

A white horse is shown from the side, standing in a dressage arena. The horse is wearing a saddle and stirrups. Several orange cones are placed on the ground in a line, indicating a dressage exercise. The background shows a wooden fence and greenery.

FINDING THE RIGHT  
EXERCISE

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## Finding The Right Exercise

I'm still amazed when I see how much a horse can be transformed when you find the right exercise or combination of exercises. There are exercises that serve a variety of purposes, such as:

- improving the horse's balance,
- mobilizing the pelvis, shoulders, spine, or poll,
- preparing and/or improving transitions,
- preparing and/or improving flying changes, half passes, and other movements,
- improving the horse's body awareness and coordination,
- explaining and improving certain aids and movements,
- or connecting the horse to the aids and to the ground.

When you choose specific, targeted exercises that develop those areas in which the horse has a deficit, you will see an improvement, sometimes a very dramatic improvement in a very short amount of time.

### But how do you know what the right exercise is?

How do you know what the horse's deficits are? How do you decide which exercise you are going to use? There are of course the obvious answers that you always get: feel and experience. And they are absolutely valid. We are always guided by experience and intuition. But what if those two don't have any suggestions for a certain horse?

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**When you are at the beginning of your dressage journey, you don't have any experience to fall back on, and your intuition hasn't been developed yet.**

Or, even if you are an experienced trainer, but you are working with a new (to you) breed of horse, or an individual that seems to go against all the rules you have ever learned (and those individuals do exist), what do you do?

When I don't have a clear idea of the root cause of a problem, I use exercises to get more information, more data on how the horse "ticks", and where potential problem areas are. I use exercises from the above list, not to fix a problem or to create a dramatic improvement in the horse right away, but to get a clearer understanding of what the problem consists of and where it comes from first.

**You can quickly check the important muscle groups with specific targeted exercises.**

### **Neck and Poll**

If you suspect that there are muscle blockages in the neck and poll, you could do some lateral flexions in hand to stretch the muscles around the poll, the middle of the neck, and the base of the neck.

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## Shoulders

If you want to find out if a resistance you are seeing originates in the shoulders, you can ride shoulder turning exercises, like corners, volte, turns on the haunches, passades, or pirouettes.

## Hindquarters

If you suspect that a resistance originates in the hindquarters, you can test it very quickly and easily by riding a shoulder-in on a circle, a counter shoulder-in on a straight line, a turn on the forehand in motion, or a leg yield on a diagonal.

## Rib Cage

If you want to test the mobility of the rib cage, enlarging the circle and figure eights are very suitable. And if you want to test the mobility of the spine, you can change the bend in whatever you are riding. This could be a simple counter bending on a trot circle, or in the canter, or it could be a transition from shoulder-in to renvers, or counter shoulder-in to haunches-in.

## Lateral Balance, Body Awareness, and Coordination

There are also exercises that test and improve the horse's lateral balance, body awareness, and coordination.



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## A very effective tool

A very effective tool is to halt square next to the arena wall, and then ask the horse to lift his inside hind leg and advance it one hoof's breadth. This is only possible if the horse is supporting himself with his outside hind leg at the moment. If his weight is resting on the inside hind leg at the time, he will have to shift his balance to the other side of his body, which is really difficult for some horses. For some horses it is very difficult to advance only a few inches because they are used to taking huge strides that are several feet long.

## Another type of exercise

Another type of exercise that tests and improves the lateral balance and coordination consists of a couple of steps of full pass to the left and right because the horse has to shift his weight back and forth. Turns on the forehand back and forth also require weight shifts. The horse also learns in these exercises that the rider has a leg and a rein on either side of the horse's body and that the horse is supposed to stay between them. He learns to yield to one leg while listening to the leg and rein on the other side of his body. He should yield to one leg and allow himself to be framed or stopped by the leg on the other side instead of running away from one leg and crashing through the leg on the other side.

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## Ride an exercise to test a hypothesis

Sometimes I observe in a lesson that a horse seems to make a mistake or show a negative reaction every time he has to support the weight primarily with the right hind for a few strides for example. When that happens, I test that hypothesis by riding a few exercises that focus on the right hind leg.

