



**1. Riding a haunches-in on a circle gives the horse and rider a feel for the walk pirouette. To begin, I ride Widor in an active walk on a 10-meter circle. I make sure Widor is straight: his hind feet track in line with the fore feet, shoulders falling neither in nor out. I stay centered in the saddle.**

**2. Then I move my outside leg back an inch or two behind the girth and, using a light supporting pressure, I ask Widor to move his haunches onto a slightly smaller circle than his forehand is making. At the beginning, I am satisfied with just a few steps of haunches-in on the circle.**

# Ride the Perfect Walk Pirouette

Give this underrated movement the attention it deserves with a three-step plan from Pan-Am Games medalist and judge Donna Richardson.

*By Donna Richardson with Elizabeth Iliff • Photos by Elaine Olsen*

If you ask 100 top dressage riders to name their favorite movement, I'd be willing to bet that *none* of them would choose the walk pirouette. This deceptively simple turning of the horse's forehand around his haunches is actually devilishly difficult. There are so many ways to go wrong. The most common error I see is a loss of the crucial four-beat walk rhythm when a horse gets his inside hind leg "stuck" on the ground. In other flawed pirouettes, a horse may lose the bend, he may drop the connection entirely, he may lose energy or he may swing his quarters out against the rider's leg and end up turning on his center. As a judge, I've seen all of these errors and more. As a rider, I've probably also committed all of them at one time or another.

The good news is that, with proper training, any horse can learn to do an excellent walk pirouette. You don't need a million-dollar horse to earn a high score. Unlike extensions and flying changes, the walk pirouette is a "non-brilliance" movement: A 10 pirouette won't leave your friends gasping with envy the way a breathtaking extended trot or a line of enormous, straight tempi changes will. But walk pirouettes—or the more basic turns on the haunches—are ubiquitous from Second Level, Test 3 through Intermediaire I. Frequently, they are awarded a double coefficient in the scoring. So if you want to do well in shows, it behooves you to master these "simple" turns.

In your horse's physical development, practicing walk pirouettes will help increase the bending of the joints in his hind legs, thus gymnasticizing his body and increasing his collection. It also will help improve his suppleness by teaching him to maintain an inside bend. More importantly, it will teach *you* to feel and regulate each step your horse takes without having to deal with balance and control issues. Ultimately, walk pirouettes will prepare you and your horse for canter pirouettes.

The walk pirouette is merely an advanced version of the turn on the haunches. According to the USA Equestrian *Rule Book*, a walk pirouette is a circle executed on two tracks with a radius equal to the length of the horse



I am demonstrating the walk pirouette on Widor, a 13-year-old Westfalen stallion owned by Antje Freygang.

with the forehand moving around the haunches. In the movement, the horse's fore feet and outside hind foot move around the inside foot, which returns to the same spot or slightly in front of it each time it leaves the ground. The horse is slightly bent in the direction in which he is turning.

The walk pirouette is done in collected walk, so it has shorter steps and a tighter turn than the turn on the haunches, which is done in a working walk from the walk or a halt. In a turn on the haunches, the horse's forehand moves in regular steps around his inner hind leg. The horse is not required to step in the same spot with his inside hind leg each time it leaves the ground but may move slightly forward. The turn on the haunches evolves into the walk pirouette when you graduate to Fourth Level.

The best way to master both is with a

progressive series of easier exercises. I'll give you three of my favorites in this article. As you practice them, remember that your goal is a *walk* pirouette. Never sacrifice the quality of the walk for the sake of the turn.

Before attempting these exercises, be sure you can perform a good shoulder-in and *travers* (haunches-in). The control these movements give you over your horse's shoulders and hindquarters will be essential in the turn on the haunches and walk pirouette. That's why turns on the haunches do not appear until Second Level, Test 3. Once your horse has an understanding of shoulder-in and haunches-in, introduce him to the following exercises.

