

Exercises for Increased Flexibility in Gaited Horses
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Regardless of the method, the objectives of increasing flexibility in the horse are to increase performance ability and reduce injury. True flexibility requires a degree of strength and elasticity in the muscles, tendons and ligaments that you are engaging.

It is important to keep in mind that a horse can only perform as well as the rider allows. If the rider is not flexible and relaxed with balanced self-carriage, independent from the horse, the horse cannot balance himself and achieve flexibility since he always has to compensate for the weight of the rider. Horses vary in their response to the rider's stiffness or lack of self-carriage. There are horses that can cope with bad riders very well. These horses keep going, off setting the problems caused by the rider, by adjusting their own carriage. Then there are horses that are more sensitive than others and can't cope, causing a battle with their rider.

A horse needs to learn to flex vertically and laterally. Remember, just because your horse is bending, doesn't mean he is flexing properly. Bending and flexing are not the SAME thing, but a horse has to begin to learn to flex by first being willing to bend.

Basic Flexing Exercises

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From the Ground

You have to teach your horse to bend. A good way to begin is to teach him to stretch his neck forward and to the side. These exercises are often accomplished best when a reward is offered, and have become popularly known as "carrot stretches". Many horses have limited lateral flexibility in their necks. The Carrot Stretch is an exercise to get the horse to begin to stretch and bend the muscles in his neck to prepare to achieve lateral flexibility.

The Carrot Stretch

From the ground and working in a halter, Jaquima, sidepull or bosal.

Stand with the horse on your right. Face the horse and stand at the horse's shoulder. With your left hand grasp the nose band at the side piece, and gently bring the horse's nose to the side, insisting that he keep his body still (often placing your free right hand on the withers or placing him where he is next to a stall or barn aisle wall to block his movement will help in this). Ask him to bend just a few inches away from a resting position, pet him, then repeat on the other side.

Now you begin to use a carrot as a bribe, holding it in front of his nose and tempting him with it until he follows it around, not giving him the carrot until he bends as far as you want. He should hold the stretch for the increasing periods of time before you give him the carrot. Try to work up to where he can hold the stretch for 3 minutes. He should be bending his neck just a bit farther each time you work with him, until he can touch his nose to his side, on both sides. With many horses this will take several lessons. You do not want to force him to bend, but to gradually encourage him to stretch the muscles in his neck so that it becomes easy. You should not progress to the saddle until the horse is bending freely to each side, touching his nose about where your knee would be if you were on him.

Belly Lifts

The belly lift is the equine version of the sit up. You perform this exercise with the horse held by a handler in the first attempts. What you are going to do is "tickle" the horse's belly to cause him to contract his abdominal muscles to lift the spine. Some horses resent this in the first attempts and will kick at their stomach as if to dislodge a fly. Keep your body well out of harm's way and

"Mild stretching may benefit range of movement by increasing the elasticity of tendons and ligaments around the joints, especially in horses with past injury in a joint area. The result may be increased stride extension and gait coordination."

Dave Freeman, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service equine specialist.

It is important that you incorporate stretching and strengthening exercises specific to your horse's needs at least 3-4 times per week. Basic limbering and flexibility exercises should be included as a warm up and a cooling off routine.

do not overdo the stimulation.

Place your hands under the horse with your fingers up. The “spot” is about 6 inches back from where the horse stomach becomes chest. Press your fingernails UP firmly but gently until you see the horse's back rise as the abdominal muscles tighten. With some horses you may have to move your fingers in a scratching motion to get results. If it still does not result in a lifting of the back, move your hands to another position and try again.

Most horses are fine with this procedure and it can be performed with the horse tied after the first attempts. Ask the horse for 2 repetitions, from each side. Do not over do this! It can be hard work for the horse and you don't want to make him sore!

