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Get Even

Avoid a one-sided problem by training your horse to be equally balanced on the left and right sides and when traveling in both directions.

Article and Photographs by Jennifer Barron



Trainer Mark Sheridan relies on three yields – to the bit, the reins and his legs – to develop an even-sided, balanced horse.

It's human nature to be either left- or right-handed, though some ambidextrous individuals are equally adept. Equines, too, can tend to favor one side or direction over another, which can cause a lack of balance. Even-sidedness and balance are significant requirements when training a horse.

For Cave Creek, Ariz., trainer Mark Sheridan, three is the magic number when promoting balance. He relies on three yields – to the bit, the reins and the rider's legs – for both foundation training of green horses and tune-ups for seasoned mounts. A horse that respects and responds to the three yields is even-sided, or is equally sensitive to light pressure on both the left and right sides when working in either direction.

Here Sheridan explains the importance of evenness and discusses the details of each yield, including an exercise to help master each element. Additionally, he offers a way to test your horse's progress.

Remember to spend more time working on the resistant side to develop evenness throughout your horse's body. When the horse responds by moving away from pressure, instantly release it as a reward. Have patience when practicing these exercises and evaluate progress in weekly and monthly increments for accurate analysis.

Emphasize Evenness

"An even-sided horse responds to the same amount of yield pressure on each side," Sheridan explains. "Ultimately, evenness is a combination of all three yields – your hands communicating with the horse's mouth, the reins commu-

Gear Check

Mark Sheridan says these exercises should be first taught with the horse outfitted in a snaffle without shanks. Once your horse is well versed at the exercises in a snaffle, complete them in a shanked bit. Whether accomplished with a snaffle or shanked bit, Sheridan advises using two hands for better control. Use one hand when the horse has mastered the tasks.

In these photos, Sheridan demonstrates the exercises on a 3-year-old Quarter Horse mare. He uses a medium twisted snaffle and split reins. Sheridan also uses a martingale for greater control.

Yield No. 1: To the Bit

Why it's Important: For the horse to avoid developing bad habits such as head tossing, pushing against the bit and mouth gaping, Sheridan stresses that the animal must yield to the bit.

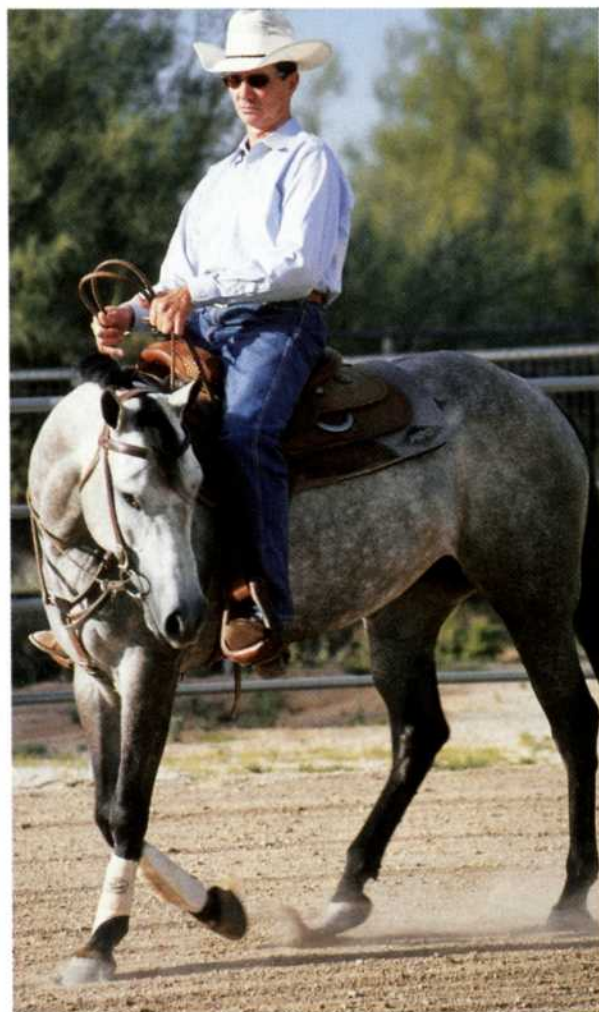
"You should be able to drive your horse into the bit," he says. "It shows that he's obedient, respectful and tolerant of pressure on his mouth. That response must be equal to the left and right."

Exercise: Poll Flex

To encourage a soft response to the bit, walk in a circle to the left. Sheridan suggests drawing the left rein back and releasing right-rein pressure to encourage the horse to look left, or to the inside of the circle. Draw the right rein back and lengthen the left rein to ask the horse to look right, outside the circle. Complete the same exercises in a right

turn, communicating with his neck and shoulders, and your legs communicating with his sides, ribcage and hindquarters. They're each relative and integral parts of a light, responsive horse."

