

Improving Your Riding:

Turn on the Forehand part 1

by Julie Penshorn

What are the essential tests of a horse's obedience? He must: 1) yield to the rein 2) yield to the leg 3) accept the core/seat aids. The turn on the forehand is a wonderful educational tool that helps you attain all three. It's useful to make a quick horse calmer as the rider can slow the turn down and control every step with seat and legs. And it's also useful to make a dull horse quicker as you insist on immediate responses to your aids. It helps you and the horse understand that the horse can yield to the rein and the leg independently. It also helps him begin to find his balance while also moving sideways. This exercise is a fundamental tool from which all lateral work is built. Eventually this exercise will get the horse more "through" and "on" the bit.

Mounted (or unmounted if your horse is very green) on either Western or English tack, but using a plain snaffle bit, and holding a dressage whip (about a 4 foot whip), begin by asking your horse to yield his head to the right. Take his nose almost to your knee. If you can't do this without moving, let him make a tiny circle as you continue to ask for his head and use your core muscles and your intention to "think" about standing still. Don't yank on any reins, just wait or firm (and give) the reins. Eventually, he'll stop. Now take his head to the left. If he's really uneducated in the bridle and won't yield, you can lift your hand upward and take it to the side.



Student, Hannah Hathaway, demonstrates a turn on the forehand from the right leg. She could be sitting more to the right, and her left hip is a bit high. That might explain the horse's slightly behind the bit posture in this picture. Note the nice crossover of the hind legs.

Whenever he yields, you release, but you're not trying to get the horse "off" the bit, so don't ask him to maintain a turned head without your rein aid for more than a fraction of a second. Now turn the horse left, release the left rein. Then turn him right, release the right rein, etc. Think "loosen the neck." He should stand still and have a round outline. You don't want him to curl up his neck. Then he is "behind the bit."

When you turn his head, use your legs to show him the boundaries. You need to help him understand that you don't want to move his hindquarters, by supporting with your legs. You also want to maintain a firm core. These are the muscles in your gut between your pelvis and your stomach. Stay still and he'll hold still.

When he yields his head left and right and stands still (this may take the entire session or no time at all), you are ready to introduce the leg and seat aids.

First, bring your right leg back quite far from the bent knee, and keep your left leg at the girth. Flex him ever-so-gently to the right and squeeze him very briefly and gently with the right leg. If he moves his hindquarters to the left, hurray

-- right answer! Pet him. Always use your leg with a squeeze-release motion. Never hold it on him. If instead, he falls right, sit more over to the right. Move your whole fanny toward the right of the saddle keeping your left hip low. (As pathetic as this feels, it works wonders to limit his ability to fall right. Now you are holding him on the leg and the seatbones.) If he doesn't move, tap him with the whip, right behind your right leg. If he still doesn't move, give him a big tap, but hang on in case he kicks at your leg. If he does, you must tap him again or that behavior will escalate and you'll never achieve success. When he moves freely from the light leg, you can try the other side. The more you need to bend the neck, the less willing the horse is to move from the leg. Avoid bending the neck during the turn.

It's useful to hold a whip in each hand when teaching this exercise. This eliminates the need to switch the whip every time you switch direction.

This exercise will prepare you for the leg yield and the shoulder-in as well. More next time.



Student, Layne Sandercott, needed core muscles and both her legs and seatbones to achieve this lovely, bending halfpass with Diamonds in the Sun. A history of obedience to the leg, through the turn on the forehand, leg yields and other lateral movements, was necessary to achieve this.

If Layne was positioned a tiny bit further right in the saddle, and was sitting a bit taller, her right hand would not need that slight lift to it. Raising an inside hand is called an "indirect rein of opposition." It is a reflex action that most riders figure out on their own. It helps the horse stay off that shoulder -- which essentially means, it replaces or supports the leg/seatbone on that side. It is a commonly taught method, especially for hunters and jumpers, to use in turns to keep the horse from leaning in.

I think any rein aid that is *required* as support of a horse's bend or balance, stops some degree of throughness (except an opening rein which invites the horse to step under and find his own balance). The seatbones and the leg should bend the horse, thus filling the outside rein. There should be no supporting or backward tendency on the inside rein. If there is, it will always be reflected in the quality of the movement.

The half pass comes after the shoulder-in and leg yield have been well understood by horse and rider, but is a real test of coordination of the rider's muscles and seat position.

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