

Riding a Good Stretch Circle

with Karen Pavicic

Karen Pavicic was a member of Canada's 2007 Pan Am Games Dressage Team as the travelling reserve with her horse, Lionheart. A Level III dressage coach, she has trained a number of horses and riders to success at the FEI levels. Currently long-listed for the Canadian Team with Don Daiquiri and London, Karen has declared for the 2012 Olympic Team with Don Daiquiri. She trains out of Centre Line Stables in Richmond, BC.

by Karen Robinson



The purpose of the stretch circle - a required movement in training and first level tests - is to demonstrate that your horse is supple, loose and engaged from behind.

The stretch circle, in which the horse stretches forward and downward on a 20-metre circle in rising trot, is a movement in all training and first level tests. The fact that it has a coefficient of two (which doubles its value) in all but one of the six tests at those levels is an indication of its importance on the training scale. It is not only a test movement, however; the horse's ability and willingness to stretch forward into the contact should be tested often in the training at home.

The purpose of the stretch circle is to demonstrate that your horse is supple, loose and engaged from behind. The horse should stretch forward and down with his head and neck while maintaining balance – which is demonstrated by the fact that the horse neither speeds up nor slows down on the circle. The horse's back and shoulders should remain lifted, and the hind legs should be stepping actively underneath his body.

In order to perform this exercise well, the horse must be well-connected to the

bridle from the back to the front. If the horse is too strong in the contact, he will probably run onto the forehand when attempting the stretch circle. The correction for a loss of balance leading to leaning into the contact is to ride frequent half-halts until the horse has become balanced. The horse cannot be asked to stretch until he has regained the correct balance.

One exercise I often use with my students and horses is to ride a lengthened stride before the stretch circle. It's a very good correction for horses that tend to curl and hide behind the contact instead of stretching out and down, with the nose slightly in front of the vertical. If the horse tends to be behind the contact, it is very important to ensure that he is taking a good contact before attempting a stretch circle. Otherwise, it's unlikely the horse will take the contact and stretch correctly forward.

I begin the exercise by having the rider make a short diagonal in lengthened stride, for example from H to B. The lengthening reinforces the connection from the horse's hind legs forward to the contact. I then have the rider return to working trot before developing a stretching circle, either a bit farther down the long side or at the end of the ring. Ideally, the rider would be in sitting trot between the lengthening and the stretch circle to ensure good connection and balance. However, if the rider struggles to sit the trot after the lengthening, she can remain in rising trot instead. The impulsion created by the lengthening will transfer into a good connection to the contact, which the horse will then take forward into a good-quality stretch circle.

Although it seems an easy exercise, the stretch circle can be challenging to perform well. It is important to practice stretching and picking up the reins again on a daily basis. It should also be practiced at the canter once it has been mastered in trot.

Stretching within the trot or canter is an excellent test of whether or not the horse is balanced on the rider's seat, and is therefore in self-carriage. ”

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