

The Dreaded Circle **By: Marilyn Randall**

Most equitation patterns involve riding a circle or part of a circle.

Equitation patterns often incorporate riding a circle or a part of a circle in combination with other maneuvers. So it makes perfect sense that when practicing to become a proficient equitation rider that a certain amount of time should be spent learning to ride a circle correctly.

Common misconceptions

First off, a circle is round; not oval, egg shaped or have a flat side to it. Good riders guide their horses between the bridle reins on a perfectly round circle. Not as easily ridden as said.

The rider must stay balanced so as not to push the horse to the outside. Too often when wanting a smaller circle I see riders lean to the inside to pull, wish, or plead with their horse to stay on course. This type of riding only encourages the horse to move further out. So, keep your center over the horse's center.

Remember that it is the outside rein that keeps the horse on course. Sally Swift likens it to the water going around a corner in the irrigation ditch. The pressure is on the outside bank rather than the inside. Therefore our horse needs to respect the outside rein and not lean on it. The inside rein gives direction and the amount of bend for the size of circle while the outside rein maintains the balance. As well, the inside leg assists in keeping the shoulder up and out of the way while your outside leg keeps the horse from swinging his hind end off of the circle.

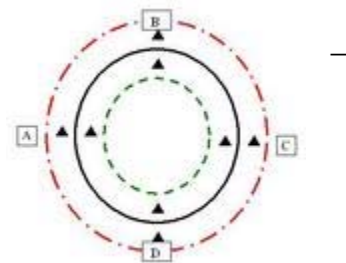


So now that we know the basic aids it is important to put them into a pattern. Again, we are back to practice, practice, practice. To keep your riding interesting, practice riding different sizes of circles at the sitting and posting trot, change diagonals while riding circles and canter your circles while sitting and in two point. Then when you think you are getting good at this, do it with out your irons and close your eyes. How round is your circle now? Doing these things will make you a better rider and strengthen your leg as well as your ability to influence your horse.

Good drill to use when practicing:

Use cones to help you keep your circle round. Set them up at varying sizes and make yourself ride between them, then move to the outside or the inside of the pattern and then back into the channel.

This basic diagram shows you how to ride 3 different sizes of circles using the same set of cones. You can set your cones at a 15 20 meter circle and then by moving to the inside or the outside of the cones you can change the size of your circle.



The Cones

The cones help you to maintain a strong sense of direction and balance. Some important things to remember when using this drill are:

- Look forward to the next set of cones. When you are halfway between set A & B you should all ready be looking forward to set C.
- Sometimes practice this drill while raising your inside arm straight up to the sky. Your palm should face your body while your thumb is pointing to the rear of the horse. This will help lift your rib cage and keep you centered over your horse.
- You can challenge yourself by riding this drill at the sitting trot, posting trot, two point, canter



and two point at canter. Practice varying the exercise by changing to the different positions and gaits while riding and by riding without your irons.

d. As you get proficient, start changing to the inside and outside of your cones. This allows you to spiral in and out as you work. By doing this you will be able to tell if you and your horse are maintaining good balance.

e. Make sure to practice both directions so that you work both sides of your horse and your body.

Checklist to riding your pattern

When you see a circle in your pattern prepare yourself to ride it round and in the correct geographic position. If the judge draws a circle in a specific part of the pattern make sure that you ride it exactly as drawn. You are judged on your ability to ride the pattern correctly.

a. Copy the pattern. By this I don't mean just get a copy, but draw it out exactly as the judge wrote it. This will help you to prepare in your mind just how the pattern is to be properly executed.

b. Now set up some markers and walk the pattern on the ground. This will help you understand the flow of the pattern. Good patterns flow from one maneuver to another.

c. Place some markers in a practice area and do the pattern with your horse. Depending on how responsive your horse is, practicing with cones helps you to know how far in advance you need to prepare for each maneuver.

d. Check out how the judge sets up the pattern in the arena and practice your pattern again with cones. Now you should know the approximate distance and size of circle you will need to ride.

e. Watch other riders perform to see if the pattern has any areas that appear more difficult to negotiate.

f. Visualize you and your horse riding the perfect pattern. The power of positive thinking is important. See that perfect circle.

Now for the fun

Show your horse and enjoy the moment. If you have done your homework you will be able to handle any of the little problems that occur. And if you do have a bobble, remember to keep riding. No one is perfect all the time. Make note of the little difficulties to help you in your practice sessions at home so you are ready for the next circle.

Marilyn Randall: Randall is the Associate Professor of Equestrian Studies at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Montana. A long-time AQHA Director, she has judged such shows as the AQHA World Championship Show, the AQHA Select World Championship Show, AQHYA World Championship Show, and the All-American Quarter Horse Congress. Randall is also a successful breeder, having bred and raised Lucca Brasi, who has carried his rider to Youth World Championships in Working Hunter and Hunt Seat Equitation.

