

Spiraling Exercises

To Supple The Horse And Strengthen You, The Rider

By Katharine Lark

You come down the long side of the dressage arena toward the judge, your horse moving big and rhythmically. Three strides before you planned, he cuts the corner, and you curse yourself for letting it happen. Later, you prepare him and go onto a 10-meter circle at E, but it gets larger and larger as you come back around to the track. These frustrating errors can be avoided or repaired as they occur by a technique called spiraling.

Spiraling exercises—enlarging and reducing a circle—are valuable because they supple the horse and strengthen the rider. Performed consistently and correctly, spirals will increase flexibility and submission to the aids, enhancing the horse's impulsion and improving the other lateral exercises.

Spiraling works the horse laterally in the direction of his flexion (as in haunches-in/half-pass) and away from his flexion (as in leg-yield/shoulder-in). The horse should actually half-pass in and leg-yield out of his spirals.

Left: Spiraling IN; Right: Spiraling OUT; both showing riders' shoulder and leg positions.

To begin the exercise, you must establish a large, round circle. It is usually best to start with a working walk to get used to the exercise while things are moving slowly.

A 20-meter circle is suggested, and it should be ridden several times while you "set" it as the large perimeter of the spiral. Transitions, lengthenings, figures, and such need to be made flowing and smooth before concentrating on accuracy; the spiral exercise demands attention to detail to make it effective.

Start with the horse flexed to his easier side (on the rein he feels most suppled) to avoid resistance, but be sure to work equally on each rein every time you ride spirals. To reverse during spirals, ride a change of rein through the circle from the large circle, then establish it again on the other rein.

A brightly colored object such as a cone or a bandage rolled up and placed on the ground at the center of the spiral circles can help you to keep them concentric, but in the long run, it is feel and perception that will make accurate spirals.

REDUCING THE CIRCLE

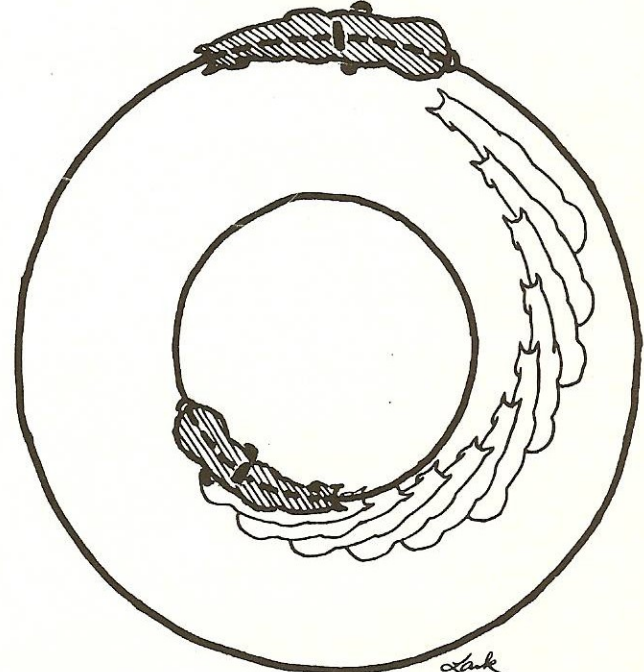
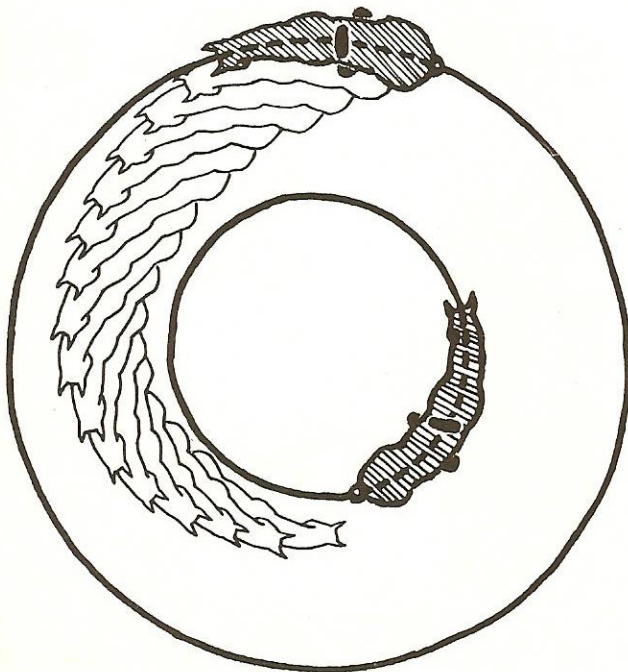
At the walk, ask the horse to "tighten" the circle and move gradually in by putting some

