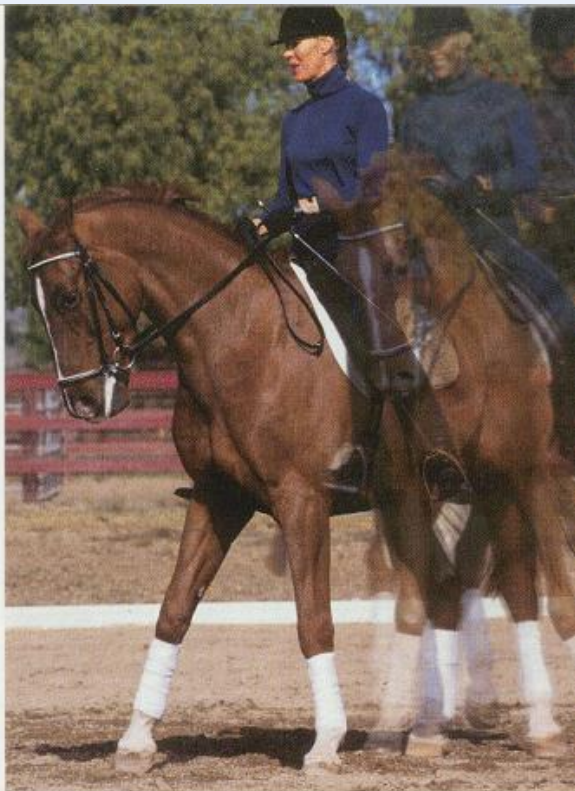


Perfecting the Walk Pirouette

By Charlotte Bredahl
with Beth Baumert



Here's a foolproof plan for preparing your horse for this Fourth Level movement.

Photos by Elaine Olsen

The Official Word

The American Horse Shows Association Rule Book says: "The pirouette is a circle executed on two tracks with a radius equal to the length of the horse, the forehand moving round the haunches." The pirouette generally is done at either a collected walk or canter, and the horse is "slightly bent in the direction in which he is turning...maintaining the exact cadence and sequence of footfalls of that pace."

The half pirouette at walk first appears in Fourth Level, and its "little brother," the half turn on the haunches, is required at Second Level.

I use the walk pirouette to help my horse tune in to my aids and to make him supple and active. The exact same principles apply to the half turn on the haunches, in which the inside hind foot makes a small circle in rhythm instead of marching in one place. There are times, with any horse, that you will work on this lesser version of the pirouette. Even with an FEI Level horse, you won't ask for maximum collection all the time. And if your horse hasn't acquired the degree of collection required for a pirouette, you can use the same exercises to improve his ability to maintain balance in the turn on the haunches.

In order to assure your success in the walk pirouette, I'm going to give you a series of prerequisite exercises. When your horse can do the prerequisite exercises reasonably well, then it's just a matter of putting the pieces together.

Begin with the Aids

To begin the walk pirouette, make your transition from medium walk to collected walk on a 10-meter circle by asking for fairly small but very active steps. Keep your horse bent around your inside leg. The degree of collection will determine the size of your turn. Minimal collection will give you the connection that you

need for a good turn on the haunches, and more collection will enable your horse to do the "on-the-spot" active pirouette that you will want for competition.

Think Square

When I begin schooling the pirouette, I don't start by doing an entire half pirouette. I start by making a basic square that is less than the width of the arena—about 15 meters—with four quarter pirouettes or quarter turns on the haunches (see diagrams below). Pick a point where you want to do the first quarter turn to the left. Look to the left with your shoulders and then apply the aids to ask the horse to turn. He will take about three turning steps to the left. Then go straight and pick another point for a quarter turn.

Unfortunately, just when your horse knows the plan, he'll probably start to anticipate and common problems