#### **Exercise 1: Haunches-in on a Circle**

Riding a haunches-in on a circle gives the horse and rider a feel for the walk pirou-

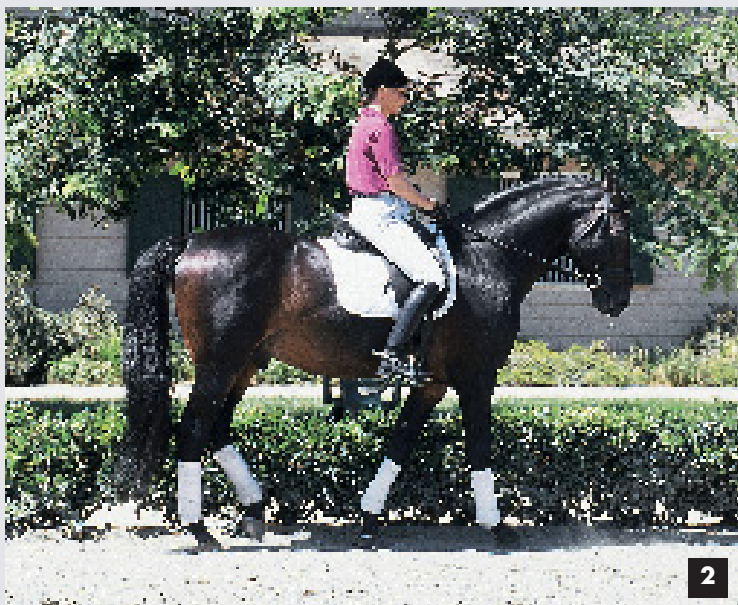
ette. Start in an active walk on a 10-meter circle in the center of the arena. Check that your horse is straight: hind feet tracking in line with the fore feet, shoulders falling neither in nor out. Stay centered in the saddle with your weight on your inside sitting bone. Then move your outside leg back an inch or two behind the girth and, using a light supporting pressure with it, ask your horse to move his haunches onto a slightly smaller circle than his forehand is making. Some riders make the mistake of exaggerating the outside leg position, which irritates horses who are ticklish in their flank areas and causes the rider to sit to the outside. Mares, especially, can be provoked to resist and even kick at a leg moved too far back.

As soon as your horse responds properly, pat him. Most horses that understand *travers* comply readily with this

## EXERCISE 2: Shoulder-in to Turn on the Haunches



1. Approaching the turn on the haunches from a shoulder-in is the next step toward asking for a true walk pirouette that must start from a straight line. I start by asking Widor for an active walk in shoulder-in, parallel to the long side.



2. I ask Widor to shorten his stride slightly, being careful to keep my legs on his sides. I want to avoid making the mistake that many people do of pulling on the reins and slowing—but not *shortening*—the step.

exercise. However, within a few strides, the average horse will feel the strain of having to bend his inside stifle and hock a little more deeply. He then will try to evade the extra effort by straightening his body—either by “popping” his shoulder to the outside or swinging his hindquarters into your outside leg.

On a horse who pops his shoulder to the outside, you will find yourself doing a very nice leg yield on a circle, without the gymnastic benefit of the inside bend of the haunches-in. To correct this, imagine an arrow pointing out of either your horse’s chest or your chest. When the horse’s outside shoulder “pops” out, that arrow will be pointing outside the 10-meter circle. Aim the arrow onto the 10-meter circle by using both reins to lead your horse’s shoulders back into position on the circle. You will now have re-established the bend and re-gymnasti-

cized your horse.

If your horse attempts to evade what to him seems like unnecessary work by swinging his quarters out against your leg, you must resist the temptation to push harder with your outside leg or to sit to the outside. Arnold Schwarzenegger himself does not have enough strength to force 1,500 pounds of horse to move sideways if the horse doesn’t want to. Stay centered in the saddle with your weight on your inside seat bone. Then tap your horse with the whip behind your outside leg. Already he should have learned to move promptly away from this aid in his haunches-in lessons. As soon as he responds properly, pat him and go back to a light supporting pressure with your outside leg. When he swings out again—and he will—tap him again and reward the correct response.

At the beginning, be satisfied with just

a few steps of haunches-in on the circle. Then ride straight out from the circle, parallel to the long side, and repeat the exercise on the circle at one end of the arena.

Gradually build up until you can ride half of a 10-meter circle and then, eventually, a full 10-meter circle in haunches-in. Frequent, short repetitions will lead to faster progress than forcing your horse to go around in endless circles until you are both dizzy.

Remember to be fair—many “resistances” can be avoided if you remember how sore your own muscles become with new or unaccustomed exercise. Imagine how sore and resentful you’d be if you’d never done a sit-up before and a personal trainer made you do 100 in one day. You’d probably never go back to the gym again. Our horses don’t have that option, so we have the responsibility to make our requests reasonable.



