

## MULE CROSSING: *Fine-Tuning the Aids*

By Meredith Hodges

While doing the exercises in balance by riding without the aid of your reins as described in DVD #5, you probably discovered a lot more shifting of your own balance than you imagined. This nearly imperceptible shift of balance, however, can grossly affect the balance of your equine.



Until now, I have always given the rider a visual point of reference by allowing you to glance down at the outside front leg. Now you will want to be more inwardly conscious of your own body position.

You need to repeat many of the previous exercises to cultivate this kind of sensitivity, but this time, close your eyes for brief periods of time to get the “feel” of each movement in your own body. Do not simply allow your equine to travel freely in any direction, because this will not give you an accurate feeling for any specific gait or task—you must plan your course of action. If, for instance, you set up your equine to bend through and come out of a corner with impulsion, you can close your eyes for a few seconds down the long side and feel the balance that comes out of that corner when the movement is executed correctly. In this particular situation, once you’ve closed your eyes, you may notice that your animal is starting to lean slightly to the inside. A squeeze/release from your inside leg, sending your mule forward and catching that balance with the outside rein, corrects the balance and keeps him going straight and erect down the long side.



Your seat bones are closest to your body’s center of gravity, making them the best sensors for balance. “Feel” the weight shift from one seat bone to the other through turns and circles, and then even out as you ride straight lines and diagonals. You will soon discover that, in order to do a circle in better balance, you must have slightly more weight on the outside seat bone and leg.

This situates your weight over the outside hind leg, which is the leg that initiates impulsion. Putting the weight over the outside hind leg clears the mule's shoulders, allowing freer movement in front. If you ride on your inside seat bone, the weight begins to fall to the inside of the circle and puts pressure on the shoulder, inhibiting the upright, forward balance and this will put your animal on the forehand instead of engaging his hindquarters.

Remember to plan your course of action and use your half-halts between changes of direction and transitions from one gait to another. You cannot expect your equine to maintain his balance when he is constantly being surprised with changes of direction or gait. Look ahead (Do not look down!) and use your eyes correctly to enhance your balance and to help you more realistically plan your course. Teach yourself to be accurate with your eyes—look well ahead at all times and try to stay exactly on the lines and the arcs of your circles. When you plan a circle, look halfway around your circle so you can plan the arc more accurately, and then you can make the next half of the circle the same as the first half, in order to complete your circle with minimal trouble. Keep your eyes on a visual horizontal line that runs parallel to the ground. Remember—you have two eyes, and any movement as slight as a tip of your head to one side or the other can affect the upright balance of your equine. Dropping your eyes to the ground shifts your animal's balance forward and onto his shoulders, again interrupting his balance.

Do small circles, but only as small as your equine can handle without losing his balance. Once he can easily maintain his balance without interruption, you can begin to decrease the size of the circles. Keep movements planned and large. This will give your equine plenty of response time through planned movements and will allow you to ride and correct the



balance with more ease. If, for some reason, your animal loses his balance, falls out or rushes, stop him by using even pressure on both reins, with a squeeze/release action. Back him up slowly and deliberately, remembering to walk backward with your seat and legs, one step at a time, and then calmly go back and try to repeat the movement. If he makes the same mistake a second time, halt, back up and then walk through the area that is giving you the problem. Resume trotting or cantering when he complies. When you approach that area again, slow him down again, go through and resume your plan.

If he “ducks out” with you and begins to run, keep your connection on the rein that he has pulled as best as you can, and try to stop him by pulling on both reins together with a light squeeze/release action. Try to verbally calm him, and when he finally stops, let the

reins go loose and praise him for stopping. Then, collect your reins again, turn him with the rein that he has just pulled out of your hand, and return him to the task. Do not try to pull him around with the other rein, because this will cause him to lose his balance and will frighten him even more. If he is praised for stopping, he will not be afraid to stop. If the reins remain tight and he's punished for running, he may never want to stop.