Undersaddle

In order to achieve the best results, most or all of these undersaddle exercises should be performed in a snaffle, sidepull or bosal. For the most part, curb bits of any type or bits with shanks are counter productive. Many people hesitate to “come out of” a leverage bit to perform these exercises, because they fear lack of control and that their horse is “hard mouthed.” It is of paramount importance that you maintain your own safety. Work in a small area, but put the horse in a headgear that can help him achieve the flexibility and teach him to soften. As the horse improves, so will his hard mouth!

The mouth is nothing more than a reflection of the horse as a whole. If the horse's entire body is rigid, unwilling to yield or soften, the mouth will be unresponsive, hard and unwilling to soften to your rein. As your horse's body becomes soft and supple through bending and flexing exercises, the mouth will become soft and more responsive to rein pressure. A horse that can be bent laterally is easier to control!

In all stretching and flexing exercises, it is important to start by asking for a small degree of stretch or bend until the horse's muscles relax and become more flexible. You achieve nothing by forcing a horse to bend; the resistance causes incorrect muscle usage.

Horses need good abdominal muscles to carry their backs [dorsiflexed](#). Trotting horses hold their back dorsiflexed to maintain a well-rounded trot. With the exception of the foxtrot and trocha (in which the back can fall between level and slightly dorsiflexed) most smooth gaits require a [level](#) or [ventroflexed](#) back. Trotting horses strengthen their back every time they are worked in the trot. It is actually a good idea to incorporate the trot into an exercise routine for any horse. BUT I suspect you are not usually going to convince the rider of a gaited equine to TROT their horse!

Most smooth gaits require that the head and neck be carried above the point where it is level with the horse's back. Raising the head and neck drops the back; lowering the head and neck raises the back. Exercises to incorporate for strengthening the horse's abdominal muscles, back and improve flexibility can be performed at the [flat and/or working walk](#).

Leg Yield

The leg yield exercise is a good exercise to strengthen the horse's abdominal muscles and back, plus improve flexibility. It can be performed at the flat and/or working walk and should be alternated between/among the various types of walk for best improvement of elasticity.

Using a snaffle, sidepull or bosal ask the horse to move out in a steady walk. Ask the horse to drop his head LOW, below the point where his neck is on the level, almost low enough to graze. You can request that your horse drop his head by using a series of GENTLE alternating tugs with your hands held LOW (at the level of your knee is NOT too low!). The placement of your hands will vary from horse to horse; experiment to see what works best with your horse. Keep your weight balanced in the saddle, do not lean or shift forward. Make sure that the horse is not dropping his inside shoulder. Once you have the horse's head lowered (softening at the poll, dropping head and neck down is vertical flexion,) ask him to begin a circle. Always reward the slightest try.

Other Exercises to improve your horse.

[WORKING The WALK](#)

[Exercises at the Walk](#)

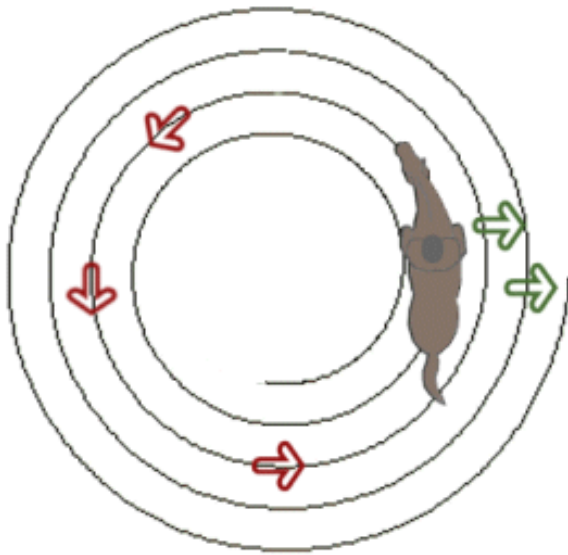
[Conditioning a Horse to Gait](#)

Exercises to improve your riding methods for Gaited Horses.