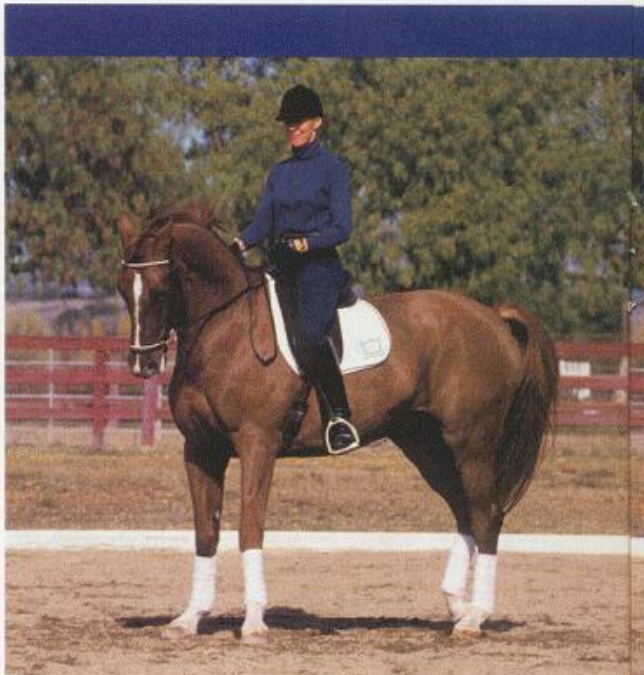
PREREQUISITES

Prerequisite 1: In order to do a pirouette, your horse first needs to be supple enough to bend well around each inside leg—whether you're going left or right. Check to see that he can do this by doing a 10-meter circle at the walk. Take your time. Starting at any letter, maintain the appropriate bend and footfall until you reach the centerline and continue until you return to the same letter. Try to make every step the same, and be sure that you can do it in both directions.

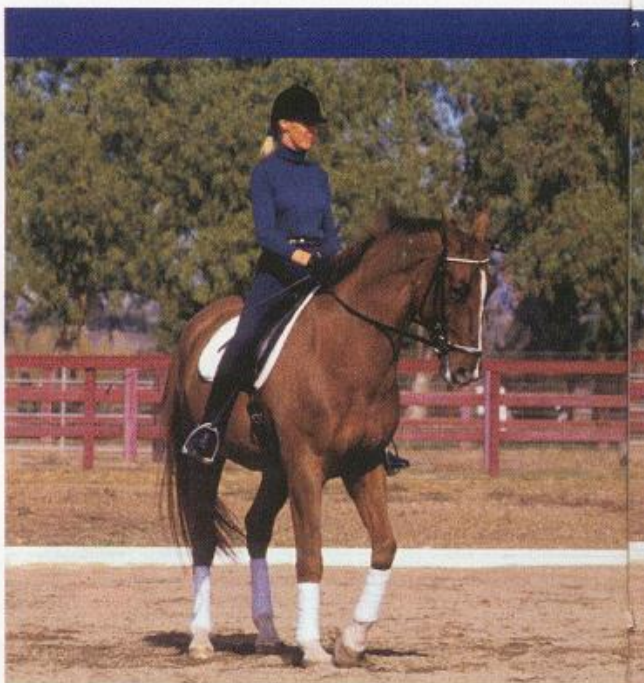
Prerequisite 2: Next, your horse needs to be able to do a shoulder-in at the walk to help transfer weight to the hindquarters and mobilize the forehand. You'll know it's right when your horse's shoulders move easily because he's light in front and soft on your aids.

Prerequisite 3: Now your horse needs to be able to move away from the outside leg and do a haunches-in in walk. Maintain the same rhythm and the same position as you had for your shoulder-in, but make your horse's neck parallel and his shoulders perpendicular to the line of travel.

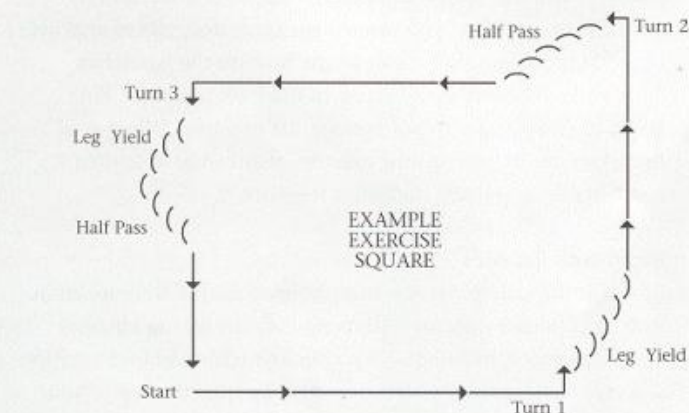
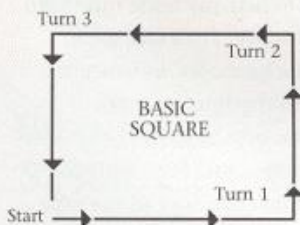
Prerequisite 4: And finally, he has to remain rhythmic, active and forward on the aids. You should feel that he is marching rhythmically forward on his own without any prodding from you.



