



# BORROW A TRAINER

*Working on balanced bending.*

**By AQHA Professional Horseman Andy Moorman  
with Christine Hamilton**

**T**IME-HONORED TRAINING METHODS SAY THAT YOU BEND YOUR horse to teach it to go straight. You do bending work to get the horse balanced so when you do go straight, the horse is really able to go straight, balanced with impulsion. Working on bending strengthens a horse's hindquarters and teaches a horse collection with better response to the rider's aids.

If the horse is in a proper bend, it goes from the poll to the tailhead, so the whole spine is bent evenly. It's not a straight body with a neck hanging around in a curve. If you were riding your horse on a big circle drawn on the ground, your horse's spine would fit right on the line of the circle. The bigger the circle, the less bend there is in the horse's body; the smaller the circle, the more bend there is.

To create a proper bend you've got to sit straight up in the middle of the horse's back. Use your inside rein to flex the horse's nose slightly to the inside. Your inside leg should be at the girth to support the bend. Your outside rein supports the outside shoulder from falling out, and your outside leg is slightly behind the girth, creating forward momentum.

## Common Problems

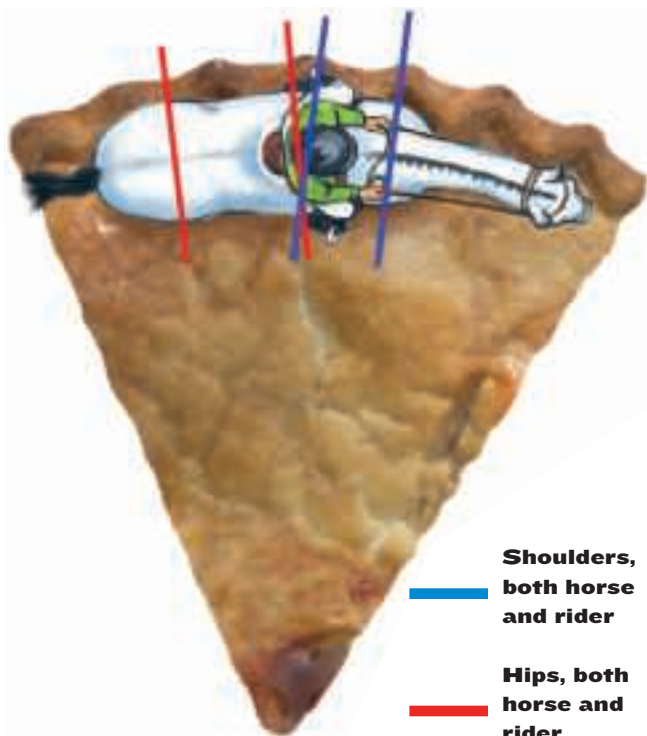
IF A RIDER DOESN'T SIT SQUARE ON THE HORSE'S BACK WITH EQUAL seat bone pressure, that can have a lot to do with a horse having trouble bending.

Many of the people I teach are more collapsed on one side and have more seat bone pressure on one side than they do the other. The horse cannot do what the rider wants because there is a seat bone jammed down into his back.

If the rider is bending in the direction she collapses, she often has no aids on the outside of the horse and the horse falls out constantly. Often, the rider can't tell she rides that way.

A lot of riders simply use too much inside rein. If you pull the inside rein to create your bend there, it will pull the horse's head in and the shoulder will fall out, to the outside. You must use your outside aids – leg and rein – to keep the outside supported.

Horses can have problems, too. They tend to be right or left-handed just like we are, and might find bending one



**Shoulders,  
both horse  
and rider**

**Hips, both  
horse and  
rider**

direction easier. A horse might find it difficult because he's not strong enough in his back and hindquarters to bend properly. Or he could be in pain and have something wrong that is making him stiff on one side.

## What to Do

1. *Carousels and pies* are two images I use with my riders to help them think about where their body and where the horse's body should be for a correct bend. If you put it all that together, and if you're paying attention, it absolutely puts everything in perfect position. And you can assess your own position.

The first is to imagine you are sitting on a carousel horse. The brass pole of the horse comes down through your body to the ground. The pole goes right down through your core, and you can turn right or left, but you can't bend the pole. You can't lean forward or back or to either side, but you can rotate. You can turn your head and look, but you can't bend or drop your head. Everything stays straight.

Keep that in your mind, and add this image: Think of the circle you are riding on as a pie, and your horse is on the outside of the crust. The outside shoulder is leading and the inside shoulder is back.

The outside hip is back and the inside is forward. Your horse is compressed on the inside and lengthened on the outside, to fit around that pie crust and in the slice.