3. Then I give a little half halt on the outside rein when Widor’s outside leg is on the ground (the moment when his outside shoulder is back). I keep my weight on my inside sitting bone. I think “swing the shoulders around,” and I open my inside rein to lead his shoulders to the inside.



4. As I continue to turn, I keep the walk steps active with my inside leg on the girth. I rest my outside leg against Widor’s side to guard against the haunches swinging out. I will continue until I have made a 180-degree turn and finish just before Widor becomes parallel with the long side.



## EXERCISE 3:

### Turn on the Haunches on the Centerline



**Make the first true turn-on-the-haunches attempt from the centerline. As I turned down the centerline at A, I established activity and straightness. I rode a hint of a shoulder-fore and shortened Widor's stride slightly. Now, at the start of the turn, I think, "swing the shoulders; keep the engine going." I ride a 180-degree turn and, just before Widor is parallel again to the long side, I ride out of the turn with my inside leg.**

#### Exercise 2: Shoulder-in to Turn on the Haunches

While you and your horse get a feel for the walk pirouette from riding a haunches-in on a circle, the walk pirouette must be shown starting from a straight line. Approaching the turn on the haunches from a shoulder-in is the next step toward asking for a true walk pirouette that must start from a straight line.

When your horse is comfortable keeping his haunches in once or twice around a 10-meter circle, start to teach him to make a turn on the haunches from a shoulder-in on the long side. From an active walk in shoulder-in, ask your horse to shorten his stride slightly, being careful

to keep your legs on. Avoid making the mistake that many people do of pulling on the reins and slowing—but not *shortening*—the step. Then, give a little half halt on the outside rein when the horse's outside leg is on the ground (the moment when his outside shoulder is back). Make sure to keep your weight on your inside sitting bone. Thinking "swing the shoulders around," open your inside rein to lead your horse's shoulders to the inside. Meanwhile, keep the walk steps active with your inside leg on the girth. Rest your outside leg against his side to guard against the haunches swinging out, but don't try to use it to push them inward. Continue until you have made 180-degree turn.

Finish the turn just before your horse becomes parallel with the long side, wherever that is. You'll probably be closer to the quarterline than the track where you started. That's OK! Finish the turn by riding out of it: Push forward with your inside leg. To prevent over rotating, apply the leg *before* he's parallel with the long side. And to avoid losing the bend, be careful not to use your outside rein to stop the turn.

In the beginning, be satisfied if your horse simply describes a 5-meter half circle with his hind feet. The essence of the movement at this point is not the size of the turn but the maintenance of the rhythm. He *must* keep walking. To maximize his chances of success at this stage, keep the turn large. But don't take for granted that he'll keep walking on his own. Concentrate on each step, even counting "one, two, three, ..." in your head, if necessary. Imagine having a sensitive little buzzer in your seat that tells you "oops, something's not moving here." At that moment, use either your inside leg or both legs to say, "Go!" Especially when you're schooling at home, don't wait for your horse to get stuck before reacting with your legs and/or whip. If his engine dies, walk straight out of the turn without finishing it. Then develop a good, active

walk again before coming back to the exercise. This will help you prevent rhythm problems from ever developing.

Once you and your horse have mastered this exercise, you're almost home. The next and much smaller step is:

#### Exercise 3: Turn on the Haunches on the Centerline

Make your first true turn-on-the-haunches attempts from the centerline, facing A or C. I find that starting them on the rail makes riders focus too much on the size of the turn. We want so desperately to end up back on the rail that we neglect more important elements, like rhythm and bend. Practicing on the centerline also gives your horse more time to set up the turn than he would have on the line across the short side.

Here's how to ask for the turn on the haunches. As you turn down the centerline from A, establish activity and straightness. Ride a hint of a shoulder-fore and shorten your horse's stride slightly. Once again, at the start of the turn, think "swing the shoulders, keep the engine going." By now, you should be confident that your horse won't swing his quarters against your outside leg. You can even use your outside leg a little more forward on the girth to encourage his outside shoulder to come around. (Of course, if he *does* throw his haunches out, use the whip in your outside hand to remind him immediately that this is not a good idea.) Ride a 180-degree turn, and just before he is parallel again to the long side, ride out of the turn with your inside leg.

Now, because you're on the centerline, you have plenty of time to reestablish the walk if it has become a bit lazy. Prepare for a second turn on the haunches by riding another shoulder-fore, either repeating it in the same direction or changing the bend to attempt it in the other direction. This way, you can attempt the next turn whenever your horse is ready, not when you've run out of room on the

short side.