extra weight (an ounce or two) on your inside sitting bone. With the inside leg at the girth, the outside leg behind (this lines your hips with his and stretches the outside of his body while it contracts the inside), bring your inside shoulder back to line your shoulders with his. Now use the inside leg actively to maintain impulsion, the outside leg to push the haunches inward. Your outside rein remains steady and stretched (full contact) to prevent rushing and overbending at the neck, and the inside rein must be elastic, softening in rhythm with the walk to keep flexion.

It will take a bit of work to keep the horse going *forward* and sideways. Your pelvis should tilt, and your eyes need to focus on the horse's poll. This concentration between his ears will keep your head in position. You can use your peripheral vision to gauge the circles.

Keep the horse calm and the walk rhythmic as the circle *gradually* becomes smaller. Since it is usually more difficult for the horse to move laterally *into* his flexion, carry the whip (if needed) on the outside. It will be easier to leg-yield *out*, so it is more effective to reinforce the aids for spiraling *in*.

At the walk, the circle can safely be reduced to eight meters or so before spiraling



out. Establish the small circle and make it accurate by walking it at least once around before starting back out.

ENLARGING THE CIRCLE

To enlarge the circle, shift the ounce of extra weight to the outside sitting bone, keep the shoulders, hands, and legs in the same positions as before to maintain proper flexion. The outside rein is still stretched and is used to check rushing (with a unilateral half-halt to it, if needed), and the inside rein maintains the bend to the *inside*, remaining active. The outside leg behind the girth maintains impulsion, while the strong, active inside leg moves the horse out *gradually*.

It all sounds much more complicated than it is. The basic truths of positioning are all that you need—line your hips and shoulders where you want the horse's hips and shoulders to be; outside aids stabilize/inside aids regulate flexions.

Remember "Calm, Straight, and Forward," and things will fall into place (Note: straight meaning that the horse's spine is in line with the track you have determined).

SPIRALING AT TROT AND CANTER

Now, the same aids are used at the trot and the canter when spiraling. The only variations are those needed for maintaining the extra impulsion—stronger driving aids.

To spiral, the trot must be ridden sitting and, as a rule of thumb, the faster the gait, the more dangerous tiny circles become. This means that you must develop the horse's muscles over time to handle the stress of small circles. Go down to 12 meters at the trot, 15 meters at a canter after the horse has had some practice at it.

THINGS TO AVOID

Some of the things you need to avoid in spiraling exercises are leaning in by horse or rider. Envision that you are riding as part of a cylinder, not a cone. The horse rushes in or out, counterflexes, pops his shoulder, or refuses to move laterally. When these things go wrong, just do a normal circle once where you are and ask him to move to the side again when he is back on the aids.

Never try to force the spirals. *Influencing* is easier on everyone and will get results. If the horse breaks gait (canter to trot or trot to walk) when you get to the small circle, he is either unable to perform (don't make it so small for awhile) or is losing impulsion (use stronger driving aids).

SOME VARIATIONS

There are several variations on spirals to help keep them from being boring. At sitting trot, you can establish a figure eight of two connected 20-meter circles. On one circle, spiral it in, then spiral it out. Then, at the

center of the figure eight, go on the other rein, spiral that circle in, then spiral it out, and so on.

At sitting trot, you can spiral from 20 meters to 12 meters, make a transition to canter and spiral out; then go back to trot on the large circle. The canter-to-trot transition should be obtained by momentarily straightening the horse's body so he steps into trot.

After a sequence of spirals, it is a good idea to take the horse "large" (out around the arena) and let him go long for a minute. His muscles will appreciate it, and it will help keep him relaxed—a very important part of his training.

Keep in mind when doing the spirals that the rhythm of any gait used must remain the same during the exercise. The horse must be on the aids (moving like a river between the banks of your hands and legs), and you must be content with any progress at all.

It will take time to polish the exercises and strengthen the horse, but it is well worth the effort. The next time you ride a dressage test and feel your horse anticipating a corner, you'll be able to correct him easily. When a circle starts to stray from its proper size, you can spiral it in or out to where it belongs. And when you make a turn to a jump and find that you've cut it short or are swinging wide from the line you had planned, you'll just spiral over to where you should be. ■