

## **Gail Hoff-Carmona Article In July 2007 Issue Of Dressage Today**

### **Dressage Simplified**

At some point in my career as a dressage rider and judge, it dawned on me that dressage is very simple (although not necessarily very easy). It is really about understanding that there are only two ways a horse can be in dressage. He can be either straight or bent. Then, understanding how all the movements--especially the lateral movements--all tie together in such a logical way and are conceptually so simplistic. In principle, a 10-meter circle is not different from a shoulder-in or a half pass except for the degree of collection. All the (lateral) movements you have in dressage tests lay out a sequence of how and when to introduce movements to a horse. One starts with big circles, makes them smaller, then starts with a shoulder-in, then the travers, and so on. The movements build from less difficult to more difficult for the horse. But the difficulty lies in the degree of collection, not in the character of the movement itself.

If you're riding on a circle, you have a bent horse. If you're coming out of a circle and do a shoulder-in, you've exactly the same degree of bending that you had on the circle. In the shoulder-in, the horse's body describes the same arc that you had when riding on a circle. Similarly, if you're coming out in a travers, you'll have the same arc that you had when you were on a circle. The only difference lies in the aids of the rider. In the shoulder-in, your inside leg is pushing a little more, while your outside leg is holding the haunches. In the travers, your outside leg is a little bit more active, while your inside leg is holding the pushing. Although the aids are a little bit different for the rider, for the horse the movement is basically the same.

Riders make things more difficult than they are because they tend to look at it from their own perspective instead of the horse's perspective. Instead of looking at the lateral movements as related, they look at them as if they were separate movements they have to learn for a dressage test.

For instance, if the rider is in a shoulder-in, switching to a travers is very simple. All one has to do is to just slide the horse through the arc of the circle. In other words, the shoulder-in is as if you were going into a circle, and the travers is as if you were coming out of a circle. Let's say you're in a travers down the long side, then all you have to do is to slip the horse around a little arc of the circle as if you're going into it and you're in the shoulder-in. If you slip it backwards, you're in the travers again.

The same thing is true for the half pass. A half pass is nothing more than a travers on a diagonal line. Therefore it requires just the same kind of bend. I see many riders, including FEI level riders who are too focused on the movement in itself, and fail to bend their horses in the half pass. They ride the half pass with a straight horse moving sideways. Let us say, for instance, the horse is doing a half pass to the right, coming from K to M. When the horse comes through the corner, a more experienced rider very often will in the corner start to set up the horse in a very small shoulder-in. This way the horse is flexed in the direction in which it's supposed to go with its shoulders. As soon as the horse's shoulders are headed towards M, all the rider has to do is add some outside leg. It's like going from the shoulder-in to the travers again. If a judge were standing at K or M looking at the diagonal line to M, as the rider goes across the diagonal, the judge would see a travers. But since the judge is seated at C, he sees a half pass.

It often happens that the judge remarks that there's not enough bend in the half pass. Not understanding the concept of the half pass--that it's nothing else than a travers--the rider starts to push the horse too much with his outside leg, which causes the hindquarters to precede. The bend is still lacking.

Because the zig zag half pass in canter at Prix St. Georges or higher levels requires changes of bend, riders not quite understanding the concept of lateral movements often get into trouble here. The rider starts the half pass, lets say, to the left and he's supposed to do flying change and half pass back to the right. What I see most of the time is that very few riders correctly re-bend the horse between the change of direction. Most of them make the flying change and start to push the horse back again, and the hindquarters precede. This is because they never establish the new bend onto the new circle.

To understand how simplistic this sequence of movements becomes when paying attention to the bend, do the following. Coming through the corner, bend your horse as if you were going to do a shoulder-in. As soon as you have the bend, continue with the half pass. To do the flying change, you have to give yourself at least three steps: One to the left, one to straighten up, and then to change the bend. When you start to re-bend your horse into the new shoulder-in, ask for the flying change when your new inside leg pushes the horse's hindquarters into contact with your new outside leg. Then when your horse has the shoulders pointing to M again you can do the half pass back to M with the correct bending. If you look at it in circles (in your warm-up or daily practice), you might realize how you may fail to re-bend your horse in this sequence of movements because after half pass to the left you won't be able to do a circle to the right without first establishing bend to the right. If you have the haunches positioned so they're preceding the forehead, the horse simply can't circle to the right.

Instead of focusing on a movement, focus on the correctness of a movement as far as the horse is concerned. Keep it simple. For lateral movements, this means making sure horse is bent correctly. And if you look at it like from the perspective of riding a circle--where you are on the arc of a circle--you can be in a shoulder-in or a travers. If you want to work with the opposite bend, renvers or counter shoulder-in can also be done on the same circle.