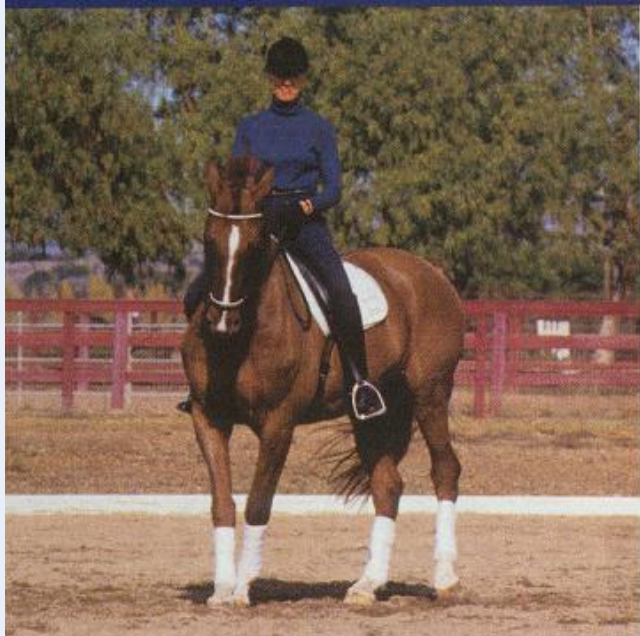
For a left pirouette, your inside (left) leg stretches down just behind the girth. The horse is bent around your inside leg and fills up the outside rein.



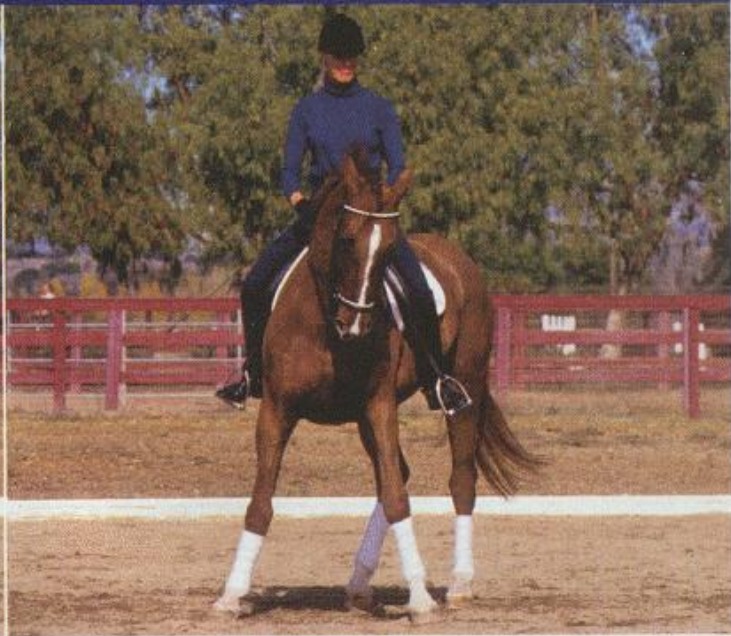
For a left pirouette, the outside (right) rein defines the amount of the bend. It should be firm but not so firm that the horse doesn't have room to bend. It's easy to make the mistake of holding too much on the outside rein.



THE INSIDE AIDS

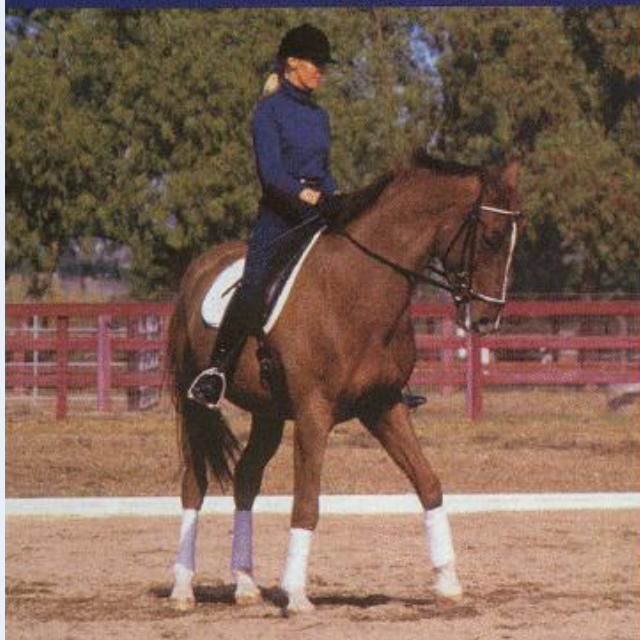


The inside (left) hip is a little bit forward and your weight is on the inside (left) seat bone. The inside rein asks for positioning to the inside but stays soft. Sometimes you can help your horse to turn by leading with the inside rein—especially when the horse is new at the walk pirouette.



Bring your hand directly to the left and guide him around a little bit with your inside leading rein. Never pull back on the inside rein, however, because then you would immediately block the inside hind leg.

THE OUTSIDE AIDS



The pirouette requires a lot of bend, so if you hold the outside rein too much, the horse will be too restricted. Your outside (right) hip is a little bit back and your outside (right) leg is usually a little bit back, but it depends on the horse. If your horse puts his haunches in too much, then you'll want to leave your outside leg in a neutral position.



