

Do you have a moment?

Do you want to improve your riding?

Are you prepared to analyze movement patterns, gaits, sometimes even footfall patterns and lessons, in detail?

To look closely, listen carefully, to analyze, research, to try on foot, to correct until you manage to create body awareness very clearly and well within a lesson?

Would you like to develop a feel for relative lengthening before you begin to collect yourself in relative elevation?

And all of that before you even get on the horse?

Then you are ready for

## Riding in Strides – Learning Step By Step!

By Silke Hembes



**No matter at what training level your horse happens to be, how young or how old it is, long or short, well or not so well it has been schooled – with this process you and your horse will definitely have more fun with each other in the long run. You don't have to judge, there will be no stress. Once in a while, take some time to feel and to analyze. You will achieve a much clearer understanding of your own body and its actions, learn to be able to control these better and become a more comfortable partner for your horse.**

On foot and fully concentrated:

- How exact do I have to be in aligning my body in order to walk a perfect volte?
- While doing this, do my feet walk on parallel tracks or do their tracks cross?
- We can walk this pattern as often as we want to or need to, before doing the same on the horse

Now two examples of how we will proceed:

**First experiment:**

Stand in your arena, in the middle of the short side, your back to the wall and close your eyes. Concentrate on 'straight ahead' and walk on. Keep your eyes closed and completely rely on your inner awareness of 'straight ahead'... A helper will remain silent but will warn you with a loud 'stop' shortly before you reach a wall. That allows you to march on freely and without cares. After the 'stop' have a look around to where you ended up.... Is it exactly opposite to where you started?

Congratulations – only few people can manage that!

Over a distance of 10 metres most people manage indeed to walk in a straight line. Most likely because they are still aligned with the goal they had in their sight before closing their eyes. Just shy of 20 metres most people begin to drift slightly.

Over distances longer than 20 metres this drifting intensifies significantly. During tests in a desert, where there are almost no reference points for the untrained person, scientists discovered that sooner or later every person starts to walk in a circle. One person sooner, so he arrives relatively quickly back at his starting point. Another person clearly later, so it looks as if he is walking along a wide arc.

This phenomenon also shows up when people get lost in the woods. They are convinced of having walked in a straight line – and still, at one point they arrive back at that clearing with the distinctive tree...



If you are trying this with a partner, do put on blindfolds. This avoids the temptation to quickly peek during the exercise and cheat.

### **Why is that? And what has that got to do with riding?**

The origin of our walking along arcs, caused by our false sense of 'straight', probably lies in our own 'natural crookedness', our handedness. With our horses we have been dealing with the phenomenon of natural crookedness for a long time. At least in theory: point 5 of the training scale – straightness – deals exactly with that point.

How about our own handedness, i.e. one-sidedness? Everybody answers the question whether he is right or left handed with a definitive statement. No question – one is either one or the other. And of course one writes, cuts, works with this preferred hand, unless one is a re-educated left handed person who is now more or less dexterous with both hands, or even equally comfortable with both. Is this unevenness in our dexterity restricted to our hands? Do you clean your stalls yourself? Can you handle the manure fork with both hands equally?

Do you try this once in a while? You should; it is very good training!

Not only our hands are trained single-sided; all of our movement patterns run through our bodies in different ways, depending on which hand or side of the body initiates them or follows through.

### **Second experiment:**

The next time you go swimming, please try the following: swim in a small circle with a diameter of about 5 metres (about 16'). I would love to hear in which direction you would decide to go. Too bad that you will now no longer be able to attempt this experiment without prejudice since I will give to you some interesting details ahead of time. Of course it is a lot more interesting to feel things happening within your body, movement patterns, individual limits and the actual movement possibilities, before somebody comes along and describes them to you generically. On the other hand, maybe this description arouses your curiosity just a little bit already and



At the very latest during the 'canter jumps on foot' the cups on the tray reveal whether we are in balance or not. If not, the china rattles and slides!

you will try to become aware of any commonplace sequences of movements and maybe even influence them.



