

Lines of communication

In the second part of our ultimate all-rounder series, BHS dressage coach **Alison Kenward** guides a rider through a lesson on the flat with the aim of creating a muscular, balanced and willing horse

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WHAT YOU'LL LEARN:

- Exercises to help your horse build up both sides of his body evenly
- Visualisation techniques to help improve those straight lines
- Methods to ensure the use of perfectly timed aids

PART TWO

FLATWORK TRAINING ISN'T just about scoring high marks in a dressage test. Working a horse regularly and effectively in an arena is just as much about strength building, improving muscle tone and developing self-carriage as it is about riding the perfect lines and shapes. In fact, most of the time these things all go hand in hand, and are essential elements to creating the ideal all-round horse.

Now I'm going to talk through three key exercises that will not only help a rider develop their horse's straightness and balance, but they will also refine their lines of communication so that the aids can be used with confidence and understanding.

Words of encouragement

Ultimately, riding straight lines is all about how well we can support our horse in getting from point A to point B. Really that's all there is to it! If we start to think "this could go wrong", we're at risk of micromanaging and becoming more of a hindrance than a help. Anyone

who starts to feel worried or overthinks a movement should simply pick one element to focus on at a time rather than letting themselves become overwhelmed. For example, the rider could focus solely on the rhythm, sitting up tall, or they could focus on what the horse's ears are doing to help direct their thoughts.

Things should be kept as simple as possible so that the rider can build up the most important flatwork ingredient of all — self-belief. After all, the horse already believes in his rider because he's looking to them to tell him what to do next. It is only when the rider can't decide that he starts to fill in the gaps. If the rider goes wrong, they should keep their cool, take a break and try again, focusing on what they can do differently the next time. You've got this!

TOP TIP

If things aren't going how you want, change the game and try something else completely. Sometimes that's all you need to reset and then try again later with a fresh state of mind.



MEET THE TRAINER

ALISON KENWARD is a qualified BHS APC Performance Centre Manager, UKCC Level 3 coach and she runs Equestrian Heroes, coaching riders from around the world. Alison also enjoys hacking and schooling her horse, Salvation.



MEET THE RIDER & HORSE

SOPHIE CLARK has owned Energizer (stable name Albie), a 17.2hh 15-year-old KWPN, for seven years. Together they have competed in British Showjumping up to discovery level, but now enjoy a quieter life hacking around their farm and attending training clinics.



In this training session with Alison Kenward, Sophie Clark works on building Albie's straightness and balance



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EXERCISE 1 THE SHALLOW LOOP

The overall aim of the schooling programme is to help the horse develop balance and suppleness to make it easier for him to carry himself and his rider. As the horse builds strength and understands his rider's questions, it becomes easier to ask him to lighten his forehand and activate his hindquarters to move forwards with ease.

I like to think of a rider's job as piloting and supporting the horse while allowing him — and the exercise — to do the rest. The shallow loop is a fantastic exercise that helps to support the horse's straightness and evenness as it allows the rider to practise positioning his shoulders and activating his hind leg.

How to ride it

- 1 Go large around the arena and concentrate on establishing the trot. Pay attention to the rhythm and support your horse by noticing your own balance without becoming self-conscious. The aim here is to support the rhythm and balance with subtle half halts and an awareness of how your posture influences the horse. Ask for some steps of shoulder fore to subtly position your horse to the inside.

- 2 Ride around the first corner, ensuring that you use the whole space by making it as square a turn as possible. By using the corner correctly you are already asking the horse to step through with his hind leg that little bit more.
- 3 Then ask your horse to come off the track on a diagonal line towards X. Depending on your horse's level of schooling, you can either ride to the three-quarter line parallel with X or to X itself. Focus on maintaining a steady rhythm and keep your eyes looking ahead to where you want to go next.
- 4 Relax and breathe as you make a smooth turn at, or in line with, X and

head back towards the next corner. Again, focus on the horse's rhythm and think ahead to riding a smooth corner.

- 5 As you ride into the final corner, ask your horse to step just that little bit over using your inside leg with a feeling of leg-yield to make the most of the turn. Then focus on going large and enjoy the quality of the trot that the shape has created.

TOP TIP

It may be tempting to micromanage your horse to produce perfect straight lines. Instead, try to keep your riding quiet and still and let the pattern do the work.

A LITTLE MORE SUPPLENESS

Think about a horse's natural way of going and they tend to like to put their quarters in — usually one way more than the other. Therefore, if the rider was to watch the horse move from a bird's eye view, most of the time he won't be moving straight at all. A rider's job is to be able to mobilise their horse's shoulders and gradually bring them into alignment by strengthening and suppling the

muscles on both sides equally. With any horse who becomes crooked under saddle it is tempting to try to push the quarters over to keep that feeling of straightness, but the biomechanics of it simply don't work. Instead, we want to position the shoulders one way or the other to maintain alignment. However, sustaining this new way of working will take time and consistency.



