

Module 8 – Bending



After Rhythm, Relaxation and Contact, the next tiers on the training pyramid are Impulsion, Straightness and Collection. Like the first three, they're very intertwined and each supports the other as they improve.

In this module, the goal we'll be working towards most is straightness. In order to travel with true straightness, our horse must learn to bend.

There are two directions of bending, longitudinal (from nose to tail) which we've covered in the round, relaxed posture we've talked about in previous modules. As they continue build their hind end strength and balance, their longitudinal bend will continue to improve.

The other direction of bend is lateral bend – bending in the direction of travel, left or right.

On their own, horses don't bend in the direction of travel. Instead, they fling their head and neck to the outside of the turn and power over their inside shoulder, relying on that counterweight of their head to keep them on their feet. It works just fine for them ... until we add the additional weight of the cart and driver. This is an issue for horses with just a rider, and is only going to be exacerbated when we have a tiny horse and a full sized human for them to manage. It becomes even more important that we help them learn to bend and balance on a turn or circle, so they're able to keep all four feet squarely underneath them. Issues with rhythm and relaxation that we've been noticing in the walk and trot modules are very often due to a lack of lateral balance.

Helping our Horse Balance

The first thing we can do to help our horse balance, is something we've already been working on – our rein communication. By using the "flashlight" method, we're asking for the bend with our inside rein, while controlling the path (how much they bend) with the outside rein. That outside rein is a huge part helping them balance on a turn, and using our flashlight to steer naturally helps us use it just enough to support them.

They might need more help sometimes – if the bend isn't going well, there are some other tools we can use.

Try It:

A "finger wiggle" on the inside rein can help ask them to soften and bend to the inside.

A big "half halt" on the outside rein – take and give back immediately – can also help reset them and get them back into that outside rein and balanced around the corner.

If you're struggling, reset yourself first. Sit evenly on your seatbones. Roll your shoulders to your ears and set them back. Get good contact, and turn your flashlight. Most of the time, if I'm having trouble with a horse counterbending around a corner, fixing myself will fix the problem.

Your whip can also be a cue to remind them to bend – use the lash of the whip on their inside ribs, to ask them to move over.

Signs of Good Bend

Bending means they're travelling straight on a curved line. That means that their whole body should bend along with the curve, with their weight well balanced and good activation of the hind end.

- Head turned in direction of travel: be aware that the head and neck is not turned MORE than the rest of the body. Overbent is as out of balance as counterbent (head and neck turned opposite the direction of travel), and even harder to steer with precision. This is why our outside rein is SO important – the inside rein asks the horse to bend, the outside rein controls how much they bend, and therefore what path they take.
- Inside hind leg reaching underneath the horse's body, not stuck into the center of the circle: this is THE biggest marker to check for correct bend, as we need to make sure our horse is bending from back to front. If you see the inside hind stiffly stuck out, towards the center of the circle, that's a great sign that the horse isn't truly bending, no matter what is happening with their head and neck. In order to follow the print of the front foot, and track up well, the inside hind will be reaching well underneath the horse's belly in correct bend.
- With our driving horses, a good sign of a well balanced corner is to watch that your horse's hip moves towards the outside shaft around the bend.

Benefits of Correct Bend

First, and most importantly, your horse will no longer end up out of balance, and have that scary "rushing to keep my feet under me" feeling. This means less tense posture or reactive behaviours, and no more losing points in competition because your horse is constantly looking to the outside of the arena. Your steering will be more precise as well, as your horse will be in balance and able to turn exactly where you want them, instead of their imbalance meaning they have to turn more or less abruptly to keep their feet under them. Driving a horse without correct, balanced bend can feel like driving a hovercraft – you'll end up generally where you wanted to be, but might not be the most direct way to get there. Your contact will be more consistent, your communication more clear, your performance better, and your drive much more relaxed.

Second, by practicing in correct bend, which increases the percentage of body weight carried by the inside hind leg, we're continuing to do weightlifting exercises, strengthening the inside hind leg – and remember, your horse has two inside hind legs. 😊

Bending for Strength Training

We don't want to ask our horse to do more than they're comfortably capable of, both to keep them balanced and comfortable, and to avoid sore muscles during weight training.

Try It:

Begin with a large circle. Check your own posture and balance first, and ask your horse to bend using your "flashlight" rather than your hands.

