

Developing Shoulder In

I've been schooling shoulder-fore on my 6-year-old dressage horse, and I want to introduce shoulder-in. Can you give me some tips on how to ride this exercise correctly?

By Sharon Biggs

Q. I've been schooling shoulder-fore on my 6-year-old dressage horse, and I want to introduce shoulder-in. Can you give me some tips on how to ride this exercise correctly?

A. The shoulder-in is one of the most challenging of the lateral movements. It is the first time the horse is asked to do three difficult things at once: shorten his stance, bend his hocks and position his shoulders to one side. It's an important skill for dressage horses because it is preparation for all other lateral work, such as half pass. But benefits of shoulder-in stretch to other disciplines, too, because it teaches balance, supples the body and assists in straightening.

The shoulder-fore is the precursor to the shoulder-in. It's easier to perform a shoulder-fore because the angle and bend is smaller. Since the shoulder-in is so challenging, it's best to introduce shoulder-fore to the horse, as you have done, before you tackle the steeper angle.

The aids for the shoulder-fore and shoulder-in are the same: Your inside leg is at the girth for lateral bend. Your outside leg is slightly behind the girth (but not exaggerated) to prevent the hindquarters from falling out. Without twisting your horse's neck, flex his head to the inside and firm your outside rein so that it supports the bend and keeps your horse on track. Sit a little bit to the inside with weight on the inside sitting bone. The angle is created when you turn your upper body. If your weight is correct, your horse will soon learn that this means he is to swing his shoulders in. As you increase the turn of your body, the horse will increase the angle of his shoulders. This can be very difficult to achieve on your own so it is helpful to have someone on the ground to point out the steepness of your angle.

If you're having trouble developing the shoulder-in, try using the corner of the arena as preparation. It will help establish the proper bend. You can also ride a small circle to establish the bend and then ride the movement out of it.

Above all, don't ask the horse for too many steps in shoulder-in. He needs to develop the strength to carry this movement, so start in shoulder-fore for a few steps, bring him back to the path to refresh the trot and then ask for a few steps of shoulder-in. And always remember to complete the shoulder-in: Finish it by bringing the horse's shoulders back in with the outside rein, pressing your inside leg at the girth and straightening your body.

Expert: Sharon Biggs is a frequent contributor to Horse Illustrated and a dressage instructor. She is the author of *In One Arena* (Half Halt Press) and the soon-to-be-released *Advanced English Riding* (BowTie Press).