[Achieving Response, Gait and Confidence through Relaxation](#)

[Rider Affect on the Horses Movement](#)

[MAKING CONTACT How to use a bit](#)



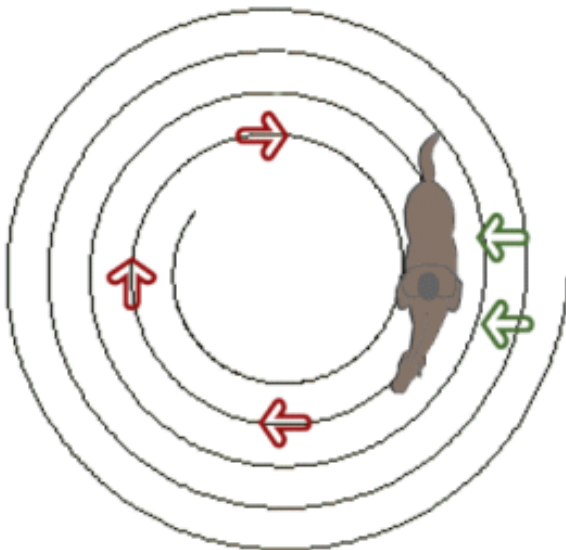
Leg Yield

You want to walk the horse in a ROUND circle at least 10 feet in diameter. Begin to spiral OUT by using your inside leg to cause him to move in a wider circle. This maneuver will cause the horse to “leg-yield” and his body should be bent in towards the circle, while the movement is the opposite direction. Leg-yield out to about a 50’ diameter circle, then reverse the horse and leg-yield the other direction in a spiral. Repeat this exercise with the horses head at various heights.

It is important that you remain soft and consistent in your aids, do not force or fight the horse as this will be counter productive.

Half Pass

The Half Pass not only improves flexibility in the horse it gives you the tools to straighten a horse who travels crooked on the straight away.



Half Pass

Repeat the above, this time SPIRALING IN, using your outside leg to cause him to move in a ever decreasing circle. So what is the big deal and what is the difference between the two? In the Leg-yield the horse is moving so that the direction of motion is AWAY from the direction of the bend. In the Half Pass the horse is stepping in the direction of the bend, a more difficult movement for the horse. The Half Pass not only improves flexibility in the horse it gives you the tools to straighten a horse that travels crooked on the straight away.

Beware that this exercise can become boring to the horse (and to you!). It is important that the horse is paying attention to get results. Do not “spiral for hours.” Do a spiral or two, then proceed to other exercises or go for a trail ride. You can also add some “spice” by placing a landscaping timber or a 4”x4” across the path of the spiral. This helps to break up the routine and causes the horse to use his hind end more efficiently to move in or out while crossing the object.

Once your horse is comfortable with performing the leg-yield and half pass in the spiral, ask the horse to do so from the rail or across any area. Both of these exercises have their practical application also! You will find them handy when opening gates, maneuvering around or beside objects or straightening the horse if he is traveling crooked.

Neck Flex From the Saddle

From the saddle, working in a snaffle, bosal or Jaquima, make sure your weight is well balanced on the horse. Take both reins in your right hand, so that you have LIGHT contact with the horse's headgear. Now reach about halfway down the left rein with your left hand and call the horses head to his side with a series of tugs and releases. Switch hands and repeat on the other side. At this point he should be keeping his body still. With practice, this becomes light and the cue is soft and the horse's response immediate. Once the horse is accomplished in the Basic Neck Flex Undersaddle, you can perform this exercise in a curb bit too, as illustrated in the examples below in the finished Paso Fino.





Summary

Flexibility is the key to a well balanced horse. Any Athlete knows the benefit of stretching, bending and flexing to improve their performance in their specific sport. Your horse is an athlete! Giving him the benefit of incorporating flexing and bending exercises into his routine! He will increase his level of performance, and improve his strength.



Ventroflexed also will be referred to as hollow or concave. The gaits with these are Pace, stepped pace, rack and saddle gait.



A level back is one of the running walk.



Dorsiflexed will also be referred to as rounded or convex. The gait of fox trot can be from a level back to a slight dorsiflexed back and a collected trot is dorsiflexed in the back.

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