

Perfecting the Walk Pirouette

This deceptively simple movement lays the groundwork for much upper-level work.

BY GERHARD POLITZ

The walk pirouette is introduced at Fourth Level and is included in tests all the way through Grand Prix. It is not as dynamic a movement to watch as the canter pirouette or other upper-level movements, and some riders seem not to pay much attention to it during their schooling sessions. However, the walk pirouette is a significant test of collection—that is to say, of the freedom and mobility of your horse's shoulders and of the lightness of his forehand. Moreover, it is essentially the same movement as the canter pirouette—meaning that a weakness in the walk pirouette is likely to show up again in the canter.

In this article, I'll discuss the definition and significance of the walk pirouette. I'll also outline some of the most common faults that riders make in training and showing the movement, and I'll give you exercises and strategies for improving your walk pirouettes.

Walk Pirouettes Defined

The *Fédération Equestre Internationale* (FEI) and the American Horse Shows Association (AHSA) define pirouettes as circles executed on two tracks, with a radius equal to the length of the horse and the forehand moving around the

haunches. (Half-pirouettes, therefore, are half-circles.) In the pirouette, the horse's forefeet and outside hind foot move around the inside hind foot, which serves as a pivot and should return to the same spot, or slightly in front of it, each time it leaves the ground. The horse should remain slightly bent in the direction of movement and should turn smoothly, maintaining the cadence and the sequence of footfalls of the gait.

Most important, a pirouette should:

1. Maintain the regular rhythm of the gait
2. Show increased engagement of the hindquarters, particularly the outside leg
3. Enhance the collection.

Pirouette Prerequisites

When your horse is able to leg-yield effortlessly in various formats, he can be taught shoulder-in, haunches-in (travers), and renvers (haunches-out) in the walk. These movements familiarize him with the aids and increase his suppleness. In time, these movements can be done in the trot.

Lateral movements can be schooled in the medium walk or in the somewhat-shortened walk but should be interspersed with free walk or work in

other gaits. In the walk, take care not to overuse the rein aids and to synchronize your leg aids with your horse's movement. If you do so, his walk will stay pure and you will in time acquire the skill to collect the walk. Be careful not to ask for a collected walk at this stage in his education. He should be taught to shorten his steps just enough to be on the aids for a fairly large turn on the haunches. Gradually, as you are able to shorten the walk, make the turns incrementally smaller. Hurrying this process along and demanding small turns when he has not yet learned to shorten his steps will only cause problems. When he is capable of a really good collected walk, the pirouettes can be made very small, with precisely accentuated steps.

Before Fourth Level, horses are asked for an easier version of the walk pirouette: the turn on the haunches. According to the AHSA Rule Book, "The horse's forehand moves in even, quiet, and regular steps around the horse's inner hind leg while maintaining the rhythm of the walk. In the half turn on the haunches, the horse is not required to step with its inside hind leg in the same spot each time it leaves the ground but may move slightly forward. Backing or loss of rhythm are considered a serious fault.



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The movement may be executed through 90 degrees, 180 degrees, or 360 degrees."

Pirouette Aids Explained

Prepare your horse with half-halts to get his attention and to improve collection. Shorten your inside rein to maintain his flexion and bend throughout the turn. If needed, you can move your inside hand a little sideways to initiate the turn. Your outside rein limits the bend but also must allow enough so that your horse is not prevented from moving forward and sideways.

Sit a bit heavier on your inside seat bone by stepping onto your inside stirrup iron, but close your outer upper leg so that you do not collapse your hip and upper body to the inside. Position your inside leg at the girth to keep your horse's inside hind leg activated to step forward, and position your outside leg slightly behind the girth. Together your legs maintain the bend in his body and the rhythm of the walk. Your inside leg has to prevent his inside hind leg from taking big sideways steps, which would result in too large a turn. Although your outside leg has to prevent his outside hind leg from "falling out," it too should drive more forward than sideways. Too much outside leg may cause your horse to cross his outside hind leg over his inside hind leg, or to step too far to the side with his outside hind leg.

Many riders find it helpful to prepare for walk pirouettes by riding shoulder-in or shoulder-fore, which ensures that the horse is light on the inside rein and that his outside shoulder is well-controlled. If your horse tends to lose flexion and bend, you can raise your inside hand slightly (take care not to cross it over the withers, as doing so tends to cause the horse to bulge through his outside shoulder) and use your inside leg firmly at the girth ("like a lamp-post") to prevent him from "falling in" as he turns.

After your horse has begun the pirouette, thinking of riding haunches-in—without overdoing your outside leg aid—may help you to maintain the correct positioning. Some riders make the mistake of drawing their outside legs far back if their horses' haunches start to fall out in the pirouette and they begin to lose the bend. However, in most cases this effort to control the evasion does not help at all but rather causes the horse to push his haunches even more against the rider's outside leg. A better solution is to bring your outside leg for-

ward and, turning your toe out a little, to use your spur close to the girth to teach your horse to respect your outside leg. At the same time, strive to maintain the bend and use sufficient half-halts to prevent him from speeding up.