EXERCISE 2 STRAIGHT DOWN THE CENTRE

Nothing screams straightness like a classic centre line and, although you may think that this is a simple exercise, there is actually a lot that goes into making it perfect. Riding a dead straight centre line takes years of thoughtful flatwork training to ensure that the horse is perfectly aligned in all the ways we have mentioned so far. As we well know, this isn't something that happens overnight and there is truly nowhere to hide on a centre line. That doesn't mean that they should be avoided, though, and there are several ways that they can be used for effective straightness training, even if you're not planning to ride a dressage test anytime soon.

How to ride it

- 1 Start in walk to give yourself as much time as possible to familiarise yourself with the line.
- 2 As you round the corner approaching the turn down the centre line, look ahead and plan your route. Imagine that you're aiming for a tunnel that runs up the centre line to help you time the turn just right. You could even put some cones out to give yourself something physical to ride through.
- 3 If you found that you weren't on the centre line and needed to turn sooner or later, don't fret — just try again. By practising at home and getting to know where the line is, where you need to look, and your horse's stride, you'll soon familiarise yourself with the exact lines you need to aim for to make it perfect.
- 4 As you ride down the line, it can help to break it down into chunks. Yes, we want to get to our destination, but also give yourself a middle point. Visualise yourself going straight through the middle and then move your metaphorical goal posts again so that you can get to the next section mindfully.
- 5 For the exit turn, prepare the bend subtly before you arrive so that you're cueing the horse with plenty of time. How you get away from the centre line is all about riding a smooth half circle, so focus on rhythm and relaxation for a clean exit.

TOP TIP

It's a good idea to add transitions into the centre line. If things are going well in walk, move up to trot half way through and then return to walk before the exit, for example.



EXERCISE 3 CANTER ON A CRESCENT

For the final exercise we are going to home in on canter transitions, as this is a clear indication of how effective the rider's line of communication is with their horse. This exercise is all about the point at which the rider asks for the transition. After practising it a few times, your aid is sure to be elegant and soft, leaving less room for things to get lost in translation.

How to ride it

- 1 Pick up a forward flowing trot around the arena.
- 2 As you come parallel with the centre of the arena, look ahead at your line and ride onto a half 20m circle. Stay calm and relaxed, but ideally you're looking for a uniform bend around the circle, with a steady contact down the reins

and a soft feel on the horse's mouth.

- 3 As you're coming into the open space after crossing over the centre line, ask for the transition to canter. To do this, sit tall and smile (it will help you relax). Prepare the trot, rebalance and gently bring your outside leg back behind the girth as the aid to canter. Keep your hands soft and allowing and let your seat follow the canter.
- 4 As you're heading back towards the wall or fence, this will naturally sit your horse back onto his hindquarters. If you wait until you're at the wall before you ask for canter, it can become confusing or rushed, your horse might lose his balance and drift out or fall in, making the transition awkward and unbalanced. If you ask too soon, the boards aren't in sight to encourage your horse to sit and balance in the transition. The key here is preparation for both horse and rider. For the rider, this involves finding the timing of the aid and for the horse it's responding to the aid to canter while keeping his balance.
- 5 This exercise is all about giving your horse every opportunity to stay in a good balance during the transition. It also gives the rider time to process what they're doing, too, with space to enjoy the canter rhythm by heading out large again after the half circle.

TOP TIP

If the horse responds too late to the transition, keep your cool and continue on a full circle until he picks up the canter. Keep practising, using your voice to help you and ensuring that you're staying quiet and still until it's transition time so that there are no crossed wires.



Sophie keeps her inside leg on the girth and her outside leg slightly behind it as she asks for the transition to canter

Lessons learned

* Flatwork is a key part in overall strength and fitness training as it helps the rider to build an evenly muscled, supple and balanced horse who is ready for anything.

* Use training aids like cones or poles to help with accuracy when riding straight lines and intricate patterns. The rider can also use visualisation techniques if that's how they work best.

* Less is more in riding. The rider should allow the exercise to make the work

easier by staying quiet and soft in their position throughout. It is hard to sit quietly and concentrate on giving the horse consistent aids and responses. When you and your horse can keep an open line of conversation based on partnership and patience with each other the schooling sessions will feel more intuitive and harmonious.

■ **NEXT TIME:** Pole exercises to hone accuracy, agility and steering. 🐾

Albie receives plenty of praise for a job well done

Alison Kenward is running Rider With A Plan, a 12-week programme that provides a clear, step-by-step approach to practice, performance and reflection with a horse. Create a personalised, flexible plan, get direct coaching support and manage exercises via the Equestrian Heroes app.



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