

Clinic with Alfredo Hernandez - February 9-11, 2024

The ideal line of travel and trajectory for shoulder-in, travers, half-pass, and pirouettes can all be explained geometrically as one fraction or another of a circle/volte. The positioning of a shoulder-in is identical to that of the horse through the first quarter of a 10 meter circle; travers, identical to the last quarter, and so on. Because the gymnastic curriculum of dressage revolves around this “circle theory,” so too does the ability of the horse to thrive in the gymnastic work revolve around the suppleness, flexibility, and thoroughness appropriate for these “voltes.” It is necessary for the horse to have enough suppleness for the neck to be persuaded to “fall down” from the withers and, by allowing the sternum and thoracic sling to rise, the back to come up, and the hindquarters to come under, help the horse find an elastic balance and self-carriage in whatever they are doing. Asking the horse to be a little rounder and a little bit more *balanced* by slowing the trot and lowering the neck in this way compresses the energy “through” the back and hindquarters without undermining the horse’s suppleness, resulting in natural springy expression and thoughts of passage. The word balance here literally refers to the even distribution of weight; 50% on one side, and 50% on the other. “Many people have the wrong idea about balance,” he mentioned. The horse has to first find *this* concept of “balance” before they can become uphill. The importance of this concept, of “lowering the neck,” was something that Alfredo emphasized almost constantly, whether it was being applied to developing the half-pass, collected canter, passage, flying changes, or piaffe. Opening the inside rein while maintaining contact with the outside rein throughout large, flowing circles is one of the best ways to supple the horse through the contact.

To help us develop a more ideal collected canter and understand how this idea of balance changes the horse’s mechanics in the work to something much more desirable, Alfredo ran a longe line (physical representation that reinforces the proper action along the back/hindquarters) from the outside ring of the bit and around the hindquarters to my inside hand, which, when the canter was slowed and her neck was slightly lowered and and her back supple and swinging, encouraged the hindquarters to come under and contribute to a very correct, “pretty” collected canter. He then helped us get more out of using the lateral work at the canter for developing straightness through difficult but effective sequences of renvers, travers, and switching the direction of the bend while maintaining either true or counter canter to supple the horse while helping them become as straight as possible. Besides straightness, Alfredo also emphasized the inherent difficulty of transitions and their role in the development of the horse, mentioning how many don’t practice transitions as much as is needed. He even described how half-pass, shoulder-in, pirouettes, flying changes, etc, are all “easy” compared to transitions. The transition from piaffe to passage is much more difficult than the piaffe or passage itself. If you think about it, the most difficult thing to address in a young horse’s education is the transitions; but they are instrumental in the horse’s development, and therefore must be perfected. “This is not magic; it’s a process,” he said, referring to the horse’s development.

Most of the problems that emerge during one aspect or another of the lateral work result from the absence of the suppleness and flexibility required of the horse to maintain the moment of the “circle” being asked for, from a lateral or longitudinal stiffening that “blocks” thoroughness

and compromises the unaffected, flexible state of the back and hindquarters. Half-pass especially requires a significant degree of supple balance from the horse to perform with ease, and is nearly impossible to execute correctly if the horse “resists” the bend. Using a turn on the haunches to organize the direction and effort of what will be the outside hind leg and then switching the horse’s bend to effectively mimic the shape and goal of the half-pass explains to the horse both the bending and weight-bearing/carrying expectations of the movement. A walk pirouette is simply a very small circle performed in the half-pass, but the quality of walk is more important than the pirouette itself; just as the quality of the trot in a half-pass is reflected more in the score than the actual half-pass being performed.