



UNDERSTANDING THE SCALE OF TRAINING - PART 5: KEEPING ON THE TRACKS

BY BRENDAN BERGIN  @brendan_cbergin

In this penultimate article digging down into the scale of training we are looking at one of the most illusive components of the scale of training; **straightness**. Horses, like riders, are naturally crooked so establishing straightness between two crooked bodies is a challenge to say the least. Building straightness is the work of a lifetime for the riders themselves and for their horses alike. Once again when we look to the original German term "**Geraderichten**" which means so much more than the simplified translation allows. First, the sense of the term is a verb "Straightening" rather than "Straightness" suggesting an ongoing process needing constant attention and development. The other sense of the word is "to adjust". Just like riding a pushbike you cannot just put the handlebars straight and go straight, you are always micro-adjusting to keep the whole bike going in the same direction. With these terms in mind, it is possible to extrapolate the true meaning of this scale of training.

ANATOMICAL CHALLENGES

The horse's natural crookedness should come as no surprise looking at their anatomy alone. The horse's hindquarters are wider than their forehead. In the training process, our role is to promote the horse's natural movement patterns, namely that the horse should move forward off their hind leg rather than dragging from the forelegs. As the horse pushes off the hind legs sometimes the power can cause lateral deviation where the hind legs essentially try to move past the forehead. This is especially prevalent in horses who do not have strong connected core muscles to transmit the energy forward. The other major anatomical challenge is the horse's shoulders. In previous articles about the differences between our shoulders and the horse's namely their absence of a collar bone. The whole thorax is suspended in the **thoracic sling** between the shoulder blades by tendons and ligaments. This offers great flexibility however this is not always beneficial in assisting the horse to be straight.

WHEELS ON THE TRACKS

Although straightness appears near the apex of the scale of training, a degree of straightening is required for successful training at every stage. In the early stages of developing straightness, it makes good sense to think about lateral adjustability. In most training systems there is a lot of emphasis placed on transitions. When you confine transitions to exclusively mean changes of pace rather than changing from one state to another (direction/frame/pace etc.) your training becomes constrained rather than unlimited. In the first level of straightness, the main goal is to have the horse's legs in line with each other. Simply put that the hind legs follow the forelegs, like the way a bike's back wheel follows the front wheel. Achieving this first level of straightness is fundamentally concerned with positioning the forehead in front of the hindquarters. From the beginning of their lives horses are programmed to lean on external bodies; their mothers, their peer group and then the arena fence.

Horses who are ridden in arenas with fences to lean on often become very stuck to the wall (shoulder falling out). Developing the basic responses Stop, Go, **Turn front legs** and Turn hind legs will assist you in developing the skill of positioning the horse's shoulders. You will likely need good eyes on the ground to help you with this until you can feel the horse's legs. In William Micklem FBHS's best selling book "The Complete Riding Manual" he discusses the importance of training shoulder fore an exercise in positioning the shoulders which should be obligatory reading for any serious equestrian.

BODY ON THE LINE

The next phase is developing the horse's body straightness, it can be helpful to think of this as "spine on a line". One of the big aspects of this is self carriage, it is immensely challenging to get the horse's body moving on a given line if they are dependant; leaning on external inputs. The horse needs to be in tune with himself, rather like a musical instrument. There is only one thing in music that sounds worse than an out of tune instrument and that is one that is not even out of tune with itself. If your horse is fundamentally crooked it is no use in getting their neck on the optimal line if the rest of their body is somewhere else. When working on body straightness the limiting factor is the site of least flexibility which is through the ribcage at the horse's centre of gravity. When you can move the horse equally left and right through their ribcage the alignment of the head and neck pretty much only takes good rider discipline. Many riders completely over-bend the horse through their neck often owing to their lack of control of the ribcage. I once again refer back to one of the great masters Rainer Kilimke often spoke of the need for riders to add to their horses not stifle them.

The solution to success in training straightness is to remember that straightness, strength and flexibility go hand in hand. Much like a gymnast on the parallel bars they need to be strong enough to hold themselves up, flexible enough to allow the range of motion and to understand the way their body moves. Our role is to adjust the horse to align them and develop their abilities over time.



Image Courtesy of Louise O'Brien