their body (without leaning or collapsing) in the direction of the turn. Imagine that the **Center** is spinning in the direction of the turn. This should automatically help the rider align the pool ring so that the “light” coming from the **Center** can travel outward through the pool ring in the direction of the turn.
- Was the rider able to maintain level hands to allow the pool ring to float in front of their center, no matter the direction? When ready, focus on bending, circles, lateral work, and work in other gaits.

Exercise 3: Riding from Back-to-Front

When first introducing the pool rings, the rider may initially focus too much on their hands. This is normal and should be temporary. Once the rider becomes comfortable using the pool ring as they ride, you can remind them about the importance of riding the horse from “back-to-front.” The pool ring can act as a temporary prop to facilitate riding from back-to-front.

The thoughts of the rider can have an impact on whether they are riding the horse from front-to-back or from back-to-front. You don’t have to be actively pulling on the reins to be incorrectly riding from front-to-back. If you are merely thinking about your hands, not looking ahead, or focused on how your horse’s head is positioned, you WILL be riding from front-to-back. It may be subtle, but it’s there. So instead, think about the energy coming from the horse’s hind end—then direct it through your **Center** (and the pool ring!) to your forward destination. This slight change of thought can make a huge difference!



- Have the rider hold the pool ring as described in previous exercises. As they ride at the walk, trot or canter, ask them to look ahead, planning their ride, and think about the energy coming from the horse’s hind-end. Imagine focusing that energy through their own **Center** and sending it out through the pool ring in the direction of travel.
- Remind the rider to incorporate all of the Centered Riding Basics as they ride, especially **Soft Eyes** and **Breathing**.
- Add the thought of a little forward elastic “push” on the pool ring. Not enough to lose contact, but so that you are always sending the horse forward into your hand, rather than hanging on the reins or pulling back.
- To illustrate the difference, ask the rider to shift back and forth in their primary focus while riding. First, they can think about the energy coming from the horse’s hind end, sending it out through the pool ring to where their **Soft Eyes** are looking. Then, for comparison, go back to thinking about their hands or the horse’s head while riding. They don’t need to change their riding, just their thoughts. Repeat both ways as necessary and have them tell you what they notice.

Summary:

There a lot of moving parts to these suggestions, so practice at each stage is helpful before adding complexity. Remember to always include the Centered Riding Basics while exploring these exercises.

In addition to the exercises mentioned in this article, the pool ring may also be helpful in:

- Ongoing improvement in rider alignment, which can benefit the horse's straightness and way of going.
- Helping the rider to correctly follow the motion of the horse at the walk and canter, with their seat, arms and hands.
- Shifting the emphasis from the biceps to the triceps, allowing for lighter hands, heavier elbows and better feel.
- Developing more sophisticated lateral work.
- Providing kinesthetic awareness for proper use of the inside and outside rein.
- Teaching half-halts, by using ring along with the **Center** to rebalance, rather than pulling on the reins.

How would you use the pool ring in your lessons?

Respectfully submitted by

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Heather Toma with Chance, her “angel” of a horse.