As the rider, your feet and legs should parallel the horse's hindquarters, and your shoulders and arms should parallel the horse's shoulders. So your shoulders are angled in and your hips are angled out.

When you bring your inside leg to the girth and your outside leg back to maintain the bend, your hips turn to parallel the horse's hips.

When you sit up straight and look around the circle where you are going – think about that pole and don't bend or lean – you turn from the waist and your shoulders turn in to parallel the horse's shoulders. Your inside arm comes back and your outside arm goes forward and your reins are just right.

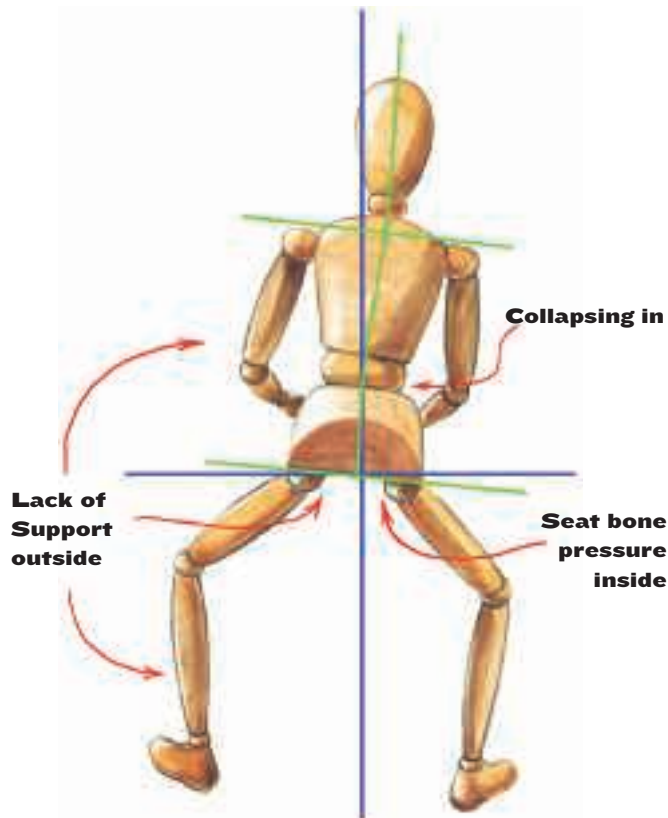
2. *Collapsing.* If a rider tends to collapse on one side, you can see it when you watch her from behind. To help her get back into the middle of her saddle, I'll often shorten the stirrup opposite to the side she collapses on.

So if a rider collapses on the left side, when she bends left, she gets her left seat bone under her and has no feel with her right seat bone; her hips go to the outside. If you shorten that right stirrup, it pushes her seat back into the middle of the saddle, and then she can feel it.

It's amazing how many people ride crooked that way and don't know it.

3. *Exercises.* A lot of times a horse won't bend because he's not relaxed. I like to have riders start on a circle at a lengthened walk with the horse on a loose rein. I'll have the rider alternate sides asking the horse to come deeper with his hind leg. You cue with your leg on the side of the horse that's stepping forward, asking your horse to reach up and relax. And you think about bending. It really helps to start your ride long and soft, and let them relax.

If you know your horse is stiffer one way than the other, start your work on the stiff side. I time it; I might work five minutes on the stiff side, then five on the easy side and then go back to five more on the stiff side and quit.



4. *Carrots and saddle pads.* Your horse can have a problem that prevents him from bending properly, he might not be as strong on one side, or he could be in pain.

I'm a great believer in "carrot calisthenics" as exercises to try with your horse before you ride. They can reveal potential problems or soreness in your horse's neck or back.

Take a treat and use it to bring your horse's nose up toward the hollow at the point of his hip, and do it on both sides. He might come around one way easily, but not the other way.

Try to take his head down toward his girth on each side. Or try to get him to reach straight down and take something from between his front legs, while you hold the treat from behind his legs.

These are easy to do before you ride; they let you know your horse is OK and feels good. He might be fine for 10 days, and on the 11th, he has a quirk in the way he does it that he didn't have before. If they do reveal that your horse has a consistent problem, it might flag something to have a professional look at.

And remember to look for dry spots on the horse under your saddle pad. When you finish working, you shouldn't have dry spots on an otherwise sweaty back – that indicates that your saddle or your pad doesn't fit right. ■

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BIO

AQHA Professional Horseman ANDY MOORMAN has trained horses and riders for decades, and has coached many youth world and All American Quarter Horse Congress champions. She began in barrel racing and moved into western and English pattern and over fences classes. Originally from West Virginia, Moorman attended the University of Florida and has been based in the state ever since. She was awarded 1998 Professional's Choice AQHA Professional Horseman of the Year.