

By Natalie DeFee Mendik  
[www.mendikmedia.com](http://www.mendikmedia.com)

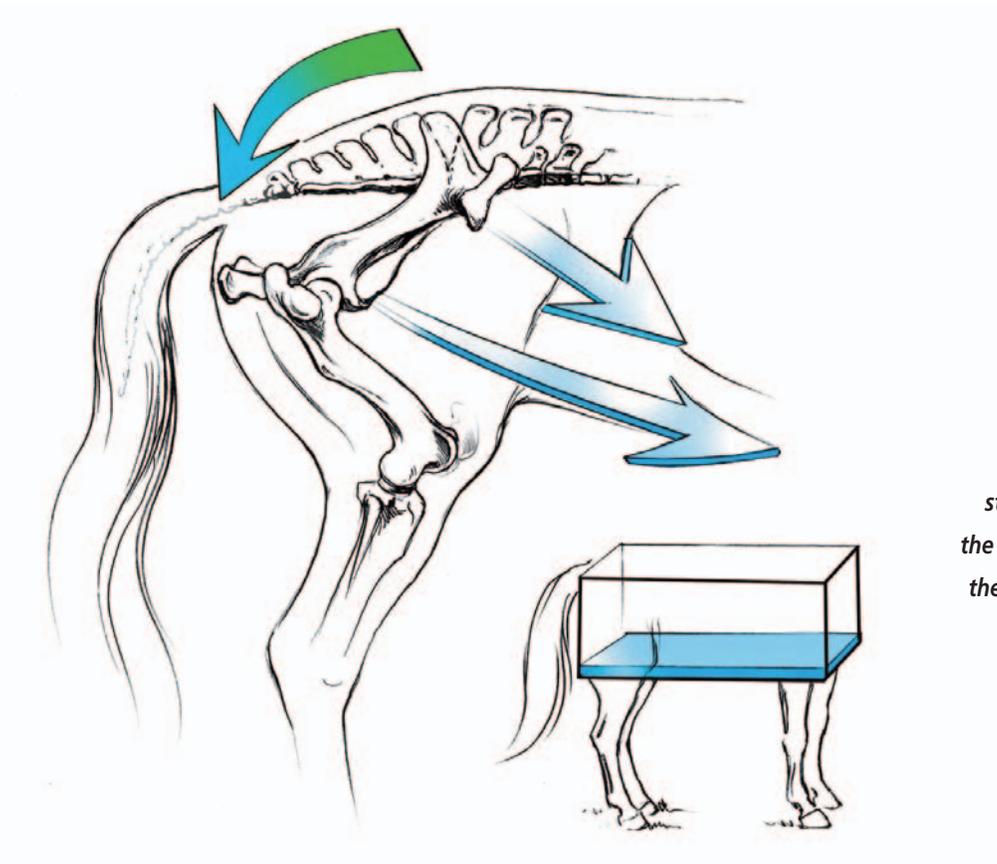
# THE LEARNING CURVE

## *Holly Mason's Secrets of Bending*

**A**re you ready to increase your dressage learning curve? Holly Mason of Dressage by Design breaks down the mechanics of bending in her popular "Secrets of Bending™" clinic. Do you want to know what the biggest secret is? It's all actually very straightforward.

In Dressage by Design, Mason's goal is to help riders understand how their bodies and the

horse's body work. In doing so, abstract dressage concepts suddenly make sense. Mason likes to change the way riders think about certain concepts by changing the lexicon we use for those ideas. In "Secrets of Bending™," the concept of bending is approached as curving. Bending is as simple as first curving the horse's spine, then riding that curve.



*Sideways steps help the horse build superior abdominal strength. The pelvis curls under, the hips supple, the back lifts, and the hind legs come more forward underneath the rider.*

Illustration: Sandy Rabinowitz

## Lateral Steps to the Rescue

Although dressage riders are familiar with the “back to front” drill, Mason likes to establish bend by first addressing the forehand. She explains that the forehand can actually be an impediment to good motion when the horse is not adequately supple in front. “The forehand has to be appropriately supple so that the hind legs can do their job,” remarks Mason. In fact, Karl Mikolka, former Chief Rider at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna and Mason’s longtime mentor, noted that the horse’s head, neck and shoulders are so powerful they can stop the motion of the back.