Sometimes you need to move the outside leg from one position to another because the horse will change what he does to escape. Also, if you push too much with your outside leg, or if it is too far back, you'll fall to the outside rather than keep your weight on your inside seat bone.

Common Problems The Leg Yield Will Remedy

Loss of suppleness. If the horse comes out of the pirouette and starts to stiffen, immediately do a leg yield away from the left leg. Supple him with your inner rein; ask him to step into the outer rein.

Shoulders fall to the inside. If the horse loses the bend and falls in too much with his shoulders, he avoids loading his inside hind leg. Immediately push him right back to the outer rein with the left leg in leg yield until he waits and he lets you bend him into the turn.

Haunches fall in. The biggest mistake that I see in the pirouette is the haunches that come in first, which makes the pirouette too big. If, when you start the turn, the horse starts to go too far sideways, leg yield back until he waits for you. You want him to step forward with the inside hind leg—not sideways.

The rider falls to the outside. Many people fall to the right as the horse steps left. This happens either because of centrifugal force or because the rider's outside leg is too strong or too far

back. Using the leg yield will automatically correct the rider's position.

Common Problems The Half Pass Will Remedy

The haunches fall out. Some horses will try to put the haunches out, in which case you need a rather strong outside leg and you need to think about bending and half pass. Usually horses want to lead with the haunches so you don't need the outside leg when you first start, but as soon as you get into the turn and the shoulders start to move, then you add more outside leg to make sure the haunches don't fall out.


The pirouette sticks and loses the rhythm or momentum. People often try to do a pirouette when the horse is not going forward and stepping rhythmically through to the bridle. In that case, the half pass will help him to resume his marching rhythm.

I do half pass, then a quarter turn, and then half pass again. Then I tell people to think half pass when they're doing the pirouette so that they won't stop riding forward. You can't do a pirouette without momentum.

forward into the outside rein. Also keep the aids for half pass in your mind so that he will maintain his bend and activity. If he loses any of the qualities that he needs, go back to the quarter pirouette. Sometimes it takes me several tries before I get into the actual pirouette.

Pirouettes in Canter

Use a variation of the foolproof walk pirouette exercises in preparation for canter pirouettes because the principles are the same. Learning the exercises in walk is certainly easier for the rider because it's slower and there is more time to think and make corrections. In the same way that you did the transition from medium walk to collected walk, be sure that you can bring your horse from collected can-

ter to a canter that is on the spot or nearly so. If your horse loses his suppleness or falls to the inside and tries to spin around too fast, use the shoulder-in or shoulder-fore to help keep his balance and make him wait for you. Likewise, use the same exercises if you are inclined to sit to the outside. On the other hand, if your horse loses the activity, think about half pass so that he always thinks about going rhythmically forward. 

For more information, refer to these Dressage Today articles: "Shoulder-In: The Preparation" (Nov. '95), "Shoulder-In: The Execution" (Dec. '95), "The Haunches-In" (Oct. '96), "Shoulder-In to Medium Trot" (July '97), "Leg Yield to Haunches-in to Half Pass" (Nov. '97).

will emerge: He may throw his haunches in, or he may throw them out. He might lose his rhythm and stop stepping through to the bridle. Likewise, you may experience the common problem of sitting to the outside. So we're going to vary this square to create an exercise that will solve all of these problems. If you can do the following exercise well, pirouettes will be easy. Whether you are schooling them in the backyard or doing the Prix St. Georges at Devon, your horse will wait for you and stay balanced and active.

Add Leg Yield, Half Pass

Immediately after your first quarter turn, keep your inside leg on the girth and ask your horse to move away from it in a leg yield. Maintain his slight bend to the left and increase the pressure with your inside leg. This leg yield will keep him in the outside rein and prevent him from falling in. Now go straight by asking him to go forward with both legs and plan your second quarter turn.

Immediately after the turn, ask for a half pass left. Think of doing a haunches-in left on a diagonal line. The half pass keeps the horse thinking forward, and prevents him from getting stuck. Now ride straight forward again. After the next quarter turn, ask for a leg yield to the right. Then go straight and then do half pass left and then go straight again. Most horses have more than one evasion, so both the leg yield and the half pass are needed to balance the horse for the pirouette. You'll soon find that your horse will keep his forward momentum, stay well balanced, truly on the bit and waiting for your aids.

The Real Thing

When the quarter pirouette is active and balanced, you'll be in a good position to ask your horse to keep stepping until you've done a half pirouette as it's required in the test. It's important to think about it as two quarter turns so that your horse maintains his balance. During your turn, keep the aids for leg yield in your mind so that your position will stay correct and your horse will stay supple and