One possibility is that you could ride a shoulder-in right to bring the right hind leg more underneath the body, followed by a walk pirouette to the right to shift the combined weight of horse and rider into it. If the original observation was right, you would expect to see a negative reaction in the walk pirouette. If you repeat the same exercise several times, it is important to watch if there is a change in the horse's behavior. Very often, a new exercise goes badly, the horse inverts and resists. The second time, it goes much better, and the third time, the horse and rider are able to perform it relatively smoothly because there has been a learning curve, and the horse's muscles have become more supple. It is equally important to observe the horse in a higher gait on a simple 20m circle or on straight lines afterwards to find out what effect the exercise had on the horse's posture and gait. In many cases you can observe that a horse finds an exercise difficult, but when you are trotting or cantering straight ahead afterward, the horse is much rounder and smoother.

If the resistance increases, or if the horse is worse afterwards, it is often a sign of a physical injury.

After testing the area of the body that you suspected of containing the muscles blockage, you should run a counter test. In the example above you should ride the shoulder-in and walk pirouette also on the left rein and observe and compare how the horse performs them in both directions, as well as how the exercise affects the gait and posture.



Ask yourself questions like:

- In which direction is the exercise more difficult to ride?
- What specifically is more difficult?
- In which direction did the exercise improve the horse more?
- In what way did he improve?

**In other words, we have to redefine what “the right” exercise is.**

Generally, everybody thinks that the “right exercise” is one that makes everything all better right away and that makes everything look all pretty (very important to most people). But sometimes that’s just not possible under the current circumstances to go in a straight line from the status quo to perfection.

Very often you have to do more research first to find out what exactly is preventing the horse from doing something correctly before you are able to determine the right course of action.

This is very similar to the way a medical doctor approaches a patient. A good doctor will not throw some random treatment method or medication at the patient without having examined them thoroughly first. ively quickly.

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## All exercises that we ride have a diagnostic aspect to them

All exercises that we ride have a diagnostic aspect to them, i.e. they reveal if a muscle is supple or stiff. At the same time, they have therapeutic properties. They stretch and strengthen certain muscle groups.

We can choose an exercise based on whether we need to find out more information about the horse and his problems, or whether we already know the root of the problem and are now ready to fix it.

For instance, if a horse always changes late behind in flying changes, we need to determine the underlying reason. A clean flying change requires that the horse is able to shift his weight easily from one side of his body to the other, that he is able to change his bend easily from one side to the other, and that he is able to move his hips freely to either side without leaving the line of travel with his shoulders. When the flying change is late behind, you will find a deficit in at least one of these three areas. Once you have found the deficit, you can improve the horse's suppleness and coordination in this area with other exercises that look like they are completely unrelated to flying changes, and when you have made enough progress with them, you can attempt another flying change, and it will usually be more successful.

These are a few examples that illustrate my way of thinking.

**Everything you ride will reveal something about the horse.**



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## If you pay close attention, you will be able to make interesting observations

If you pay close attention, you will be able to make interesting observations, regardless of whether you are riding circles, squares, rectangles, triangles, ovals, lateral movements, or transitions.

Once something interesting has caught your attention, you can investigate it by designing exercises that explore your train of thought further. And once you have a clear understanding of what it is exactly that the horse is struggling with, you can design exercises that will help him to overcome these challenges.

EVERYONE SAYS THAT THE BIG MAGIC IS MADE BY WORKING ON THE BASICS, AND THIS IS TRUE. BUT THE TRUTH THAT NO ONE TELLS YOU IS THAT THE BASICS ARE NOT THE ENDLESS BORING CIRCLES SEEMINGLY FOR YEARS ON END.

THE REAL BASICS ARE THESE KEY ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS. KNOWING THESE AND BEING ABLE TO USE THEM LIKE THE PAINTER USES HER BRUSHES IS WHAT TURNS YOUR RIDING INTO ART. PERHAPS AN ART IN PROGRESS, BUT ART NONETHELESS.

THIS IS WHERE THE REAL BIG MAGIC LIVES.

JOIN US FOR A FREE 6-WEEK POP-UP TRAINING GROUP ON FACEBOOK TO LEARN THE WHAT, WHY, AND HOW OF USING EXERCISES IN YOUR RIDING TO TRAIN YOUR HORSE. YOURSELF. JUST CLICK HERE.

(MISSED THIS GROUP? NO PROBLEM. SIGN UP FOR THE WAIT LIST AND GET IN ON THE NEXT ONE.)