Incorporating lateral work into schooling is one of Mason’s first steps in establishing bend. This lateral work in the form of leg-yields promotes flexibility in the horse. Mason begins working the horse in-hand at the walk by asking the horse to move laterally away from her. This in-hand work encourages the horse to soften in the poll and release the shoulders away from the handler.

Riders can perform the same exercises under saddle by first riding a circle at the walk. Begin by feeling the horse’s rib cage rhythmically swinging between your legs. The moment the horse’s rib cage swings away from your inside leg is also the moment when the horse’s inside hind begins to lift into the air and step forward. The swing can also be felt in the hips as the inside of the rider’s pelvis is pushed forward.

At this phase of the horse’s gait you are best able to influence the horse’s inside hind. Riding in the walk on a circle, feel for this moment of timing. When the rib cage swings to the outside, use your inside leg to ask the horse to leg-yield outward. This leg-yield should be performed in a slow “tai-chi” motion while the horse relaxes and lets go. From human exercise physiology, it is known that low-level warmups work better to oxygenate muscle tissue.

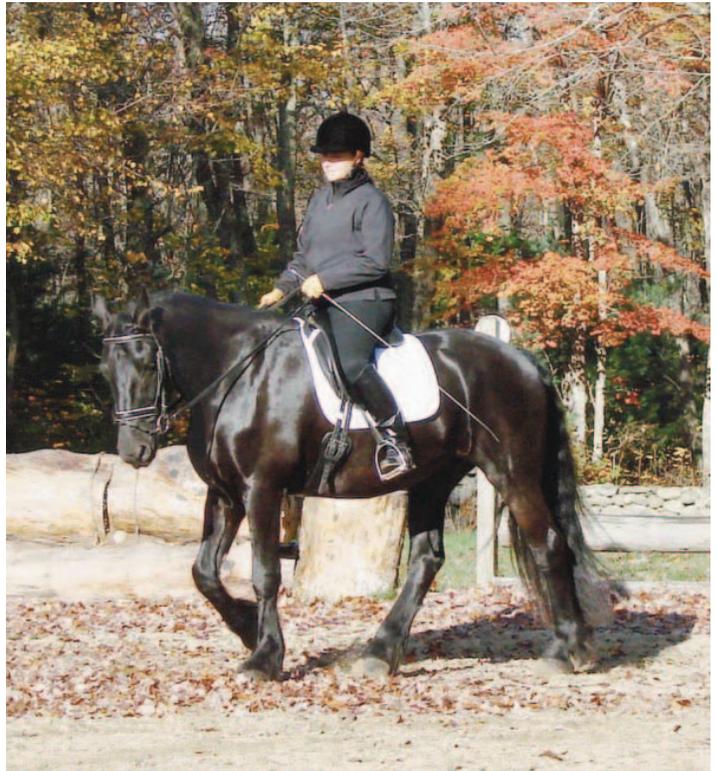


Photo: Ricci Hill

*The horse's rib cage starts to swing away from the rider's inner leg, as the inner hind leaves the ground. The head, neck and shoulders in this picture are softly and correctly curved, and as you can see, a slightly higher inside rein and lower outside rein helps explain this to the horse so that the correct turn of the head is achieved.*



*The inner rein has softly curved the horse's neck, which allows the inner hind to step under the rider's center of gravity as the leg-yield begins. The rider's inner shoulder is back and one could easily tap the horse at the hip to further supple the upper joints of the hindquarters and increase the size of the sideways steps.*

You'll find that when the horse begins to move fluidly laterally in the forehand, the inner hind leg also begins to cross over more easily. "Working front to back unlocks blocks in the body, allowing the hind legs to move," explains Mason. This promotes a positive spinal effect. "Nice crossover steps make the horse more supple all the way through the hindquarters from the lower back to the sacroiliac joints to the hips, to the stifles and to the hocks." All of this creates a supple and engaged horse.

