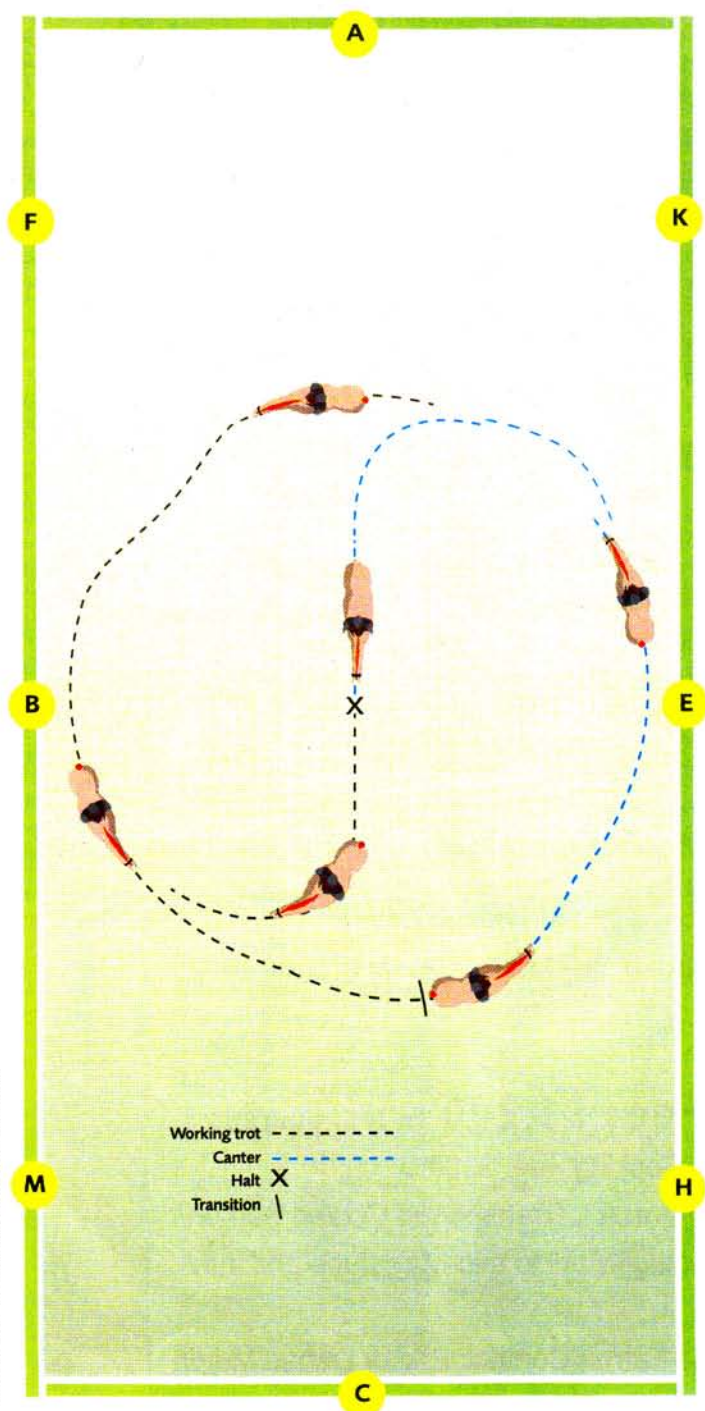


The Battle of the Bulge: **keeping your circles on track.**



A bulge, in the horse world, develops just as predictably as that mid-life spare tire around our waists.

A bulge of the equine kind can endanger us or simply embarrass us and will always lower us on the judge's scorecard. As a trainer and coach, I can say from experience that horses tend to cut in on one half of a circle and "bulge" out at the other half. At times they gravitate toward the centre of the ring and the in-gate at others. As one whose specialty is equine behaviour, and the motivation driving their actions, I can tell you that your equine partner is a herd animal, hard wired to believe there's safety in numbers. If your horse has bulging problems he most likely gets magnetized toward the fence, barn, or toward another horse.

At its worst, this behaviour results in him running back to the barn, squeezing your leg into the fence or receiving a kick from another horse in the warm up ring who does not wish to play bumper cars! More often, it's just drifting off track on a hunter course or western horsemanship pattern.