To evaluate your horse's evenness, Sheridan recommends a few quick investigative exercises. Pick up your left rein with your left hand. Does your horse flex toward your left knee and yield to the bit? Release the pressure, walk your horse forward and lay the right rein on his neck. Does he willingly guide to the left? Finally, apply lower-leg and heel pressure on the right side. Does your horse freely move off your leg to the left, or does he offer resistance? Now evaluate the other side, using your right hand, left rein and left leg. Compare the amount of pressure required in each direction. Ideally, the horse should respond to the same level of pressure. With practice of the accompanying exercises and careful evaluation, you can alleviate any side favoritism.



Sheridan draws back the left rein and releases the right rein to check his mare's bit-yield. As soon as she gives to pressure, it's released.

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circle. Draw both reins back to ask the horse to break evenly at the poll. Each maneuver should be done with the same amount of pressure and receive a willing response from the horse. Try the maneuvers at a trot and progress to a lope once your horse is comfortable at slower gaits.

Yield No. 2: To the Reins

Why it's Important: Yielding to the reins basically means neck-reining. Sheridan points out that, optimally, the horse yields his neck and shoulders when the rider lays indirect rein (neck rein) against the horse's body. When furthering the horse's training, shoulder control is essential for such tasks as changing leads and turning on the hindquarters and forehand.

"The horse should respond to the neck-rein without you having to always go to the horse's mouth," Sheridan asserts. "A light touch should sufficiently gain shoulder control. Don't make a habit of pulling on the horse's mouth to accomplish this yield."

