

Jumping Straight and Balanced

One of the most common things that I see in Jumpers is a diving inside shoulder in both riders and horses. When jumping a fence on a turn many riders will lean to the inside, which then causes the horse to lean to the inside and drop their inside shoulder. This creates a falling affect as the horse travels around the turn. If the rider does not get the horse straightened out before the jump the horse will knock a rail or refuse. Many riders, also may notice that when they ask the horse to make a sharp turn after landing off of a fence, the horse seems to dive onto their front end and speed up. This also causes the horse to knock a rail or refuse because they feel unbalanced. All of this is only exaggerated by a rider that leans with the horse.

I have found that developing exercises with visual aids is the most effective way to help students understand lateral aids. In jumping, these exercises help riders feel changes in the horse's jumping technique and balance, help the rider understand how their position affects the horse, help the rider to ride more from their leg than from their hand, teach the horse to jump and land straight, and help the rider to identify their horses' weaknesses and where their horses need help. The jump exercise described in this article helps riders to ride a turn as a bending circle, lifting the inside circle instead of allowing the horse to fall into the turn in a counter bend. This exercise, also helps riders to recognize their own leaning habits.



Set up the above exercise on a 20-30 meter circle. There should be four poles on either side of the jump creating the curve of the circle. To start leave just the jump standards up and lie the cross rail poles aside. Begin by walking along the poles, asking the horse to follow the poles closely without stepping over them. To ask the horse to bend open the outside rein to invite the horse to step his shoulder out, add the inside leg to ask the horse to step their ribcage out, and add a slight inside rein half halt to ask the horse to continue turning along the poles. Riders should watch their own inside shoulder that it does not drop. A good trick to correct leaning is to think about stretching the inside ribcage up closing the outside ribcage. In the photo to the right the rider is collapsing her inside ribcage causing the horse to lean in to try to catch the rider's weight. This has caused the horse to track away from the poles and cut off a corner of the circle. Practice this at the walk, trot and canter in both directions.



Once comfortable with the circle set up a small cross rail half way through the curve of the poles so that the center of the jump is in the track that was ridden on the flat. Return to the trot and ride the exercise again with the jump. While riding the exercise continue riding the bend on the approach, over, and on the landing of the jump. Envision pushing the horse to the poles as the horse takes off and lands off of the fence. The rider should continue to think about stretching the inside ribcage to keep from leaning or twisting their upper body. If the rider is really struggling to stay centered in the saddle, I ask them to step into the inside stirrup and push the inside hip to the inside, which will straighten their inside posture.



In the above left photo the rider has stretched her inside ribcage, stepped into her inside stirrup and pushed her inside hip to the inside, allowing the horse to stand up, track closer to the poles, and not cut off the corner of the circle. This rider is still slightly leaned to the inside but is much straighter than in the earlier photo. No matter where a fence is positioned on a turn or on a straight line the horse should jump straight over the fence. This means the horse has taken off and landed in a straight line over the center of the fence. The above right photo shows this clearly. The horse is taking off and about to land in a straight line setting him up to land in a balanced canter, which allows the upcoming corner to be easier for the horse to track.



In the photo to the left the horse is expecting the upcoming turn causing him to jump the fence on an angle and falling away from the ground poles. In result the horse landed heavy on the front end, sped up on the turn, and struggled to make the turn of the circle without stepping outside of the poles.

This exercise can be done at the trot and canter. It is designed to be done over smaller fences to improve technique and develop more feel for the horse. With practice the horse will become stronger and the quality and balance of the trot and canter will improve, turns will become easier, the horse will become lighter in the rider's hand, and the horse will jump cleaner. If there are any questions about this exercise contact Aelin Johnson 615-653-9733 or aelinsequine@gmail.com.