A familiar scene from the judge's booth is the red faced rider kicking furiously with her outside leg while pulling on the inside rein to no avail. The circle or approach to the jump ends up becoming a compromise somewhere between horse and human – not really what either one had in mind – and the canter rhythm fizzling away, down to a trot or walk.

Across all disciplines, judges expect to see circles of uniform size with a horse's body arched to follow the circumference. In dressage and reining marks are specifically deducted for circles of inaccurate size and horses which are over bent or counter flexed. Over fences, bulging off line disrupts the rhythm and flow of the course, often resulting in an awkward take off distance or refusal at the fence following a drift to the in gate.

you an alternative to simply pulling on the inside rein. Set up a square with four pylons. Practice riding ninety degree corners around its perimeter, keeping your horse aligned from poll to tail. Instead of turning with your inside hand, press his ribs across with your outside leg, while keeping his neck straight with a steady outside hand. Although it's counterintuitive, resist turning his head with your inside rein. Picture your horse between the long shafts of a cart and unable to bend his body. Keep the forward motion going. Don't let him stop and do a stationary turn on the haunches. Get the feeling of turning your horse off your outside, not inside aids.

You now have the ability to realign your horse when he steps to the outside of the track you've set.

3. Anticipate the bulge.

Because herd animals are creatures of habit, don't be surprised again by his tendency to gravitate toward the familiar. Pick out where the likely magnets are, well before you derail. Knowing that your horse tends to drift towards the barn or overshoot the corner on your approach to a jump, decide in advance to ride the curve straighter instead. I suggest to my students that they visualize such a curve as a series of straight lines (resembling a stop sign) Limit the bend in your horse's body by taking a feel with your outside hand and leg, even going so far as to ride him completely straight if he's a determined bulger. It's really just a mini version of your ninety degree turns.

By thinking ahead, you nip a potential problem in the bud. When someone recounts the typical story of their trail horse leaving the path, heading for the woods and running under the low tree branch, I'm sorry that they didn't react on the first step the horse took off the trail. Once he's heading full steam downhill for the forest, no amount of pulling on that inside rein is going to help!

Straightening the curve can be so subtle that all it takes is a feel with your outside hand and leg to straighten his spine the moment you think the notion of leaving your track enters his mind.

You may need the reinforcement of a spur or dressage whip to back up your initial leg cue. Providing you've done your homework, moving off your light aids should be thoroughly ingrained by now. But if a horse is determined to go in a certain direction he'll run right through your leg. If you don't have a back-up system instantly available to motivate him to get on track you'll miss out on a training opportunity.

It's a common thing to see a rider reverting back to kicking and pulling because she doesn't have her tools with her. Once that horse has seen that window of opportunity he's likely to opt for the behaviour again. We can un-train our horses by failing to correct a behaviour.


If you are a novice rider and not confident with your technique or with using artificial aids, ride in an environment which limits the option and motivation to bulge – an enclosed ring with buddies around. As a judge it's a common to see competitors open up a can of worms in the show ring when they don't have their lateral skills in place. When a horse feels vulnerable in the unfamiliar atmosphere, alone in the ring, with his buddies and the horse trailer in sight, the incentive to drift toward these magnets is difficult to overcome. Defeated riders exit the ring with their horses having run out of jumps, stepped off trail bridges and made circles looking like giant eggs. Perfect your skills at home before you take the show on the road and have your tools available in case a problem arises.

Using these techniques you should be able win the battle of the bulge! 🐾

Lindsay Grice, Coach, trainer, equine behaviour lecturer and judge, has prepared horses and riders for wins at major horse shows in the US and Canada for over 20 years. Starting her career on the hunter circuit, she continues to compete actively in both english and western events, specializing in the AQHA circuit.

Lindsay teaches Equine Behaviour for several University of Guelph courses, drawing on the principles of equine psychology and sports psychology to bridge the communication gap between horses and riders. In her popular clinics she explains both the "hows" and "whys" of training and showing. Lindsay is an Equine Canada judge and AQHA specialized judge, as well as a certified Equine Canada and NCCP (multi event) coach. Lindsay thrives on putting the complex principles of riding into a language that riders can understand. For more training and showing tips, visit www.lgrice.com





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Comparing your horse to a train, I'll give you some practical tips to improve your lateral control and be able to keep your horse on the track of your choice without derailing!