Watch for markers of good bend – inside hind reaching well under the horse, nose turned gently in direction of travel, hip closer to outside shaft.

If your horse is struggling, try: increasing the size of the circle, giving a “finger wiggle” on the inside rein.

Once your horse is comfortable at a large circle, you can begin making it smaller. Remember though, that working on bend weights in the inside hind leg, and we need to work gradually and take many breaks to avoid strain and sore muscles.

One Side is Easier

Like humans are left or right handed, horses also have one side that they find it easier to bend. You'll likely already know this with your horse, and it's usually that they are comfortable bend to the left, so basic bending work in large circles is going to seem easier to the left, and harder to the right.

Making note of this is important to having a productive session and helping your horse improve every day. We can be sure to start out always in their “easy” direction, so they're able to warm their muscles up, or try something new in the direction that comes most naturally to them.

The truth is, however, that once you begin advancing with your horse, you'll actually find that their “good side” becomes their “bad side” and vice versa.

When a horse is bent to the left (like my Rocky, a permanent “left banana”) that means that the right side is stronger, and they're bending to the left to protect their weaker side. Once they've begun to supple and strengthen their bodies with some basic bending work, you'll find that the stronger right side, that initially seemed so stiff, is actually the side that are more easily able to do more advanced work.

Every horse as a strong side and a supple side – our job is to supple their strong side, and strengthen their supple side!

Again, begin each exercise with the direction that feels easiest to you and your horse, but be sure to work each side equal repetitions, as both the strong and supple sides have something they need to work on.

Try It:

Spirals are a great way to test your horse's ability to bend and practice your skills as well. Begin with a large circle to their easy direction, and gradually spiral in smaller and smaller until you see that inside hind leg poke into the middle of the circle, to demonstrate that they are no longer able to balance comfortably, then drive straight out of the spiral and try it again the other direction. How small can you get in each direction before your horse isn't able to balance in the bend anymore?

Once they are comfortable driving into a very small circle at the center of the spiral, you can increase the level of difficulty by spiraling back out again while still maintaining inside bend – a great test of your skills and your horse's strength.

Note: We never want to continue to work in a circle where our horse is struggling and isn't in balance. We aren't building the right muscles or setting our horse up for success. Take a walk break, check your own posture and cues, decrease the level of difficulty. If it's too hard for your horse, it's not fun for them or for you, make it easier and try again and you'll be getting much more benefit from the exercise!

Changes of Bend

My favourite exercise for introducing changes of bend, as well as interspersing straight lines, is a deep serpentine. This exercise is a great one for building strength and I use it regularly as a warm up as well.

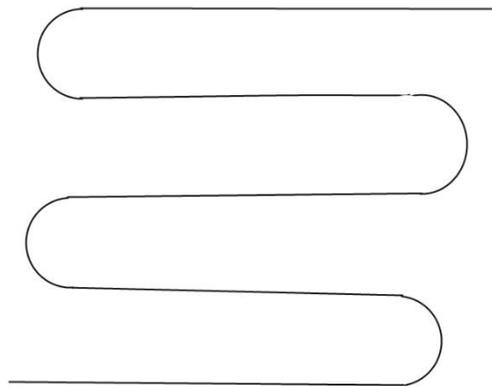
Try It:

Serpentine back and forth across your driving area. The pattern is: half circle to the left, straight line to the other side of your space, half circle to the right, straight line, half circle to the left, and so on.

The size of your half circles will vary depending on the strength of your horse – good bend is more important than small circles. But make sure they're nice round half circles – it's very easy to get a quarter circle and then lose your bend and fall inside, squishing your circle.

Prepare for the upcoming circle while you're on the straight away – change your own bend, give a finger wiggle, and help your horse balance into the curve.