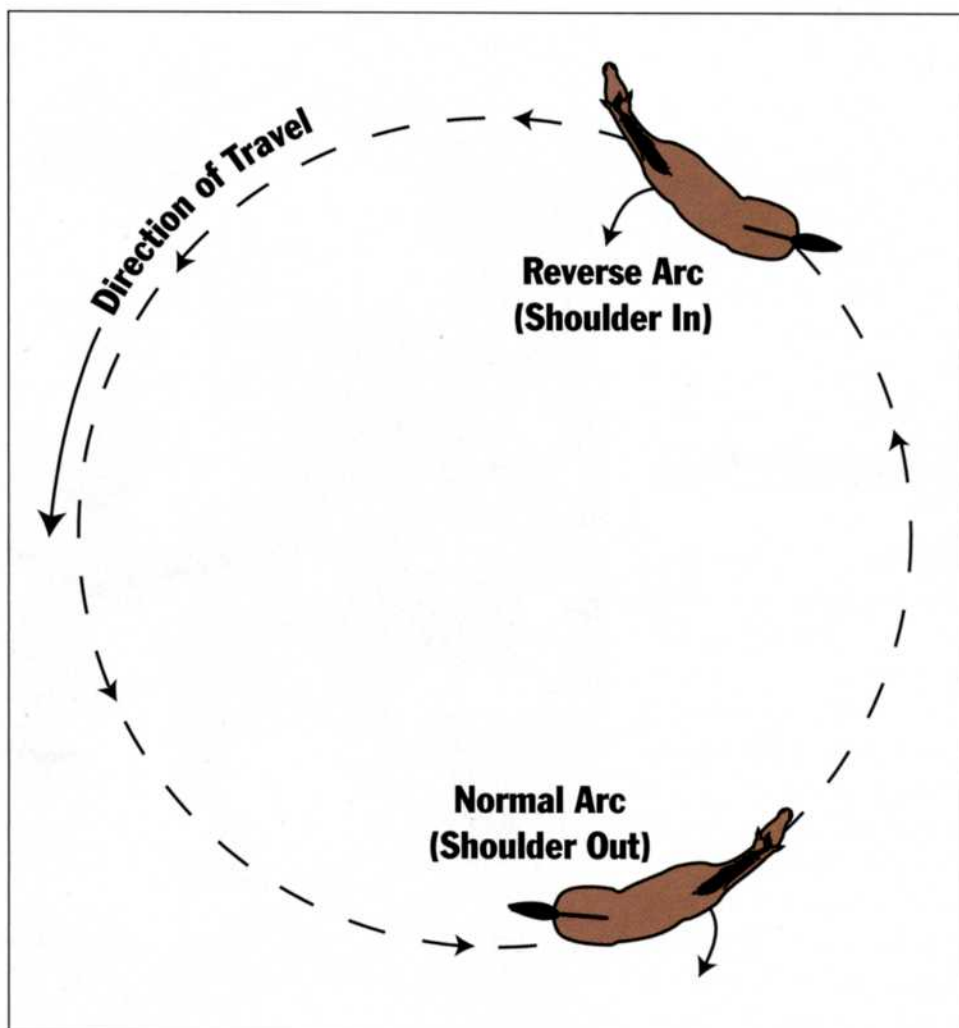
Exercise: Arc and Reverse Arc

Begin at a walk, circling to the left. Maintain enough leg pressure to keep the horse walking throughout the exercise. After checking the horse's bit-yield, lay the left (inside) rein on the horse's left shoulder to shift his shoulder to the outside of the circle. In this instance, his body arcs with the circle (see the diagram at right). In essence, you open the circle's circumference by pushing on the inside shoulder with the corresponding rein. Progress to a trot and lope, and complete the exercise in both directions.

A reverse arc means the horse's inside shoulder shifts toward the inside of the circle. The horse's body arcs opposite that of the circle. Circling to the left at a walk, lay the right rein on the horse's outside shoulder to shift his left shoulder inside the circle. This is essentially the opposite of what you accomplish with the regular arc. The reverse arc might require more practice because it's not mastered as easily as the regular arc. Progress to a trot and lope, and complete the exercise in both directions. ➔



Using rein pressure, Sheridan directs the mare on an arc to the left, the same direction as the circle. He lays the inside rein on the horse's shoulder and pushes her shoulders out.



In a normal arc, the horse's body bends with the direction of the circle; his shoulders bend to the outside. In a reverse arc, his body bends opposite the circle's direction; his shoulders bend to the inside.



When making a reverse arc, Sheridan pushes the horse's inside shoulder to the inside of the circle. The mare's body arcs opposite the direction of travel.

"Doing these exercises on a circle reveals whether or not the horse is even," Sheridan offers. "The horse might feel good to the left, but falls apart to the right, or vice versa. Then you'll know which side needs more work to make the horse even."

Yield No. 3: To the Legs

Why it's Important: According to Sheridan, most evenness problems lie in leg pressure. Your horse might require a stronger push, nudge or kick from one leg than the other.

"Leg-yielding is very important," he says. "You must have extensive hip control at all gaits and the same sensitivity in each direction in order to progress to more difficult maneuvers, such as lead departures, lead changes and turnarounds."

Exercise: Two-Track

Sheridan admits that the two-track is a difficult maneuver, however he emphasizes its importance when laying the groundwork for a horse's education.

In this drill, walk in a straight line and apply right-rein and left-leg pressure behind the cinch to push the horse's hip and ribcage to the right while continuing to move forward. Reverse the action by applying left-rein and right-leg pressure to shift the hip and ribcage to the left while continuing forward at a walk. In both

directions, this advanced maneuver results in the horse traveling with his hip and head tipped in the same direction.

"Be patient when two-tracking," Sheridan advises. "Start slowly and get both sides



Two-tracking is the most difficult of these maneuvers, but one on which Sheridan places great emphasis. The mare's head and hip tip in the same direction, and she continues moving forward.



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The two-track requires the horse to travel with his head and hip in the same direction while holding up his shoulders and maintaining forward motion.

even at the walk, then progress to the trot. Achieve evenness at the trot, and then progress to the lope. Take your time, because this drill offers a high degree of difficulty.”

The Ultimate Test

Test your horse’s yielding skills with one maneuver – the back up.

“Backing up is the best way to determine if everything is working when you’re going forward,” Sheridan shares. “If your horse yields willingly to each drill, he’ll back a perfectly straight line with a light touch from the bit, reins and your legs.”

Don’t be discouraged if your horse doesn’t back arrow straight. Use the three yields to correct his deviation. For example, if he shifts his hindquarters left, push his shoulders to the left with your right rein to straighten his spine.

Sheridan advises using the three yield exercises and the back-up test as a warm-up for any task, whether it’s a western-riding pattern, a roping run or a trek down the trail. The quick refresher course will remind your horse of his lessons and make him a more willing and able partner.



Backing is the ultimate test of a horse's yielding progress. Eventually, the horse will back in a straight line with light pressure from the bit, reins and your legs.

Mark Sheridan

Born and raised in Nebraska, Mark Sheridan has trained all-around horses and prepared youth and amateur competitors in Cave Creek, Ariz., for 22 years. An American Quarter Horse Association Professional Horseman and judge, he's officiated at the organization's world show three times, the American Quarter Horse Youth Association World Championship Show twice, the All American Quarter Horse Congress twice, and has presided over numerous AQHA events overseas. Sheridan's program includes both English and western disciplines, but focuses on producing top-notch western-riding horses. 🐾