Last summer when it was really hot and our fountain filled with fresh water, I could not resist jumping in. Very refreshing! Of course a fountain is not very deep or particularly gigantic. If you want to swim you are forced to remain as horizontal as possible in the water and swim in small circles. In

addition we have a column in the middle around which we have to dog paddle. So I swam on – to the left! It went without a hitch despite the limited space. I even determined that I bent hollowly to the left in my horizontal position, looked to the left, my inner leg performed the stroke more forward – i.e. the inner hip was forward – and my outer arm reached further forward – i.e. inner shoulder back – exactly like a flexible body with two axles would horizontally move along a curved line.... In short – exactly like a horse that is straight, will follow a circle arc.

After swimming for a few rounds, I – as a rider – remembered of course that one should train every movement on both sides equally and ‘changed reins’. Oops – very strange! Of course I could also swim to the right, but was somehow less fluid than going left. I continued to swim though and caught myself

- Looking to the outside
- My inner shoulder somehow slid deeper than the outer one
- I suddenly found myself no longer horizontal in the water but somehow tilted sideways
- My legs stopped doing regular frog-like kicking strokes, but were more dog paddling

I clearly came onto my inner shoulder in counter position and worked my ‘hind end’ less optimally to move forward, but somehow sloppily pushed back and out. Well, will you look at that...

To the left you could have looked from above and drawn a clean curved line from the top of my head, along my spine and through my body to between my toes, exactly along a circular track around the whole fountain. To the right my body position had nothing to do with the planned circle. I did follow a circular line, but over the shoulder and on my side, looking to the outside, almost going backwards-sideways. And that position was viewed as 'natural' by my body. Of course I now attempted to correct my position:

- I looked into the direction I was moving
- I tried to stretch the left side of my body to keep my body staying horizontal in the water, without tilting sideways
- I paid attention to keeping my inner shoulder further back
- And my inner hip more forward, along the curved line, just like I did going to the left.
- I tried to swim with rhythmical strokes and according to the direction of movement

I managed to make all of these corrections, more or less successfully; exactly the detail I happened to be focused on at any given time. But I really never managed to coordinate everything together for more than two or three strokes. In no time one of the 'tentacles' had gone off on its own again, or I was looking to the outside again. And when I finally seemed to have organized all of my body parts and they were aligned, I discovered that I was holding my breath. I soon found out that swimming was no fun at all in this fashion, and changed the direction again. My body relaxed again and I soon found myself motivated to try going to the right once more. Bit by bit it turned out that my right circles worked best if I changed direction with a wide arc, a reverse so to speak, from going to the left. In that manner I had enough time to get ready for the new bend and progressively stretch the new outer side of my body and go hollow to the right without dropping my hip or twist my body. For a little while I was then able to fluently keep that bend, without going tense or holding my breath, and I changed back to my 'chocolate' side before I could again get completely out of breath and notice how tense I had become.

An interesting experience, in terms of our own natural crookedness, as well as the feeling we get when we go against what feels natural. My body was completely ok with swimming to the right while moving on the side and over my shoulder. This must be similar to how a horse feels when it will not bend in one direction because the outer side is now the shortened hollow one. For a horse that is hollow on the left it is completely natural to support itself on the inner shoulder when going to the right and to look to the outside – naturally – not in defiance!



Right hand – attention!  
Bending/turning from the core – don't drop your hip. The gaze is not focused. What aids are being used here? Turning? Shoulder fore?



If you are goal oriented and focused you will not drop your hip! Here you see a shoulder-in in walk, on four tracks. Turning the shoulder brings in the forehead, the outer hip keeps the haunches along the rail and the focus points the way.  
These aids can be practiced on foot – on the horse every rider profits from perfection!

I think these two examples show quite clearly that our natural crookedness has a much firmer grip on us than we think; and that already on foot, i.e. hovering in water.

