

WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT THE OUTSIDE REIN?

If you ever have attended a clinic about dressage whether for English, Western or Eventing training, you heard some mention of the outside rein. Why is that more important than the inside rein? What about the poor neglected inside rein? That always seems to me to be a mystery that needs a solution. But let's hear it for the OUTSIDE REIN!!

Oh yes, that is the one nearest the wall or outer edge of the riding arena be it a wall or the difference between the edge of the grass and the sand. Later it is the rein on the outside of a bend.

The overall goal is to BALANCE the horse's lateral weight into the outside rein and the outside leg. Vi Hopkins would rhapsodize about the horse' mid body "filling up the outside leg" because then the horses' lateral balance was correct.

That balance is created by "bending". That too is complicated, but generally means that the rib cage of the horse is shifted to the outside on a bending line. The ribs can be shifted a little on a straight line by flexing the head at the jaw/poll joint. That is where the top of the face bone - the occipital bone - meets C1 or the first cervical vertebrae. That flexion is small. Not more than 22 degrees on a compass.

How can you tell that when sitting on a horse? If you can see some of the cheek on the side to which you are flexing his head, that will be a good gauge.

If you are standing on the ground at the side of a horses' head, run a finger along the groove starting behind the base of the ear and down around the jawbone. Put your other hand around the horses' face above the nostrils and gently coax the head toward you. The groove should deepen, and the jawbone move under/away from you. That is called Flexion and sometimes Position One.

Position One implies there are more. Position Two is enough for the rest of the body to do shoulder fore and Position Three is enough for shoulder in.

So, what is happening to the outside rein during that flexion? It both SUPPORTS AND ALLOWS the head to FLEX. The positioning puts the curve of the horse's neck muscles into the outside rein. Then you as the rider have an elastic feel of the rein so it will both support and allow that curve to happen.

Think of this as the first effective use of the outside rein. What is another one? STEERING!!!! Keeping the elastic rein aligned straight back from your hand to your hip bone will be the beginning of riding a straight line from point A to point B. There are two contingencies. Too much pressure or rigidity, and the horse will turn off of the straight line to that direction. If there is too little to no pressure, the horse likely will fall/fade to the inside of your line. The correction/fix for that is to turn his head and steer out onto your line. Therefore, a second job of the outside rein is to STEER. There is more.

Beyond steering on a straight line, there is TURNING. The way a horse turns is to “pivot” each stride around his inside hind leg. Pulling him around with the inside rein never has worked for thousands of years. If going to the right and pulling with that rein, he still can slide out over his left shoulder. The correction for that trick is for the rider to use her outside rein against his neck to “push” it around. Combined with strong pressure of her outside upper Leg on his shoulder, he can be persuaded to turn.

Another job of the outside rein is to receive the energies produced by the work of the outside hind leg. That leg works pretty hard as it always must move farther through space than its partner. Even in the first productions of the collection, that leg’s action needs the attention of the rider through the outside rein. Collection can be improved by the rider using her outside leg to keep the horses’ outside hind leg actively working. She will know to activate it when she feels, through the outside rein contact, a lessening of the connection to it. There will be less connection to her outside seat as well. She knows how to use her lower outside leg to say, “Keep it coming.”

This feel of slacking off with the outside hind especially is noticeable in the canter. Often the phrase is used “the outside rein improves the collection in the canter”. The aid to make that happen is a “unilateral half halt”. One sided. Draw the horses outside leg into better activity by drawing it forward and under by pressing/lifting your calf up to your outside seat bone and to your outside hand which closes and receives the better thrust. (Sidebar. A half lasts only as long as the swing phase of the horses’ leg). That half halt can be done once if it is effective, but often a series applied in the horse’s rhythm works better. Pause at the end of the series to see if it is working. Repeat as needed. So, the outside rein is used to improve COLLECTION.

I asked a riding friend what she thought the outside rein does for us. She said, “It gives me an Edge. It helps me to have direction for my line of travel by helping my whole body stay balanced over my line of travel”. So, it improves the RIDER’ S LATERAL BALANCE.

Another friend said, “It helps me and my horse “STAY VERTICAL TO THE EARTH”. Going around circles and through corners invites both of you to “tip” in like banking a race car around a racetrack. But all four limbs and hooves of the horse are supposed to be producing the force against the ground to keep moving. The correction for “tipping” is to keep the outside rein (seatbone and leg) secure.

In summary, this list includes five important needs that the outside rein can fulfill. Maybe you can add to this list. In any event I trust that listing these uses will help answer the question - “What’s All The Fuss About The Outside Rein”.