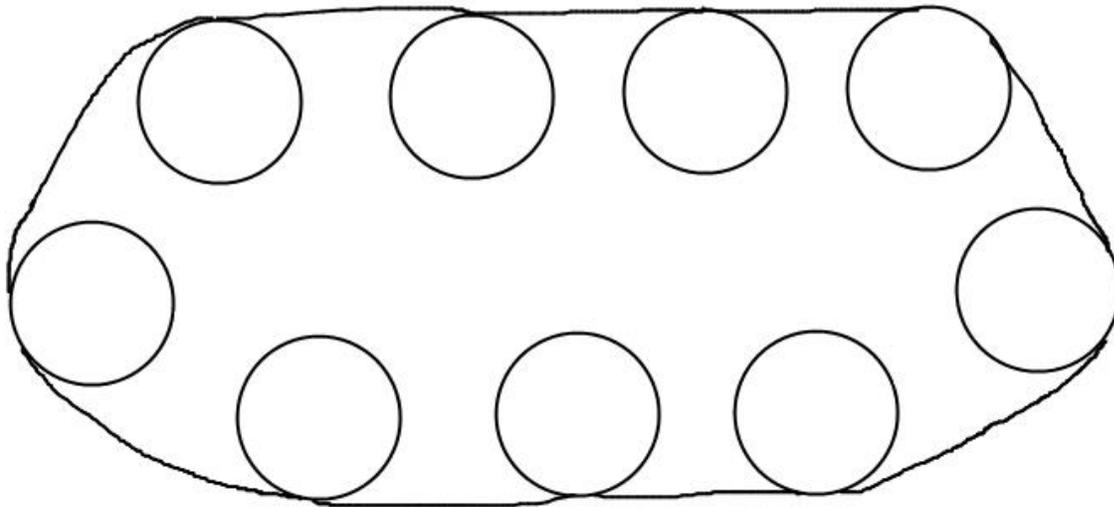
Watch for changes in rhythm as subtle signs you're losing your balance.



Try It:

Repetition is a great way to help horses find their balance and gain confidence, but we also don't want to ever drill anything. This exercise is a good way to practice bending and straightening in the SAME direction over and over. As always, remember to go for quality over quantity, begin on their easier direction, and work both directions equally.

Begin driving on the rail or in a large oval in your driving space. Come off the rail to the inside and drive a circle – as small or large as your horse is comfortable. When you get back to the rail, go straight again and then immediately make another circle. Chain them together until you've driven a whole line of circles like a string of pearls.



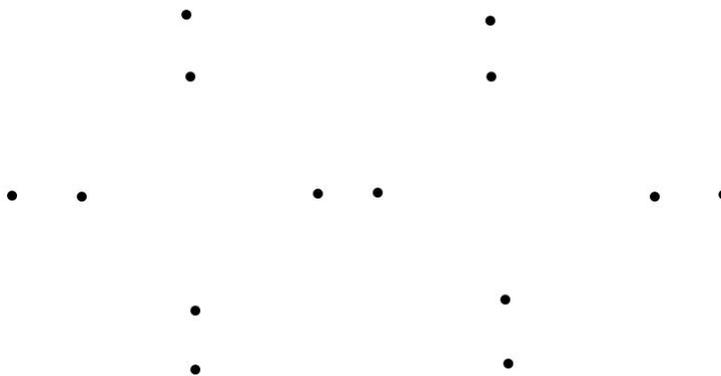
Cones

Cones are a great tool to help with bend, as your horse has something to focus on instead of wondering why you're driving in endless circles.

Try It:

Drive a figure eight, but instead of just having one cone at the center of each circle for you to drive around (although, that's a great exercise too!) set 4 pairs of cones for each circle, with the center set doing double duty (7 sets altogether).

Remember that a figure eight is driven as two round circles, overlapping in the middle, not as an X across the middle. (That's a different exercise 😊)



In this exercise, with each set of cones as a target, you can concentrate on driving each $\frac{1}{4}$ circle with nice bend separately, and then you aim for the next set. When you get to the center cones, straighten for a few strides, then set up the new bend to circle the other way.

Try It:

Set four cones in a small square, big enough to drive the horse and cart through comfortably. These cones aren't going to be in the center of the circles, just a space to cross through – make your circles as large as you need to for your horse to drive them comfortably.

With this square of cones you can do four circles to the left, four to the right, alternating left and right, or change it up unpredictably, whatever feels right in the moment.

No matter what the pattern around the four cones, you're making full circles, and being aware of good bend and maintaining consistent rhythm.

This is another one of my favourites, as it's a very easy one to set up, very versatile, and makes it easy for your horse to see what the game.

That's a lot of exercises. Don't feel you need to do them all every day, or even regularly. Play with them, find the ones that help your horse, and then work on those and your horse will continue to get better and better!