The main goal is to cultivate an equine that is moving calmly between your two hands and your two legs and is responsive to changes in your aids—to your seat, to your legs and to your hands. If you keep your eyes focused well ahead and your hands and legs evenly balanced over your seat bones, you can strongly affect your animal's vertical balance. Correct and repetitive use of the aids will eventually allow your equine to become lighter in the bridle and more responsive. In addition, his muscles will begin to be properly and symmetrically conditioned. An animal that is restrained and forced will develop muscles incorrectly. In turn, this will cause him stiffness through many movements. Most commonly, you see a slight "U" in the base of the neck in front of the withers. This is caused by stiffness in the poll from riding from front to back, rather than from back to front. Actually, the stiffness will transmit to other parts of the body and can cause chronic soreness as in the croup (hunter's bump), but the most obvious signs show in the neck and poll. Incorrect development of the muscles will undoubtedly inhibit your equine's best performance.



I ride my equines diagonally through the aids to get the best lateral and vertical response. I want to maintain a good forward movement, which means that the impulsion must come from the hindquarters and push forward. Think of your hands and legs as four corners of a box that contains your equine. If you push forward on one side at a time from, say, left leg to your left hand, it leaves the

other whole side of the animal unchecked, and he will proceed forward with a tendency to drift into the "open" side. This is why you have to ride alternately and diagonally from the left leg to the right hand and from the right leg to the left hand. It is why you ride from back to front, leg to hand, in a diagonal fashion—it pushes your animal from the outside leg forward into a straight and balanced inside rein, and from the supportive inside leg to the outside rein—he remains upright on the arcs and sufficiently bent. The wider the space between your legs and between your hands, the more lateral "play" you will feel in your equine. If you keep your hands close together and your legs snugly around his barrel, there is a lot less lateral "play" and a great deal more accuracy when doing your patterns. Think of your legs and hands creating a "train track" with rails



between which your animal must move. The wider the space between your hands and legs, the “snakier” his movements will become.

But what if he will not turn without you really pulling on the inside rein? He will turn if you do it correctly. Remember, it doesn't matter how far you turn his head to the side. His head is not attached to the ground and he will only go where his legs go. You will be helpful to your mule and correct if you always try to keep his head and neck straight in front of his shoulders. When you wish to turn, give a slight half halt to slow for the turn. Be sure to support your equine with your legs as you do this—the inside leg should become stronger with each squeeze and give with each release. Keep your outside rein slightly checked back compared to your inside rein (which pulls and releases), and hold your hand in close to the withers on the outside. Do not check too hard or your equine will turn out instead of around the circle. Take your inside rein away from the withers a little to encourage the turn, but be careful not to take it any farther than necessary, because this will disconnect your animal's hindquarters from his shoulders. As you repeatedly do this exercise, your equine will learn to lead with his shoulders, bend his body through his rib cage to the arc of the circle, and not just his head and neck. If necessary, you can counter bend his head and neck to move the shoulders onto the arc of the circle, but do not counter bend too much or you will get a turn instead. Hold his correct bend steady with your legs – the inside leg at the girth and the outside leg slightly back to encourage impulsion through the turn.



The finer you tune your own aids, the lighter and more responsive your equine will become. To summarize, before you begin, plan your course of action. Keep movements large and flowing, your eyes looking ahead and your aids even and close in. Employ the aids diagonally, while firmly encouraging forward energy horizontally from back to front while at the same time, encouraging

vertical flexion over the topline. Do not be too concerned about where your equine's nose is if his body movement is correct. As he becomes more confident, fit and relaxed, and as your aids become more correct, his head and neck will drop into the improved posture of their own accord. If you try to set the head and neck on the vertical before the body has been conditioned to balance and round, you will produce an animal with a hollow back and a lot of vertical and lateral stiffness. This will prevent him from correctly responding to your aids even if he wants to, because he will be physically unable to do so. It may take a little longer to correctly condition both your body and his, but the result is a sound, cooperative animal, possessing the mental and physical qualities necessary for the best

performance upon your request. You may even experience the surprise of a better response to your aids and good posture, balance and strength in your own body, as well.

To learn more about Meredith Hodges and her comprehensive all-breed equine training program, visit [LuckyThreeRanch.com](http://LuckyThreeRanch.com) or call 1-800-816-7566. Check out her children's website at [JasperTheMule.com](http://JasperTheMule.com). Also, find Meredith on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter.

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