

## Barrel Essentials

**If you want to run barrels, use champion barrel racer Julie Voigt's proven strategies to get your horse started.**

*By Micaela Myers*

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Whether your young horse has come of age, or your more mature mount is ready for a change of careers, you won't get far by simply pointing him at a cloverleaf pattern and hoping for the best. Champion barrel racer Julie Voigt outlines the foundation and skills your horse needs to succeed as a barrel horse.

### Is My Horse a Barrel Candidate?

Julie says an ideal barrel horse is often in the 15-15.2 hand range, but this isn't a hard and fast rule. "Barrel horses come in all shapes and sizes," she says. "It's more in the training than in the actual height." However, a barrel horse must be properly proportioned. "I like a well-balanced horse," Julie says. "The horse can be tall as long as the rest of him fits his height, and he's able to move fluidly."

A barrel prospect should also enjoy running. Julie recommends watching your horse at liberty to see if running comes easily and naturally to him. If it doesn't, he may quickly burn out in a job where running is key.

Of course, it goes without saying that a barrel horse must be sound. Barrel racing is a demanding sport that requires the horse to use virtually every muscle in his body.

### The Basics

Before you ever go near a barrel, your horse should know how to yield to hand and leg pressure so that he's maneuverable and responsive. "I start a lot of it on the ground," Julie explains. She teaches her horses to respect pressure on the lead line and practices side-passing and backing on the ground.

According to Julie, the horse must move easily away from leg pressure, so the side-pass is an important maneuver to master. When you practice side-passing from the ground, simply apply hand pressure where your leg would go—left side pressure to move your horse right, right side pressure to move him left. Meanwhile, your other hand will guide his head. His legs will cross over as he steps sideways once he's mastered the task. Then, practice the same maneuvers under saddle.

Your horse also needs to drop his head when you pick up the reins. Although we're not talking about a western pleasure frame here, a resistant horse with his head stuck in the air will not be able to perform as well as a relaxed horse with a more natural, lower headset. If you have a horse that lifts his head in response to rein contact, Julie advises keeping light pressure on the reins until you feel the slightest bit of give. Even though the give may be minimal at first, release all pressure. It could take a while, but eventually your horse will learn that pressure on the bit will be released only when he gives to it and lowers his head. The same idea applies to leg pressure, such as that used when side-passing—the pressure will be released when your horse moves away from it.

### Round and Round

"Barrel racing is about circles," Julie says. So practicing perfect circles at all gaits before bringing on the barrels is a must. "I really concentrate and am extremely strict about being able to walk, trot and lope a perfect circle—and by a perfect circle I mean the head, shoulders and hip all following the arc."

Julie uses a funnel drill to perfect her circles. She reminds riders to maintain a consistent speed throughout—starting at the walk or trot and moving up to the lope once these slower gaits are mastered. Start with a large circle, around 50 feet. Ride a perfect circle, and then gradually decrease the size, performing a perfect circle at each increment. If your horse is unable to maintain a perfect circle, go back to a larger circumference until he regains his form. When you have reduced the size of the circle to 10 to 12 feet you can begin to increase your circles back out.

During circle work remember to sit squarely in the saddle. "I compare it to carrying a backpack on your back," Julie says. "You don't want that backpack hanging off to one side or shifting back and forth, nor does your horse want you shifting your weight or stepping to one side."

Your hands can also help your horse maintain proper balance. Place one hand on either side of his neck, just in front of the horn. Your shoulders should be relaxed, with your elbows near your body. As you turn, your outside elbow will naturally extend slightly to accommodate the horse's bend. "A lot of barrel racing training is done two-handed for balance," Julie explains. "One thing I try to avoid is crossing my hands over the neck." Use your body and legs to position your horse instead of exaggerated hand movement. "If your horse is veering to the inside of the circle, instead of crossing your inside hand over his neck trying to bring him out, you should actually move his shoulder out with your inside leg."

Position your legs to help your horse perform perfect circles, and apply leg pressure only when needed. "Your inside leg will be slightly in front of the cinch or right at the cinch," Julie explains. Your outside leg should be just behind the cinch. "For the most part, my legs are completely loose from the knee down unless I need the horse to move in or out," Julie says. "If your legs are making constant contact with the horse, it makes him dull, and then you don't have the opportunity to move him at a split second's notice when you need to." Revisit the funnel drill at all three gaits until each circle is indeed perfect. Only then will you be ready to go on to the next step.

### Teaching Your Horse to Rate Meet Julie Voigt

Julie Voigt was crowned National Professional Rodeo Association champion for seven years straight—from 1997 to 2003. Not only does Julie train all her own barrel horses, she also sells barrel prospects and works cattle on her 5,000-plus-acre ranch in Beulah, N.D., where she lives with her husband and two children.

