Dressage Moves

The Turn on the Forehand, Half Halt and Leg Yield Dressage Movements
A Note From The Editor

Here at MyHorse Daily we are committed to bringing you the latest information designed to keep you and your horse healthy, happy and productive.

Enjoy the read!

Amy Herdy, Managing Editor
MyHorse Daily
Interested in doing some reining or barrel racing with your horse? Or perhaps jumping and trail riding are your chosen pursuits. The best place to start your horse’s education—regardless of his intended discipline—is with some dressage. This will benefit you as much as it benefits your horse!

According to the United States Dressage Federation, “dressage” is a French term meaning simply “training.” Movements taught in dressage are intended “to develop the horse’s natural athletic ability and willingness to work, making him calm, supple and attentive to his rider.” It’s a concept rooted in Xenophon’s ancient Greek philosophy, and further developed during the Baroque era, when it became the gold standard for training cavalry men and their mounts at the world’s finest military schools.

Today, competitive dressage at the highest levels is an art that has often been compared to ballet. Even at its most basic levels, however, dressage teaches rhythm, balance and soft forward movement, providing a foundation for any well-schooled horse and rider in everything from English hunters/jumpers or three-day eventing to Western disciplines, polo, trail riding and more.

Here’s a look at three useful basic dressage movements and their applications in everyday riding.

The Turn on the Forehand

Adapted from an article by George Williams with Reina Abelshauser

The turn on the forehand is an important exercise to teach any horse. He learns to move away from your leg and to respond to your aids without you having to nag him. Once the horse knows how to do this, it will be easier to open gates and negotiate obstacles on the trail—and there are always times when you need to move over a little sideways. This kind of exercise shows you are communicating well with your horse; you’re a team. It also increases his respect for you as the leader.

In a turn on the forehand, the horse’s hind legs walk around his front legs, which remain in an area the size of a plate. Because you’re asking your horse to remain in one spot during the turn, you can focus on the sideways. Here is how to do it:

Mary Ann Grant and her mount demonstrate the early stages of the turn on the forehand...
At a walk, track to the left, keeping some distance from the wall or fence so your horse doesn’t hit his nose on it during the turn. Halt on a straight line parallel to the wall.

With your right leg on the girth, ask your horse to prepare to turn. The pivoting point is your horse’s poll, not his front legs; so when he steps, he does so with all four feet, but the front feet describe a half-circle the size of a plate.

Ask him to take a step to the left with his hind legs, maintaining the 4-beat rhythm of walk throughout the turn. One goal of the exercise is to make your horse lighter through his shoulders. Pivoting would cause the opposite effect, gluing the shoulders to the ground. If that happens, use an opening rein to lead the shoulders sideways, making the arc of the plate larger.

When you are facing the opposite direction, walk forward in a straight line. Repeat the exercise on the other side.

George Williams is president of the US Dressage Federation (USDF). He is a USDF gold medalist, a sought-after clinician and a successful international competitor who represented the United States both at the 2003 World Cup in Sweden, placing 5th, and at the Hickstead European Championships, placing in the top 10.

He also rode on the US bronze-medal Nations Cup Team in Aachen, Germany in 2005. Williams’ coaching credits include four NAJYRC individual medalists and numerous team medalists. His Williams Dressage LLC is based at Elizabeth Juliano’s Havensafe Farm in Ohio and Florida.

Tip for Success

While doing the exercise, you don’t want the horse to brace against your hands or feel trapped by your reins. That’s the tricky part. Riders who are learning to ride turns on the forehand often hold with their hands and push with their legs, becoming static in their aiding—which can give a horse the feeling of being in a straightjacket and make him frustrated or uncooperative.

It requires some finesse to guide your horse through the turn, keeping him within the movement, yet without overpowering with your hands. So keep your aids playful. Think of gently coaxing your horse to be round and soft with your hands rather than making him do it. Be patient.
The Half Halt
Adapted from an article by Jessica Jahiel

A half halt is nothing more (and nothing less) than a signal that prepares a horse for a new demand by saying “get ready; something is coming.” Do as many half halts as are necessary when preparing for a new movement or during a transition to get your horse’s attention and improve his carriage within a gait.

If you watch a military unit drilling, you’ll notice that the words that tell the troops what to do always come after a preparatory word that alerts the troops to the fact that there is an order coming. You won’t hear just “Halt!” but “Company... halt!” The word “company” is a verbal half halt. It says, “Get ready; something is coming.” Similarly, your nonverbal half halts tell your horse to become more attentive, balanced and ready for whatever you may ask next.

The best way to learn the half halt, in the beginning, is to use a combination of seat, leg and rein aids as if you were planning to halt. Deepen your seat slightly and relax your buttocks. Take a deep breath, and as your chest lifts, let your pelvis tilt slightly, allowing your seat bones to “plug in” to the saddle. Use your legs; a brief “pulse” with both calves will ask the horse to use his own hind legs with more energy.

When you feel your horse step more deeply under himself with his hind legs and his back comes up into your seat, close your fingers more tightly for the space of a heartbeat and then relax your hands again. This part, the yield or release, is too often overlooked, and it is essential.

