

## THE FIRST UNNATURAL ACT

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*“Mechanics is the paradise of all sciences.” Leonardo da Vinci*

In dressage we are told that everything we ask of the horse is done in nature. Nonsense. That is tantamount to saying that Tapioca occurs in nature. There is a whole category of what I call ‘unnatural acts’ – things horses do not do in nature. These include Half Pass, Renvers, Travers, and Pirouettes in walk and canter with bend in direction of turn.

Any exercise in which the horse bends in the direction of travel is unnatural, in the sense that horses do not do it in nature if left to their own devices. In nature a horse would never investigate a threat or promise of food by half passing across the pasture toward it.

Travers, Renvers, and Half Pass should be easy and quick to teach IF the proper foundation is laid. That foundation is what I have dubbed “Counter-flexed Turn on Forehand.”

That takes more time and more artfulness than teaching Travers, Renvers, and Half Pass.

It is my own “invention” (though doubtless others have done it when ‘the feeling strikes them,’ but have not described it or given it a name or written it in their books). Therefore, it will not be found in dressage books.

It is very clarifying for both horse and rider.

Development, preparation and correction.....

It has to be TAUGHT – slowly and thoughtfully. It cannot be FORCED, MAULED, MANAGED, or WALLOPPED.

The normal way to do Turn on Forehand is with the neck straight, or flexed away from the direction in which the haunches are asked to turn.

In this counter-flexed exercise the horse is asked to flex or bend to one direction (let’s say *right*, for the moment). Then it is asked to move its haunches from the *left* leg – in the direction of the bend – hind feet step to the *right*, one step at a time with a pause after each step.

Before trying this, check out the normal turn on the forehand, making sure that the horse does a crisp, light, immediate step (only one) on a loose rein, from the lightest touch of leg (or whip). Do not do more than one step at a time at the beginning – stopping from voice (“good boy”!) after *one* step.

It works like this:

1. Turn the horse’s head to the right.
2. Fix the right hand to something (neck, saddle, thigh). This keeps the rider from twitching and pulling, and gives the horse a frame of reference and limitation. Loosen the left rein (to allow the horse to stretch its outside side).
3. WAIT for the horse to ‘use its own muscles’ to do this (dressage babble is ‘yield,’ ‘give,’ ‘soften’ or ‘lighten,’ etc.) before going to step 4.
4. Ask with left leg for the croup to move right. If the whip is used, it is only as a ‘pointer’ to direct the horse’s attention to the croup, not so much as a stimulator.
5. The left rein remains loose or VERY LIGHT, EXCEPT to make momentary crisp corrections if the forelegs move (forward or sideways). Loosen at once.

6. Reward with voice and STOP after ONE step (it doesn't matter at first which hind leg instigates the movement, or even goes a bit backwards, so long as it goes more sideways than backward).
7. Repeat until the ONE step becomes quick, light, bright and calm.
8. After one step works well, add more steps, but incrementally. After each step, give the horse 3 to 5 seconds for reflection and retrospection (horses learn retrospectively!). Take the leg away for a moment and then reapply for each subsequent step.

When the horse (and rider!) sort this out, the horse will, of its own volition, IF it is in self-carriage with a stretched outer side, step with the outer-hind leg passing in front of the inside hind leg and move each foreleg in turn in a very small circle nearly on the spot, in a pure walk rhythm.

What to use it for:

Preparation for Travers, Renvers and Half Pass – to make them progress quickly and go smoothly. Correction for same (horse fights/blocks bend or displacement of haunches). Correction (momentary) for Pirouette when the horse dives in, circles or puts the croup out rather than making a 'pirouette-STYLE turn,' STOP and do one step, then proceed with pirouette.

Take ALL the time it takes to get this exercise right. It will save a great deal of time and struggle and confrontation in the long term!

Go back to it at the first sign of blockage or clogging or tumbling. That is re-installing understanding.

Stop and check it often – just to be sure it is still there. Do not wait for a problem.