Exercises and Corrections

Some horses respond to the walk-pirouette aids by slowing the walk, "curling up" in the neck, and coming behind the vertical. A common rider mistake when these evasions occur is to give one or more upward tugs with the reins, but doing so will only cause the horse to raise his head, come above the bit, tighten his back, and take irregular steps.

Another common rider mistake is to sit on the outside seat bone and try to "push" the horse around the turn, particularly if the horse is not bent properly to the inside and the rider is having difficulty making him turn as a result. If you use an overly strong outside-leg aid while counterflexing him, your horse may even resort to turning too quickly, possibly losing his balance and getting his hind legs "stuck" in the process.

Square voltes. If you encounter any of the above difficulties in schooling walk pirouettes, focus first on reestablishing the quality of the collected walk. Begin by alternating among shoulder-in, haunches-in, and renvers in the walk along the long side of the arena. Make sure that your horse's walk is very active while maintaining a clear four-beat rhythm and an even tempo.

Next, continue in the lateral suppling work along the long side of the arena but then begin introducing quarter-turns on the haunches to produce a rectangular or square figure. For instance, on the left rein, do suppling movements from P to B. At B, make a quarter-turn to the left and continue straight across the arena to E. Make a quarter-turn left at E and again at V and P. If your horse is more advanced, make a square volte by turning at the center line instead of going all the way across the arena. (See Figure 1 at right.) The benefit of the angular figures is that he must go straight after each quarter-turn, which makes him more responsive to your inside aids.

As you decrease the size of the pattern, be sure to maintain your horse's activity and to half-halt frequently with short, light rein aids. Guard against his desire to slow down by quickening the rhythm of your leg aids; you can even try thinking piaffe (without letting him do so). Repeat the exercise in both directions.

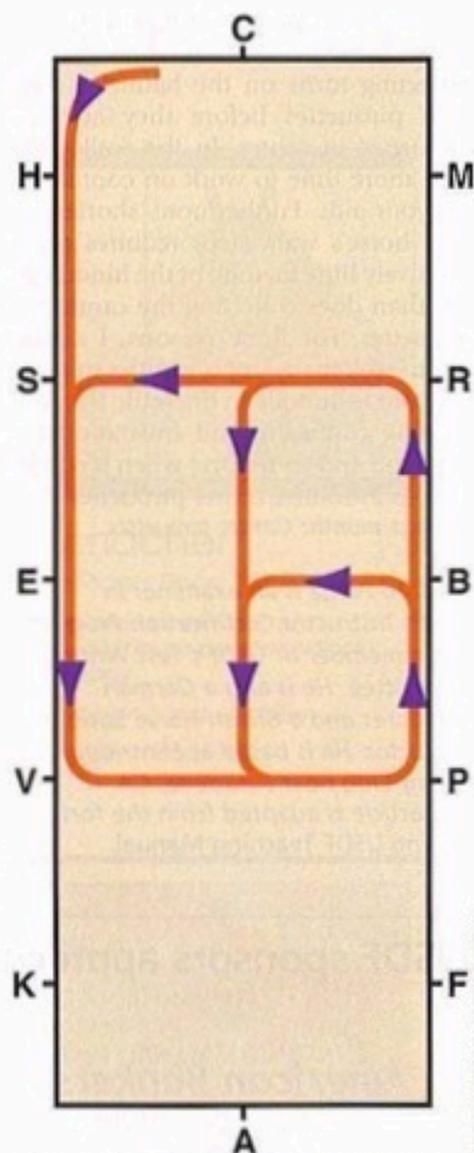


Figure 1. Walk-pirouette exercises incorporating quarter-turns and square voltes.

As you and your horse become more comfortable with this exercise, gradually decrease the size of the quarter-turns until you are riding them more like quarter-pirouettes. Be sure to give him frequent breaks as you practice the exercise so that he can relax and stretch out. You may even find it helpful occasionally to intersperse the exercise with brief periods of a lively trot or canter to refresh his energy.

Passade. The passade is a 180-degree turn on two tracks in a haunches-in manner. It can be ridden in both the walk and the canter. In the beginning, make the turn like a ten-meter half-volte. As your horse becomes better able to collect during the movement, ride the passade turn smaller, with his hind legs remaining more "on the spot" yet still active and maintaining the rhythm of the gait.

It is important for riders to realize that it is essential to hone their skills in perfecting turns on the haunches and walk pirouettes before they attempt pirouettes in canter. In the walk, you have more time to work on coordinating your aids. Furthermore, shortening your horse's walk steps requires comparatively little loading of the hindquarters than does collecting the canter for pirouettes. For these reasons, I advise you to seek many opportunities to practice your technique in the walk, thus decreasing confusion and frustration for both you and your horse when it comes time to introduce canter pirouettes. ☺

Next month: Canter pirouettes.

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