

Exercises: Under Saddle – Serpentine

There are two types of serpentine: short and long. Short serpentine has undoubtedly an important role in helping the horse to find its balance and to improve softness. Yet, the serpentine is, on my mind, much more important in building the relationship.

Short serpentine will teach the riders to feel their horses, to consider them as a part of their body. Long serpentine will teach the horses to feel their riders, to consider them as part of their mind...



but flowly goes through its body down to its feet.

The consequence of this good timing is your horse raising its right foot, moving it to the outside and laying it to the ground.

Tip: Sequence

- Your right hip goes up and forward = horse's right front foot leaves the ground;
- You pick up the right rein = horse keeps its foot in the air;
- You open your hand to the outside = horse brings its foot to the outside;
- You release the rein = horse puts its foot down to the ground.

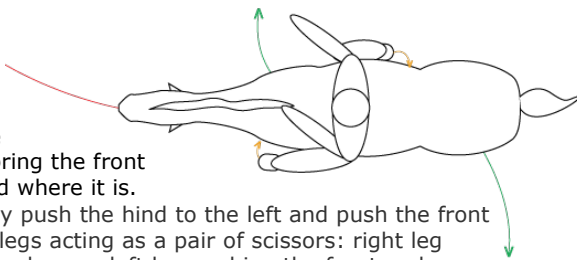
Positions

You should remain in position 2 all the time. Your hands are wide spread for the short serpentine in order to pick the feet at the right moment and change directions easily. On the contrary, your hands should remain still for the long serpentine.

Position of the legs is the key parameter for these exercises: indeed, serpentine will educate the horse to listen to your legs, that is why you have to be very particular. You should have already taught your horse to untrack its hind legs by applying your heel on the back of its flank, so this part will be easy as your horse will recognize it. We add a new cue with your outside leg: you should bring it by your horse's elbow to push its front leg away.

Try to figure your horse as a canoe instead of a car. When you want to turn right, you do not pull on the right rein to bring the front and leave the hind where it is.

You should actually push the hind to the left and push the front to the right, your legs acting as a pair of scissors: right leg pushing the hind end away, left leg pushing the front end away. This, combined to the forward motion, will make the horse turn smoothly to the right. Vice-versa for the left turn of course...



Will you get it at once? NO! So, be patient and consistent, do not try to force it but to feel it. Pretty soon, you will pick one step right every two or three steps. Later, you will pick two steps right in time every three or four steps. Finally, you will miss only one or two steps from time to time...

When you can pick the foot right in time once in a while, change direction and repeat the process.

There is a lot of information, so do not try to do it all at the same time. First, feel the rhythm, then pick the reins in cadence, next position your legs.

The objective of the short serpentine is to walk a balanced horse, which means both ends move at the same speed and rate: in the right serpentine, you pick the right rein in cadence with the right front foot leaving the ground (your left leg comes and pushes the outside elbow in the same rhythm), and you push the hind legs to the left by applying pressure with your right heel, so the right hind leg will come up and forward under the horse, crossing with the left hind leg.

As I said, that is a lot of information. Please, take the time to read this over and over until you figure every step and apply them by successive layers. If you try to do everything at the same time, you may get lost and your horse will get confused.

Process – Long serpentine

Long serpentine are less demanding technically and just require patience and understanding. Pick a straight line in the arena, do nothing with your hands, position your legs to ask for a right turn and leave some time to your horse to feel them. If nothing happens, pick your right rein in rhythm and pull the right foot to the outside, then release your hand and ask a left turn with your legs only. Same process, if nothing happens, pick up the left rein and bring your horse's left foot to the outside, release and change direction.

After a while, your horse will assimilate the position of your legs to the picking of the rein coming right after and the necessity to turn. Pretty soon, you will not need to touch your reins anymore, legs will do the job.

Duller horses may need a firmer second deal, you can actually bump gently into your horse's elbow to move it away from pressure, then make sure you stop bumping as soon as your horse turns as expected.

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Process – Short serpentine

Pick a straight line in the arena, switch to position 2 to walk your horse and take some time to feel its rhythm. That is the most important part of the process, your ability to synchronize with your horse will radically change your way of riding. Pay attention to the position of your horse's legs and the direct relationship with the position of your hips. Typically you should feel your right hip going up and forward when your horse's right front leg leaves the ground. Start from here to get the rhythm, to match the motion of your body to your horse's legs.

Once you are in cadence with your horse, pick the right rein exactly when the right front foot leaves the ground, open your hand to the outside and release the rein. This very tiny little thing makes huge changes in your riding as this rein-picking right in time with its rhythm will mean something to your horse: the rein is directly connected to the foot, your action is not stuck in its mouth