Taking these anatomical facts into account, how could we possibly straighten our horses easily as soon as we sit on their backs? It seems that the fastest way to get this done would be without any analytical thinking and on a purely by feel basis, when horse and rider are without fear, happy and comfortable and both clearly moving with a forward thinking attitude. Stretching while moving forward does indeed create a kind of lengthening which would be helpful in straightening both horse and rider. And this is exactly why many people, sometimes at high speeds, rush across the arena. With the motto, 'straighten your horse and ride forwards'. This saying may be taken quite literal when the speed is appropriate, but it certainly does not mean: ride in a straight line as fast as possible! In addition should I not have schooled an idea of what 'straight' actually means before I am consciously able to ride straight? How do I ride my horse in a straight line if I have not learned to influence its shoulders and pelvis? On the other hand, might over analyzing right at the beginning lead to rider and horse going immobile altogether, and become reluctant to move? What should be first: forwards or sideways? What is possible at the beginning and how crooked is my horse; and – how crooked am I?

This is exactly where we'll start! If you would like, we will try to achieve a better understanding of movement sequences together; of our own and those of our horses.

We will experience – in strides – how precisely our horses move along certain paths, and in what position we ourselves will be able to frame our horses in a way that allows the

horse and rider to move together in the greatest possible balance and resulting harmony. Instead of forcing a horse into a pre-determined standard position, we will try to blaze new trails on which we can open channels for our horses in which they can supply follow their noses on two tracks; and this with a fluid balance in spite of or in fact because of the rider, and instead of 'swimming' sideways and over the shoulder.

### A lofty claim?

Yes, absolutely. But I don't have to be a champion in order to aspire to this goal. First of all I have to be aware of myself. I have to be able to determine what exactly my body does and how it feels during the process. What feels the most comfortable for me is not necessarily the best frame for my horse. But how do I provide the best frame if I tense up to achieve it? Who of us has not heard corrections from coaches or more or less constructive criticisms from co-riders and could have sworn that the issue being criticized was not in fact an issue at all. We hear, 'turn more towards the centre of the circle', even though we already are completely turned – as far as humanly possible – or so we think. And if we watch a video, we are shocked to see that what we felt and what others had noticed all along, and what we now see for ourselves, are two completely different things. The idea I would like to discuss here, offers the following possibilities:

1. To be more objectively aware of our movements
2. To intensify our body awareness and school it
3. To correct ourselves and thereby help to centre us,

so we can be riders to our horses who

1. sense their bodies more deeply and thus control them better. We want to be able to be clear with our aids,
2. acting constructively towards moving forward, and not complain about something we did not want, even though consciously or unconsciously we got exactly what we asked for.

If you are interested in this topic, I am looking forward to some interesting moments with you over the coming few months. Together, we will use a variety of exercises on foot, alone or with a partner, to attempt to literally grasp and sense a few concepts and equestrian lessons; happy and free, according to the motto : **Riding in strides – learning step by step!**

The experiences gained with this method have been and still are surprising to me, sometimes amazing, enlightening and more and more logical over time, and I hope it will be the same for

you. And imagine how often you can track each and every movement over and over again, without having to drive your horse to the edges of its patience. This is another advantage of working on foot that is often overlooked. Of course you will continue to ride – but the more aware you are of your own body, the less you will stress your horse's nerves and body with deficiencies that confuse your horse.

Why not practice on the ground what can be practiced on foot? I will proceed systematically and state very clearly (those of you who know me and/or my book, know that I am VERY detailed) HOW we can utilize all of our senses in order to become better and – for our horses – more comfortable riders.

I am very pleased that **Tölt.Knoten** allows me a platform to reach many interesting horse people who are more interested in a harmonious interaction with their equine friend than in ribbons. And I hope you will join me!

People with gaited horses and of course those with trotting horses. And since nobody at Tölt.Knoten is dependent on the commercial success of a series of articles, we will indulge in the luxury to write in a style that suits us. But: what you will not find here either is a more effective technique for faster, better or simpler making your horse perform. Instead, you will get some good ideas for becoming a nicer partner for your horse.

With kind regards

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