Mason recommends any time you're having difficulty establishing your horse's bend to ask for a lateral sideways step. "The horse will pretty much curve in order to maintain balance," she explains. "When you sit tall through your spine and shift your weight to the side, the horse will move under you to hold you up."

Playing with the bend by switching from true bend to counter bend is another wonderful suppling exercise. Riding on a circle, change your body and your horse's bend so that you are curving to the outside. When in rising trot, be sure to change your diagonal so the horse is best able to reach under with whichever hind leg is on the inside of the curve.

### *Bending Success Checklist*

- Check your position all the time.
- Make sure you're level and balanced in your stirrups, your shoulders and your spine.
- You should feel the horse come over the back with a fluid stretch over the topline; when the horse's neck is down, the back is up.
- The horse should be balanced and rhythmic. Don't rush.
- When the horse is fluid and balanced, sitting correctly should feel easy.



Photo: Steve Simpson

*For sidesteps in-hand, first soften and turn the head towards you, keeping the ears level. Then ask the horse to move laterally away from you in the shoulders as the hind legs follow. The soft lateral curve of the spine is retained and adjusted by the outside rein.*

## Put it all Together

In order to better influence the horse's poll on the circle, raise your inside rein and lower your outside rein. "The goal is to soften the jaw and the two vertebrae behind the ears," explains Mason. "When you turn the horse's head to inside, it stops the horse from blocking in the base of the neck and in the chest muscles."

So how do you know if you are bending your horse correctly? On the circle, you should see the inside eye, which is the result of the horse's skull rotating to the inside. You'll note that the ears stay level, but inner ear comes farther back toward you. The goal is for the curve of horse's spine to be the same as the curve of the circle. If the whole neck has come to the inside, the horse is only bending at the base of the neck. You should see a very slight curve in mane. If you don't see the eye, but the horse's neck is low and supple, you are almost there and need to apply more bending aids.

On the circle, the rider's inside shoulder should come back a bit at the same time they ask for softening with the inside rein. "When you bring your inside shoulder back, your shoulders are tracking with the horse's shoulders on the circle," says Mason. "There should actually be a slight twist to upper body when on a circle. This allows the inner hip to come forward. When the inner pelvis comes forward in time with inside hind leg, it allows the horse to take bigger, more fluid steps." Allowing the horse to rhythmically swing your seat forward can help loosen your hips.

Once you have established the horse's bend, bring your outside arm in a little closer to your body to close the outside rein; this maintains the curve. Throughout this your elbows should be by your sides.

Mason's two-step approach to bending has the rider first soften and then add seat and leg to send the horse forward. From the bending exercise you can let your horse flow forward. Once you have established bending on the curve, you can then ride that curve forward and go large. "Forward motion makes it work. Like humans limbering with a side bend, the horse can then take long strides in order to come forward afterward. The horse's pelvis must curl under to create better motion sideways. Sideways steps develop the abdominal muscles, so the horse can bring the hind legs under himself," notes Mason. "This allows the pelvic flexibility necessary for the horse to be truly a back mover instead of a leg mover."

## Teamwork

Mason encourages riders to not only think about how their bodies and their horse's bodies work, but to have the courage to play around with different techniques. "Work together to make it happen. Experimenting with bending your horse is just like us doing some limbering exercises before we go for a run," says Mason. "I like to encourage people to experiment with different ways of doing things in riding. There is a lot of worry that we are going to ruin our horses, but horses are very tolerant. Doing any kind of flexibility work with your horse is a bonus. Bending and lateral steps simply make the horse more limber and agile."

Learning more about the biomechanics of your body and your horse's body takes much of the mystery out of dressage. "Behavior problems are often physiological," notes Mason. "Biomechanics explains frustrating behavior and circumstances. Horses have better lives when they are supple; they are happier and misbehave less."

### *Dressage by Design*

Dressage rider and instructor, Holly Mason, takes the mystery out of how the anatomy of horses and riders works together. Armed with clear descriptions and visualizations, riders learn to think and work together with their horses. Look for Mason's DVD, **Focus on Flexibility**, and her book, **It's Never Too Late**, to bring her concepts straight to your home.

Visit Mason online at [www.dressagebydesign.com](http://www.dressagebydesign.com)