Manolo Mendez

LATERAL WORK

Lateral Work (part 2): The Marriage of Lateral Work and Natural Collection

By Manolo Mendez, Specialist of In-hand and Classical Equitation

with Ysabella Dean and Caroline Larrouilh

Lateral work consists of the shoulder-in, travers, renvers and half pass. We begin by introducing the simple shoulder-in and, when the horse understands it and can do it easily, we progress to travers (quarters-in) and renvers (quarters-out).

When these movements are established, we introduce the half pass. While we train, our focus should be on building the horse's fitness, straightness, suppleness and confidence, not on how much flexion and crossing we can create, even if we have a very obedient and athletic but untrained horse.

We want to develop our horse progressively so he stays sound and happy in his work throughout his career. To that end, we do not ask for too much lateral flexion or continuous lateral work. For example, in the early stages, we do not ride lateral movements across entire long walls, across the entire length of the diagonal or around the arena again and again. Instead we take our time, we break the work into manageable chunks and we give the horse plenty of breaks when he can walk or work straight. This ensures the horse does not get sore or discouraged and thus helps ensure the horse does not get crooked as a result of too much pressure, too soon.

Instead of focusing on the amount of flexion we can create, we work on developing the horse's independe

Good basic lateral work increases the quality of all the work and makes Grand Prix more attainable

Lateral work requires that the horse moves forwards and sideways at the same time, with regularity and evenness.

Correctly executed lateral work is a critical key to allowing riders to progress up the levels because lateral exercises strengthen and supple the topline and underline muscles of the horse, increases the range of motion and freedom of its shoulders and its loin and promote elasticity, fluidity and stability in all the important joints, muscles, tendons and ligaments that are needed for quality extension and collection work, and every nuance in between. In a word, lateral work enhances, develops and maintains the horse's essential "equipment" for higher level training.

It is not "just" about being able to ride good lateral movements. As a part of the horse's daily exercise routine, lateral work is what straightens, elasticizes, supples and strengthens the whole horse in such a way that in time, he will be able to execute beautiful pirouettes, piaffe and passage.

The importance of lateral work is reflected through the levels of dressage competition. In Elementary, only very simple lateral movements are required (shoulder-in and travers). In Medium and Advanced, increasingly developed movements are required. Slowly and methodically introduced lateral work is what gives the horse the ability to push off the ground evenly with both hind feet, frees his shoulders, allows him to travel forward and sideways without falling in or out of the movements, makes it possible for it to glide across the arena rhythmically, its diagonal pairs crossing evenly and effortlessly.

If the basic lateral work has been rushed or forced, it will be revealed more and more as the horse struggles to move up the levels.

There will be more resistance because as the horse is overfaced by the rider's demands - unable to comply physically and overwhelmed mentally - he will evade the work by becoming crooked, uneven, showing a dramatic difference between one direction and the other, bracing into the hand or either not crossing or showing insufficient flexion and crossing.

When this happens, if the horse does not become unsound first, it will find it difficult to get to Prix St George. And yet, PSG is really only halfway to the top, because to properly develop all the movements required for Grand Prix can take another twelve months or more for a professional (and several years for an amateur). If the horse struggled to get to Prix St George, how difficult will it find it to get all the way to 11, 12 and Grand Prix with the increased demand of zig zags, pirouettes,piaffe and passage?

No horse can perform Grand Prix movements with grace and ease if it has not been properly and thoroughly prepared through lateral work. Imagine asking a human being who only knows how to run forward to suddenly start

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moving sideways or backward at a walk or at a run.

To begin with, this person's brain and central nervous system would have to process an entire new way of moving, test it and practice it before they are ready to proceed laterally confidently, and without falling down or moving like a drunken sailor. Initially, they would lack the coordination and balance needed to succeed, and they would need to use different muscles groups that they have not yet developed. They would have to build these slowly, slowly, step by step to not tear muscles, get achy and sore and become discouraged.

We would not expect them to achieve perfection overnight, and neither should we ever rush our horse through any stage of its development.

Anticipation leads to resistance

When we start lateral work we are trying to teach the horse so much. We have to be very careful because the horse can become oversensitive to our leg, and then he can escape quickly to one side or another, to the left or right. As we practice together, its brain will process information faster and as the movements become more and more familiar he will develop muscle memory. Our aids will travels through his body faster and he will show better and better coordination. In time, he will respond seamlessly to very light aids from the rider.