Your horse must learn to "body rate," or slow down in response to your body, before you begin pattern work. Julie explains, "I'm riding along, and I quit riding, which basically means relaxing my body. You have to make sure to relax your entire body, just like you're stopping to get off of your horse. When your body quits riding, your horse should relate that to the movement of his feet."

"Be sure to sit deeply by relaxing or 'melting' your seat deeper into the saddle, not by forcing your seat into the saddle," Julie says. In the beginning your horse may not understand what this change means, so you'll also have to take up the reins and apply pressure until he slows down and eventually stops.

### One Barrel at a Time

Once your horse understands the body rate, it's time to bring one barrel out and place it in the middle of your arena. Julie's method introduces the barrel as a place of relaxation and reward. Begin by approaching the barrel from one end of the arena at the trot, and when you're about 17 feet back and out from it, practice body rating (this is approximately where you will want your horse to rate when you're actually running the pattern). "The horse will hopefully be able to rate at that point and listen to your body to shorten up his stride and slow up coming to the barrel," Julie says. Rate all the way down to a stop, and then let your horse relax for a while. Make sure he's facing parallel, not toward the barrel. "Let your horse drop his head, let him lick his lips," Julie says. "It's going to be a place of rest for him to start with." This accomplishes three things: It begins to teach the horse where to rate; it reinforces your body rate; and it teaches the horse that the barrel is a good place to be.

After your horse has shown he's relaxed, move him away from the barrel and on to another part of your arena. "Lope some circles on him until you feel him wanting to stop, then take him up to the barrel at the lope. Quit riding again [body rate] and let him come to a stop," Julie says. "The horse should start to associate that barrel with rate.

"I'm trying to teach the horse that coming up to that barrel is a good thing. It's not something to get all panicky about. I don't want him to think 'turn' [as he approaches the barrel]. I want him to relax and listen to me," Julie explains.

Once your horse is body rating and relaxing with the single barrel, you can move on to practicing a perfect circle around it. First, practice the funnel exercise at the end of your arena, then head toward your barrel. Don't let your horse forget his rate lesson during this drill. "Never speed up around the barrel," Julie warns.

Maintain a constant speed, or transition to a slower gait or speed at your rate spot, only transitioning back up when your circle is complete.

### Bring on the Barrels!

With the previous drills mastered, it's time to set up a pattern. To begin with, however, you'll set up four barrels, one in each corner of your ring (far enough away from the rail that you can turn them). "Turn each barrel the same direction," Julie says. "For example, all right hand turns." (See "Four Corner Drill" diagram below.) You'll make a complete circle (or more than one if you need to smooth out a turn) around each barrel. Begin at the trot, only moving up to the lope when your horse has mastered the exercise at the slower gait.

Again, you'll use the barrels to reinforce your rate and your perfect circles. "Each time I come to a barrel, I'm wanting the horse to listen to me for the rate. If I feel that he is slowing up, his stride is shortening, and he's wanting to stop, then I continue on in the perfect circle. If the horse has lost that, and he just rolls right on through the rate place, then I'll sit down deeper, take a hold of the reins, and ask him to stop there, maybe even back a step or two."

Practice this drill at the trot and lope in both directions, but don't overdo it. Ten minutes on any one drill should be enough, then take a break and return to it later or another day. When your horse is turning and rating consistently in this four-corner square, set up your regular cloverleaf pattern, only this time put a fourth barrel where you would begin the pattern, creating a diamond. "This way you have a continuous pattern," Julie says. "When you finish your actual three barrel pattern, you'll have that final barrel so that you don't have a starting point."

A starting point often creates a hot spot of excitement and anticipation for the horse, which can cause problems. Riding the diamond shape instead of the cloverleaf also helps the horse not become pattern driven. "I'm not interested in the horse knowing this barrel's first, that barrel's second and that barrel's third," Julie says. "I don't want him to think of any pattern. I want him to be listening to me." You can stop and start the diamond at any of the four barrels.

#### Are You Ready?

When your horse can run through the pattern at about three-quarters of his competition-run speed, and he body rates before each barrel without you having to pick up the reins, he is probably ready for competition. Julie explains the horse should also be maintaining perfect circles around the barrels and changing leads between the first and second barrel.

You should revisit your foundation work often, and incorporate training drills into each practice session, even on a well-seasoned horse. As Julie says, "It's one thing to get 'um running, and another thing to keep 'um running." Going back to basics will ensure you're always ready to run, rate and turn like a pro.

Micaela Myers is a freelance writer based in California and lists barrel racing as her favorite sport.

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