

Sue's Snippet No. 17: Circles and How to Solve Their Mysteries for Dressage

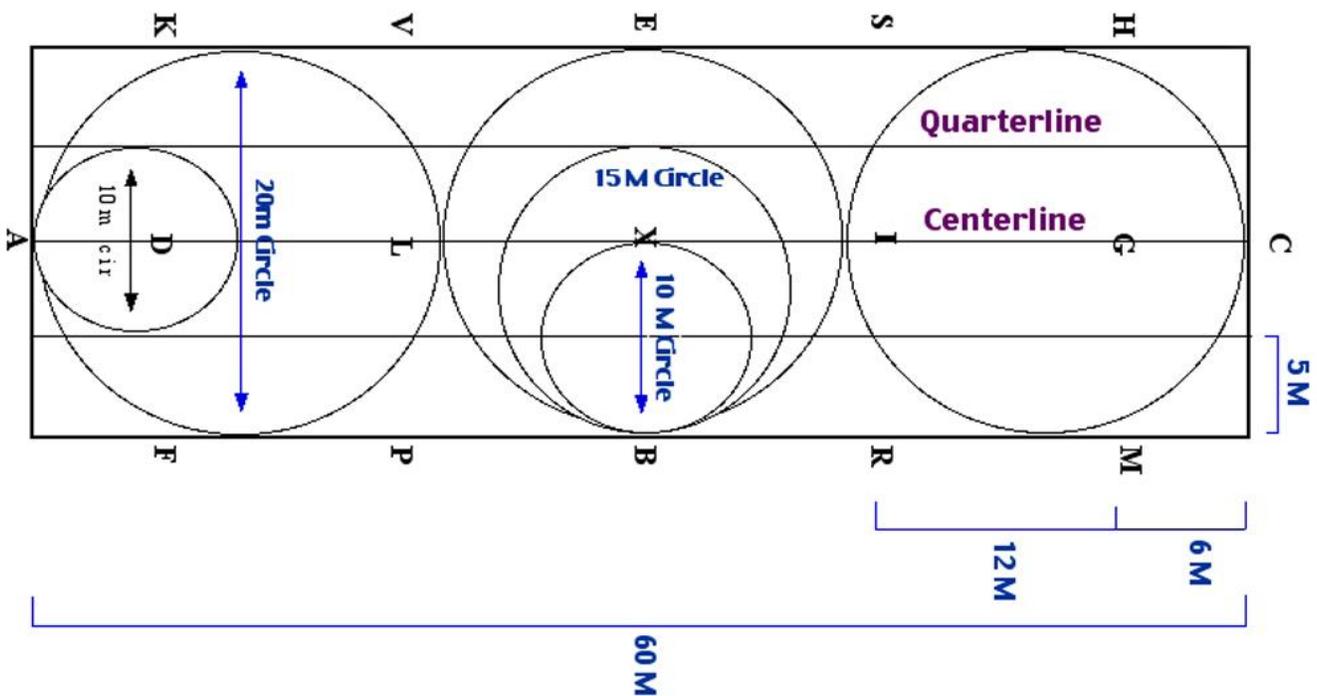
There are car license plate holders that read, "Dressage Riders Go In Circles". Funny and makes readers scratch their heads and wonder why. What a strange obsession. A circle is a circle, no? So, here are some thoughts to explain – hopefully.

First, in geometry a circle has no end. But in dressage, a circle not only has an end, but a beginning. And they are supposed to be at Exactly the same place as they started.

For example, if the directions say to make a circle at a letter, the front end of the horse leaves the wall about 3 feet before the rider even gets to the letter. But the rider is the "mark" of the beginning and end. So, the rider "peels" the horse off of the wall that fraction of time before she gets to the letter, and then when she, the rider, arrives back at the letter, it is the ending.

At the end, the horse's front end gets into the track and meets the letter just before the rider so aim for the horses' shoulder to touch at the letter. Then it's your turn. Curious, eh?

Second, the size of circles indicates the level of training of the horse and rider. A 20-meter circle is the accepted starting size. Then, as training progresses the horse and rider advance to the 15-meter, then 10-meter and eventually to the 8-meter circle.



But an even smaller size is historically preserved by the corner letters of a dressage arena itself. Those letters are 6 meters from the corners. Why? Because that was to be the smallest circle a horse ever would be expected to make when strong and well balanced and has educated feet.

This size used to be called a "Volte". Modern terminology has softened that definition to include any "small" circle.

But why bother with circles anyhow? Because it takes a well unified horse and rider to do them. Strength for the horse to stay collected no matter what the degree of "collection", it has and a super well-balanced rider to provide a swift sequence of aids to help the horse do it well.

What is a well-done circle? First, the rhythm (beat) should not change. Second, the tempo (beats per minute) should not change. Third, both horse and rider should remain “vertical to the earth” all the way around. Fourth, the number of steps in each quarter of the circle must match for the circle to be round.

The best photograph I have seen of this is in the Harry Boldt book, “The Dressage Horse”. (Plug for Pegasus books added.) In the picture, the shadow shows a slight flick of the horse’s tail on the left side indicating that Mr. Boldt made a slight correction to the horse. Otherwise it is totally balanced, smooth and looking effortless.

So how many ways can riders “mess it up”? Several in my experience. First is riding the circle to “get it done!”. The fix for that is to ride every stride as a separate entity with the rider checking rhythm, tempo, bend of spine, and lateral flexion of the poll joint that compliments the bend of the spine. In other words, every vertebrae of the horse matches the line of travel chosen **By The Rider**.

So, letting the horse sort of choose the line and hoping for the best is not “it”. The rider is intently focusing and diagnosing all the requirements and subtly (hopefully) bringing them back to order. **That is Hard!**

The rider can use this sequence of the aids that I describe next, or choose her own, but these are my suggestions as to how to do that. In the first quarter, the rider uses her outside upper leg and rein to “peel” the horse's front end from the wall. In the second quarter, she uses the diagonal half halt (inside lower leg and seat) molding the horse’s ribs to the outside into the receiving outside hand and leg acting at the same time. In the third quarter, the rider usually must again go to the outside aides to swing the shoulders and neck around the hind quarters because that often is the quarter in which the horse slides out and the circle enlarges into the fateful oval. The last quarter often is a reminder to the horse to Go and/or to bend more.

The last quarter often depends on what a horse thinks about making circles. Long ago I knew a horse who was really annoyed with the whole idea. The first half to her was that you meant to turn around. But then you did not so she just “cut it off as soon as possible and “said” with great disgust “what a bother”.

There is another help to riders to ride a round circle. I learned this watching Karl Mikolka teach. He told the rider that on a 20-meter circle she would post 7 times per quarter. Experience has shown that this is true and does not vary depending on breed, gender, nor height of horse. 15-meter circles are 6 posts per quarter and 10-meter circles are 4 posts per quarter. Have fun experimenting with that. I'll bet you will find it to be true too.

A final thought is that to me, on a laterally well-balanced circle, the horse’s weight is slightly but clearly on the outside two legs. That would feel like it “filled the rider's outside rein and leg” as Violet Hopkins so often told us. A lovely connected harmonious pleasure and a joy to ride.