

STRAIGHTNESS

What is it and why is it important to gaited horses?

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Many of us riding gaited horses have experienced that common stumbling of a foreleg or buckling of a hind leg, which we often perceive as a horse not paying attention, picking up its hooves as it should, or sometimes, as just laziness. Other common issues are maintaining consistency in gaits, losing gait just in corners or in turns, stronger working one direction than another, trouble picking up a specific lead, speeding up or charging through corners at the canter. Many various reasons can be the causes of these situations but common in my experience is that a horse has not been helped in learning to travel and supported to use its body in straightness.

What is Straightness?

Horses by nature are all one-sided, most being born dominant on the left side. Most people are by nature also one-sided; however human one-sided dominance is generally on the right side, the opposite side from horses. The other situation that affects the horse is that they are structured naturally to be heavy on the forehand. This means the horse is crooked by nature and out of balance. These imbalances may work sufficiently for those horses not being asked to work or bear the weight of a rider; however, when a horse is asked to carry the weight of a rider, the biomechanics change.

An unbalanced horse being asked to move as a riding horse will become stiff, tense, and there can be an emotional impact on the horse as well, with the horse losing confidence while being worried about staying on its hooves. Horses don't like to stumble or fall just as humans don't like to stumble and fall. In the ideal situation, a horse can be taught to carry itself in straightness from the ground first before ever carrying a rider. The goal is to teach a horse to be ambidextrous, something the rider will also want to develop in their horsemanship. The rider should become effective at being ambidextrous and balanced so they can teach this and receive it from the horse.

Straightness can be defined in a number of ways. One way is to say the horse has the ability of the entire skeleton to bend easily and equally to the left as far as it is able to bend to the right. A horse using itself in straightness can access its full range of motion; optimize impulsion, while avoiding muscular compensation. Many performance difficulties encountered with a horse can be the result of faulty balance. This faulty balance can be greatly improved if not cured if a rider can help a horse to become sufficiently supple and able to create a posture necessary to achieve real balance. A horse can be helped to bear weight as equally as possible on all four legs.

Developing Straightness

Developing straightness is an ongoing process and one in which a rider will need to develop a feel of the horse beneath him. Straightness is as important to the trail horse as it is to a

performing show horse. Its importance has to do with developing and maintaining overall body function and lifelong performing health. For this to happen, our goal becomes to coordinate the muscles on both sides of the body to an equal degree. Many riders not having the time to work on straightness to a maximum degree can still do many simple things to help a horse become straighter. An important factor is to be consistent in helping the horse find some direction toward straightness, not just once in awhile. In being consistent, not only will your horse find positive, correct changes in muscle use, development, and muscle memory, the rider will also find this happening within their own bodies. It's good to understand that a crooked rider cannot straighten a crooked horse.

An easy way to tell if your horse is traveling straight is on a center line. The right hooves of the horse move along the right side of the line and the left hooves move along the left side of the line. When a horse is traveling straight, the hind hoof will track on the same line as the fore hoof. A gaited horse having overstride of the hinds will show tracking in front of the fore hoof print but will still be in the same line as the fore hoof. A horse should also work in straightness on a curved line or circle.

The horse not in straightness on a curve or circle will put their inside hind hoof on the line of the circle sending the haunches to the outside of the circle. This is a sign that the horse is not using its muscles properly or fully, especially the abdominal muscles. The horse's spinal curves are not being governed properly and utilizing proper impulsion from the hinds while preventing the base of the neck to lift, bringing the horse more off the forehand.

Good exercises working toward balance and straightness are proper flexions from the ground and in the saddle. These flexions should be a means of releasing tensions which may be preventing a horse from using full range of movement. This means teaching a horse to give a flexion when asked, not forcing it from the horse's body.

Leg yields, circles, serpentines, and shoulders-in are good exercises for building muscle balance on each side. Working forward and downward, while not losing longitudinal or lateral balance is important. Often helpful for riders is to work at keeping the horse perpendicular to the ground; in not leaning, tipping upper body more to one side, or weighting one stirrup more than another. These all unbalance the horse, making the horse tense and creating stiffness of the body.

It helps if the rider tries to keep his spine in alignment with the horse's spine. Having a good, educated ground person who can give you instant feedback and tell what corrections are needed can be most helpful in bringing a rider and horse toward straightness in a much shorter time. Many of those working with very laterally inclined horses, creating faulty gaits, will find straightness work helps to purify a gait rather easily. For more information, please visit www.lizgraves.com.