Yielding the rein tells the horse that he has answered your question correctly. For riders, this is often the most difficult part of the half halt because they are reluctant to release until they are entirely convinced that the half halt has gone through. The problem with this kind of thinking and acting is that by that time, it’s too late. The rider has already held the horse for far too long. Restricting, frustrating and confusing the horse prevents the half halt from going through. In a correct half halt, your horse will feel lighter in your hand, even before you release the reins.

Tell yourself, “Create the energy, contain the energy, release the energy.”

A correct half halt will have several physical effects. If the horse steps under himself, engages more and carries slightly more weight with his hind end, you can feel his hind feet step more deeply under him and his back round under your seat. Even before you release the reins, he will feel lighter in your hand—and therefore, better prepared to turn, jump or perform some other activity where his attention and good balance are required.

If your horse is cheerful and confident and seems pleased with his own ability to comply with your requests, your half halts are making perfect sense to him. If he seems confused, unhappy or resentful of half halts, then your half halts are not making sense to him. Most
often you may be releasing too late or perhaps not at all.

If you half-halt your horse and then continue to hold him with hands that should have tightened for only a heartbeat, he won’t be happy or comfortable, and he won’t have the chance to offer you a moment of increased lightness.

When you begin to acquire a new skill, there is always a learning curve. At first, it takes longer for you to apply your aids because you have to think about what to do, when and for how long. It takes longer for your horse to respond because he is not yet in the habit of responding and, even when he understands what you want, it will take time for him to become strong and balanced enough to give an instant correct response.

As your seat improves, your half halts will improve with them and your horse will become stronger and more responsive. This in turn will make him more connected through his body, better able to lift his back and, thus, better able to respond with eagerness and energy. The better you ride, the better your horse will move. The better your horse moves, the better you will ride and the more easily you will be able to use your aids.

There will come a time when you will just think about a half-halting and your horse will respond to the slight changes in your seat and the tiny movements of your muscles. Then, someone will be watching you at a show and will say to herself, “It looks so easy when she does it. I wonder if it has anything to do with half halts?”

Jessica Jahiel, Phd is an international clinician and speaker whose system of teaching and training, “Holistic Horsemanship®, is based on classical dressage training, emphasizing clear communication between horse and rider. The author of “Riding for the Rest of Us: A Practical Guide for Adult Riders,” she lives in Illinois and maintains the website www.jessicajahiel.com.

The Leg Yield
Adapted from an article by George Williams with Reina Abelshauser

Leg-yielding is a basic exercise that belongs in every dressage rider’s toolbox. Considered a lower-level exercise because it doesn’t require collection, it is commonly used to establish obedience to the sideways-driving leg aid. The horse learns to yield or move away from the rider’s leg while being flexed away from the direction of travel.

Benefits:
• Leg-yielding gymnasticizes and supplies the horse’s body.
• It improves the horse’s coordination and his ability to maintain good posture.
• It frees up the inside shoulder, increasing its mobility.
• It allows greater reach of the inside hind leg, which prepares for lengthenings.
• It improves the inside-leg-to-outside-rein connection.
• It improves the horse’s ability to bend correctly.

How to do a Leg Yield
1. Establish a slight bend around your inside leg at the girth. Make sure the bend is even from head to tail. Often riders make the mistake of over-bending their horses at the base of the neck, which throws the horse off balance. Your inside hand supports your inside leg in establishing bend. By repeatedly closing and opening your fingers, like squeezing a sponge, it asks for more softness. Keep up this softness throughout the exercise. Your outside hand remains passive, ready to be used when needed.

Tip for Success
Be encouraging and inviting with your aids rather than demanding. Sometimes, riders don’t realize that crossing the legs doesn’t come naturally to all horses. Instead of increasing the intensity of your aids, recognize that your horse is having coordination problems. Give him time to figure out how to step.

Don’t use your aids in a way the horse might read as punishment. Some horses, when feeling insecure, clumsy or trapped, get worried or even panicky. Allow your horse more space—making sure you’re not hanging on your reins—and encourage him to go more forward. Remember that your reins modify the energy in the movement. When there’s too much holding, you deny yourself the opportunity to modify.

Since dressage builds on forwardness, as a general rule, there must be a forward desire in the horse in every type of leg yield. That forward desire causes the horse’s inside hind leg to cross in front of the outside hind, as opposed to crossing behind or stepping parallel. Forwardness feels like a cushion of energy you keep filled up in front of you. If it feels deflated and empty, you’ve lost forwardness. To reestablish forwardness, drive your horse with your legs.

Repeat the exercises but avoid drilling. The suppling effects will set in gradually over time.
In an effective leg yield, as demonstrated here by George Williams and his mount, the horse learns to move away from the rider’s leg while being flexed away from the direction of travel.

2. Stay centered with your seat during this exercise.
3. Your outside leg is positioned behind the girth to maintain the bend and prevent the haunches from escaping to the outside. When not needed, it rests quietly on your horse’s side.
4. With your inside leg, ask your horse to take a step sideways. Give a short, gentle pressure (in the rhythm of the gait) and then release. You want his legs to cross one another as they move sideways and forward.
5. When he does, reward him.
6. Repeat the exercise on the opposite side.