All that remains now is to make the turn smaller. The more you can shorten your horse's step before you start the turn—without losing the rhythm—the smaller the turn will be. How small is small enough? When I'm sitting at C, I am very happy to see an active, nonresistant turn on the haunches where the hind legs describe a circle about two feet in diameter. For a walk pirouette, the ideal (the 10!) would be to see the inside hind

foot step up and down on the spot. In reality, if I see a walk pirouette with clear rhythm, good energy, maintained bend, and a diameter of less than a foot, I can still give a very high mark—8 or better.

### Perfecting the Pirouette

So how do you go from turn on the haunches to walk pirouette? It just happens—with the development of the collected walk. As the length of the walk step shortens, the turn on the haunches

simply becomes a walk pirouette. No new schooling is required. By the time you reach Fourth Level, your horse should have acquired a greater degree of suppleness and engagement. You won't need to take so many steps to prepare for the turn. Still, be sure you have a collected walk *before* you start the pirouette. It's impossible to develop collection halfway through the movement.

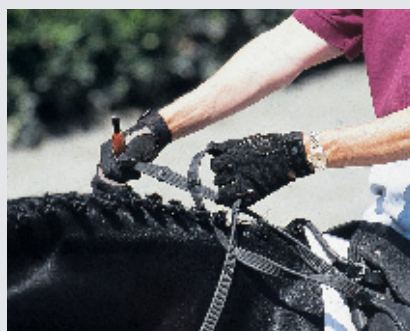
If you've instilled the right basics in your horse with exercises like the ones I've described above, by Fourth Level you'll be able to go from pirouette right to pirouette left easily on the short side. And you will be confident that if you ask for a tighter turn, your horse will not lose the bend or the activity. You will be a paragon of pirouetters! But guess what? Now you get to start all over again with the haunches-in on a 10-meter canter circle to prepare for the *canter* pirouette! 🐾

## QUICK POSITION FIXES

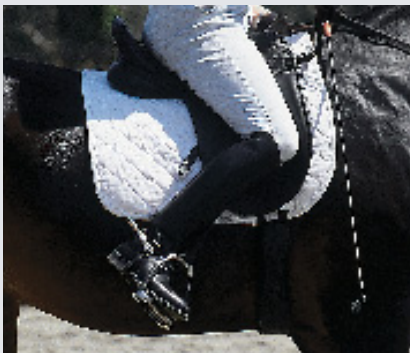
Besides the cardinal sin of losing the walk rhythm in the walk pirouette, I see three common rider errors in the show ring:



1. Many people who believe they're sitting to the inside are actually leaning to the outside. Most horses will attempt to keep a load they're carrying (the rider) under their center of gravity. You're giving your horse contradictory instructions if your weight tells him to move outward while your reins tell him to move inward. To make sure you're sitting to the inside, look back over your inside shoulder toward your horse's hind leg. Exaggerate this lean until you feel your weight shift onto your inside sitting bone.



2. Another common mistake people make is crossing the inside hand over the withers in an attempt to keep the bend. This "indirect rein of opposition" tells the shoulders to move out. Instead, use an opening inside rein and maintain the bend with your inside leg.



3. Some riders also make the mistake of exaggerating the outside leg position, which irritates horses who are ticklish in their flank areas and causes riders to sit to the outside.

USA Equestrian "R" judge Donna Richardson, MD, won the team gold medal and finished sixth individually at the 1999 Pan-American Games on her Dutch Warmblood gelding Jazzman. She bought Jazzman as a 3-year-old, trained him and earned multiple U.S. Dressage Federation Horse of the Year awards. In his first year at Grand Prix, Jazzman won the Grand Prix Freestyle at DG Bar Dressage and qualified for the 2001 USET Grand Prix National Championship. Believing it too soon to compete at Gladstone in the Grand Prix, she kept Jazzman at home for more training. Six months later, he won the Grand Prix at the Dressage Holiday Special Show with a 75 percent score. Shortly afterward, he injured himself.

While Jazzman rehabilitates, Richardson plans to debut her two younger horses at Prix St. Georges and Intermediaire I next year—the Fourth Level champion, Mondeo, and the 2002 FEI 6-year-old Young Horse Regional Reserve Champion, Domino. Meanwhile, she continues to juggle teaching, training and judging with an emergency-room medicine practice in San Marcos, California.