However, while he is learning, he also may misunderstand these new aids. He may be so eager to please that he will respond to what he thinks we are asking for, before we finish preparing it for the movements, and he will then make mistakes. This is called anticipation.

Anticipation from a horse occurs when we make him over sensitive to our demands and its anxiety is expressed by its delivering something, anything, to lessen the pressure he is experiencing from the rider. This pressure can be too much hand, leg, flexion, too much repetition, too much reinforcement with the spur or the whip. Too much expectation. It is a training, not a horse problem.

That is a shame, because a young horse who is considered "difficult" because it anticipates and gives the "wrong answer" and thus frustrates its rider is often one who has the potential to be very good if the rider develops its trust and confidence.

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Anticipation can also lead to resistance because the horse, in trying to please, does more than he is physically ready to do. For example, when practicing travers and half-pass, one simple exercise consists in doing a ten-meter half circle from F and then asking the horse to move back to B (or from M to B). Sometimes, because the horse knows what is coming, it will take its hindquarters to the inside too soon as he comes round the circle. Then it will travel back to the track with its hindquarters in too far, which will affect its balance and it will feel that it is in trouble. Next time we ask for this exercise, it will remember its unpleasant experience and feel that the exercise is too hard.

When a horse starts to think negatively about an exercise, it starts to build resistance and then our work becomes much more complicated and can even falter and stop. To avoid this serious problem, we have to be careful to not ask the horse for too much too soon, avoid letting it give us more than it is ready for, and make sure we present each exercise in a way that will build his confidence.

A good example of how to do this is when we introduce half pass. We should always introduce half pass by going from the middle of the arena to the track, not vice versa. We ride a half ten-meter circle in the corner which takes us to the center line and from there ask the horse to half pass to the track.

The horse knows when it reaches the track it has finished the exercise, and the track pulls him like a magnet. But if we ask it to go from the track to the center line before he is comfortable doing it the other way, it may think we want him to half pass across the entire arena. It knows very well how long the arena is, and it may feel it is too hard. And so it will resist, lose its forward, lose its bend and just putter out.

If a horse does anticipate, we must never, never punish it. We must ask for something simple we know he can accomplish easily, reward it and then ask for the more difficult exercise in a different way. We should also look for ways to slow down the training, to take the pressure off, to change the way we are working. This may mean not only finding a different way to do the exercise, but perhaps not doing that exercise at all for a few days.

By working intelligently and being sensitive

"We have to strive to find the same balance and feeling with our horses. If we want to create a partnership, we should not ride with either rigid minds or bodies because then we will block our horse instead of allowing him to flow with us.. "







Work in shoulder-in down the center line, view from the back. Please note in image 1 the diagonal pairing of the left hind and right fore have just lifted off and are stricking forward. They will be landing together evenly in image 2 on three clear tracks. Dinamico is showing a nice amount of bend from poll to tail and is supple and relaxed.



Front view of shoulder fore. In this image, Dinamico is clearly traveling on three tracks and showing great symmetry. As he reaches the track, he shows not loss in rhythm or activity.

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In schooling, we are always looking to improve the quality of the movements little by little. In image 1, practicing the half pass, Dinamico is not bending well through the body and is a little stuck and labored. In image 2, Dinamico is bending better through the ribs, carrying himself and "flowing" through the half pass with Manolo just guiding him.

to our horse's needs rather then to try to force him to comply to our expectations, by avoiding resistance and anticipation, we will encourage the continued development of suppleness, coordination and good will.

Lateral work and collection go hand-in-hand

Building suppleness and coordination is only one part of the big picture. The other very important purpose of lateral work is to achieve natural collection. We will know when we are ready to progress from lateral work because our horse will understand what natural collection is - and know when and how to use it.

Lateral work and natural collection are two aspects of training that cannot and should not be separated. Just as lateral work leads to more advanced movements, natural collection leads to refined collection. Refined collection is what gives us the necessary lightness and elevation needed to perform these movements - half pass, flying changes, zig zags, pirouettes, piaffe, passage...

As the horse learns lateral work and as its body develops, it also learns about collection. It learns about it through the practice of the movements which progressively shape his body into different postures and lead to a different balance. Because he learns about it so organically,for itself, we will never need to force collection out of him.

