

## Snippet 21: What Does Ring Geometry Teach Us?

Visualize putting a round peg into a square hole. Think about a dressage ring (square hole) and put a round peg (a 6-foot-long wiggly horse body) into that space. No wonder riding a dressage test is so hard!

Dressage probably is the most difficult sport of all. Most other sports have a stick and a ball as their tools. It behooves us to think about the challenges we have as we come through the proscenium arch at A and proceed down the Centerline towards The Judge.

The first thing we need to learn is to *Steer*. We need to navigate in that 20 meter wide by either 40- or 60-meter-long space. Basically, *steer* with the outside rein. Keep your outside arm and hand holding the rein and the bit, straight alongside your body. That line up has a name. It is called a Direct Rein. Directly from bit to hand.

Let's say you are going to the left. When tracking left, many horses will let you pull their heads towards the wall yet still fall over their left shoulders. The basic fix for that is to get a feel of the outside/right and, using both hands, steer the whole front end back to the wall. You are the one driving! Of course, there is a more refined way.

In the meantime, here is an exercise that will help. Ride a diamond. Cut the four corners by riding from A to B to C to E. Those lines will produce a diamond pattern in the sand. Just like a diamond in a deck of cards. Use that outside steering rein to press (steer) the horse's neck around. Use your outside upper leg - knee and thigh - to press the horse's shoulders around. The turns at B and E are not very sharp, but those at A and C take effort. And yes, they resemble the beginning of a turn on the haunches.

The ring has landmarks for steering. They are the letters around the outside of that rectangle. Don't you wonder who invented them? Information about them appears to have been lost in history, but they are our Google map. You must actually look where you are going. How many times does your instructor say "eyes up" during your lesson?1?

Horses have eyes too, but we get to choose. Some of you more experienced riders can see your current line, ("Bando get around the ring!"). That means you must steer, be able to plan ahead, and know your tests well enough that you are confident. You need to practice tests.

I read of a very successful German instructor who ended every session with a test. It is like practicing scales and phrases on a musical instrument. Pick apart the groupings of lines, movements and transitions. Concentrate on them individually until they are easy and then blend them back into the whole test.

As we move from one letter to another, we must reach them *accurately*. In the rules of English dressage, it says that the rider's body must meet the track at the letter. In Western it says the rider's leg must meet the letter. That is the same. Just different wording.

Accuracy is all important. It creates a unified picture for a test and certainly verifies the skills of a rider. The word accuracy appears often in the "collective remarks" at the end of many tests.

Along those same lines is the skill of riding corners. In Intro, training and first level in English dressage and in Intro Basic and Level One Western dressage, the goal is to ride one fourth of the arc of a 10-meter circle. That measures a curving line 28 feet long. If a horse is 6 feet long, that means that it takes 4 strides to ride an accurate corner. Apply 4 diagonal half halts to succeed.

This brings us to bending and flexion. Horses bend in three places. 1) At the jaw/poll joint. 2) where the neck plugs into the torso, and 3) between the back of the shoulder blade and the front of the rib cage. The latter one is "the hinge". Your inside legs fall naturally into the groove like the pin in between the two halves of a door hinge and bends him around it.

Bending is needed to ride the corners and curving lines required in tests. As the horse's inside hind leaves the ground, the rider's inside seatbone and entire leg mold the rib cage to the outside. Bending is required over bending lines.

The rider's inside fingers and wrist turn just the head of the horse at the jaw/poll joint so he looks slightly around the circle. That is "flexing". This, added to bending, keeps the entire spine over the curving line of travel. That also is the dressage definition of Straightness.

Horses straighten their own bodies from their heads, but we, being over their center of gravity, straighten them from their middle. The adage "always straighten a horse by putting the front end in front of the back end" applies here.

In summary, bending and straightening are intertwined. One needs both skills to ride the corners and circles in tests.

Transitions need a special word. If a down transition is required on a diagonal line, it is done while still on the line. **Not In The Corner**. Why? Because it is more humane as the horse gets to remain in both lateral and longitudinal balance before his neurological firing must change.

Additionally, when riding a diagonal line, the rider needs to choose the “end point” about two and a half feet earlier than the letter. The head, neck and shoulder of the horse arrive onto the track before she does. Remember her body must meet the track exactly at the letter.

Now you know a bit more about fitting that round peg (a horse’s body) into a square (rectangular) hole. You must know how to steer, bend, flex, ride the many corners, plan lines, and meet the demands of a test. These skills and understanding of the geometry of the ring will bring you to that great place with your horse where you have MUTUAL Trust.