1. Define your train track.

The old adage "If you fail to plan, you can plan to fail," applies here. You, as the leader of your herd of two, are the decision maker and must decide precisely the path you want your horse to follow. This involves looking ahead and planning your route. Most bulging situations come from indecision. The rider has a general idea of the track he'd like to travel, but leave the specifics more or less up to his horse. As a young rider, I was instructed to look ahead. As someone who thrives on simplicity, I found myself asking "Where exactly is ahead? In the air? Between the horse's ears?" As a professional trainer, I realized, I was always plotting destination points in the path ahead of me and unwavering in my decision to ride through those points. How far ahead that point will be depends on the pace. On a hunter course it may be far ahead to the next fence, while a western pleasure rider might focus on a point just ahead on the track.

I suggest that my students start by locating an imaginary dot in the dirt approximately 30 ft ahead and direct the horse's feet to step right on that dot. Train yourself to be decisive. How deep into the corner do you want to ride? How many feet away from the horse you are passing would you like to be? Would you like your horse to jump exactly the center of the fence?

On a circle, pinpoint four dots around the perimeter, like the numbers 12, 3, 6, 9 on a clock face. As you approach one dot, lift your eyes to the next, keeping your decisions well ahead of your horse's feet. As you get better, or as your circle gets larger, you can even pinpoint dots between those dots, increasing the accuracy – but keep it simple for now.

Vague plans from the rider produce vague responses from the horse. Imagine your path as a train track and keep your horse between the rails.

2. Direct each train car.

"Ok", you might say "I've zeroed in on my destination dot,

but my horse, unlike the amazing Kreskin, cannot read my mind!" So now you need the physical tools to keep him on the track and connect those dots.

To simplify things, visualize your horse's head and neck as the first train car, his shoulders and ribs the second, followed by his hips as the caboose. Having the ability to control each section so that they individually follow the line of the track is the essence of straightness. Straightness is a necessary ingredient for your horse to look and perform his best. When one car slips outside the rails, gaits look sloppy, jumps are knocked down and sliding stops fizzle out.

Realign your train

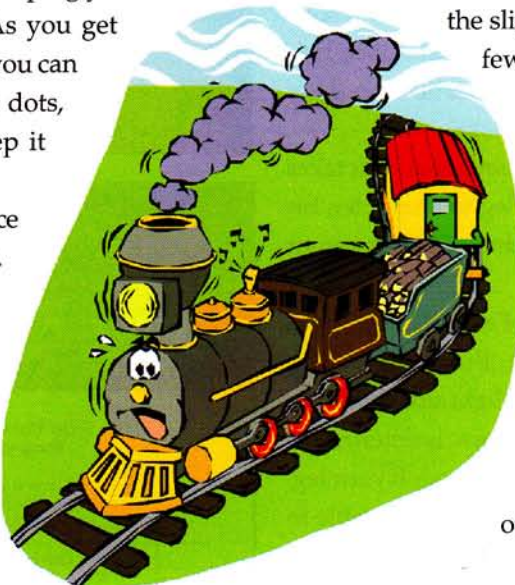
Usually when a horse is bulging to the outside, the rider intuitively pulls on the inside rein to try to get him back on track. The rein, however controls only the front train car and the rest of the cars continue to leak out, off the rails. With every bulge comes a loss of pace and you can bet that if your horse is going to break from a canter to a trot, for instance, it will be when he's being drawn toward the gate.

Control of your horse's shoulders, ribs and hips are what you need to realign your train. This can be achieved with lateral exercises such as turns on the forehand and haunches, and leg yields. Make sure your leg and rein cues are clear, distinct and accurately located so that your horse understands which section of his body you want him to move.

I start my horses and students with the most basic of lateral movements, a sidepass. I often have the rider face the horse into the wall and by applying leg pressure at the girth area, encourage a sideways step. Escalate your leg pressure if your horse just ignores it, and reward the slightest effort to step laterally. With a few repetitions, he'll get the hang of it.

After a few training sessions, once you're sure he knows the drill, add forward motion to your sidepass and call it a leg yield. This is precisely what you'll do when your horses drifts to the centre of a circle or cuts a corner. Teach the turn on the haunches and turn on the forehand in the same systematic manner.

Now, to address that bulge to the outside of your track, I'm going to give



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