So what is natural collection? What is a natural anything? It is when the horse gives us something fluidly, smoothly and to the best of its ability. When it understands clearly what you are asking for and it knows how to use its body to best achieve it.

Natural collection comes from within the horse when it prepares itself for certain movements. It cannot achieve good lateral work without this self-preparation. And although it comes naturally to a horse playing or posturing in the paddock, it is a much harder thing for it to learn to use when he is also carrying a rider.

Not only is a horse's own natural balance changed by adding a rider, it must also learn to be in harmony with him, to perform the movements not spontaneously and at will, but as a discipline.

Just as forcing lateral movements too soon can lead to resistance, so can forcing collection destroy the horse's confidence and ability to collect naturally. Natural collection will come just as fluid lateral movements must come:





A working half pass. Between a travers and a half pass. Manolo's philosophy is based on working with the horse not against it. When a horse offers a movement, he is creative and flexible enough to work with it, build the horse's confidence, and gently transform what is given into what he wants, with tact and feeling.

Good quality shoulder in down the center line. This work is a little bit more advanced and should be introduced when the horse performs lateral movements with ease, and travels forward and sideways freely without losing activity, regularity and bend. This image shows a very straight horse traveling in a clear, three track shoulder in.

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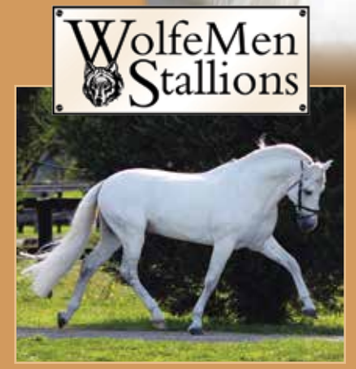
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Travers right down the center line. Again, this represents more advanced lateral work, a horse beginning travers would start out on the wall to make it easier to learn. In this image Dinamico moves effortlessly in self carriage, Manolo is not propping him up. Note the perfect alignment on the right fore/ left hind diagonal pair.

little by little, step by step.

This does not necessarily mean that the rider never asks for a little more collection. Because the horse is only learning, there are times when the rider must, through the contact and the use of his body, and by pushing the horse on just a little at the right time, encourage the horse to find the level of natural collection he needs for the movement he is performing. The rider must do so without asking for more than the horse is ready and able to give.

This requires very fine feel from the rider. **Even more important than knowing when to ask for more, is to know when to stop asking at all.**

Collection is a collaborative effort. It is the rider and horse working in perfect understanding and harmony, each helping the other to such a degree that the two blend into one.

I like to think of it as akin to a pair of ice-skaters who have practiced and polished their performance to such a high degree of refinement, that when they work together they are no longer two separate people. Their partnership has become so finely integrated that they appear as one being.

They come to the part of their act where the man must lift the woman above his head and skate around the ring with her. From the moment she takes a foot off the ice, he has prepared himself and is already in the best position to lift her and hold her. However, her own position is vital to the success of the lift. If her balance is not quite right, it will affect his balance. If she is a good skater, she will adjust her own body and balance to help her partner.

Maybe she will need to move one arm back or forward a little to adjust her weight distribution, or hold her neck and head a little higher or lower. She will be able to feel by the way he is balancing which way she needs to balance herself to maintain total harmony between them.

We have to strive to find the same balance and feeling with our horses. If we want to create a partnership, we should not ride with either rigid minds or bodies because then we will block our horse instead of allowing him to flow with us. We must cultivate the horse's natural and independent balance as we do our own.

Collection is a partnership where horse and rider become so so tuned in, so connected that six legs, two brains and two hearts come together and move as one.

The rider who makes his horse short in the neck with an unyielding, insensitive contact, then uses the spurs to "round him up" artificially to make him piaffe is therefore not creating or achieving true collection. Just as false collection is is no match for real collection, executing the movements with technical accuracy only, is not dressage.

Dressage is gracefulness, lightness, beauty and harmony.

Manolo Mendez wishes to thank Alex and Sandra Wolfe for their friendship and patronage; and Wolfe Civil for its support and sponsorship. Featured in this article is Andalusian stallion Dinamico XII, Dinamico is part of the WolfeMen Stallions stable and is owned by the Wolfes. For more information on Dinamico and other WolfeMen stallions visit
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