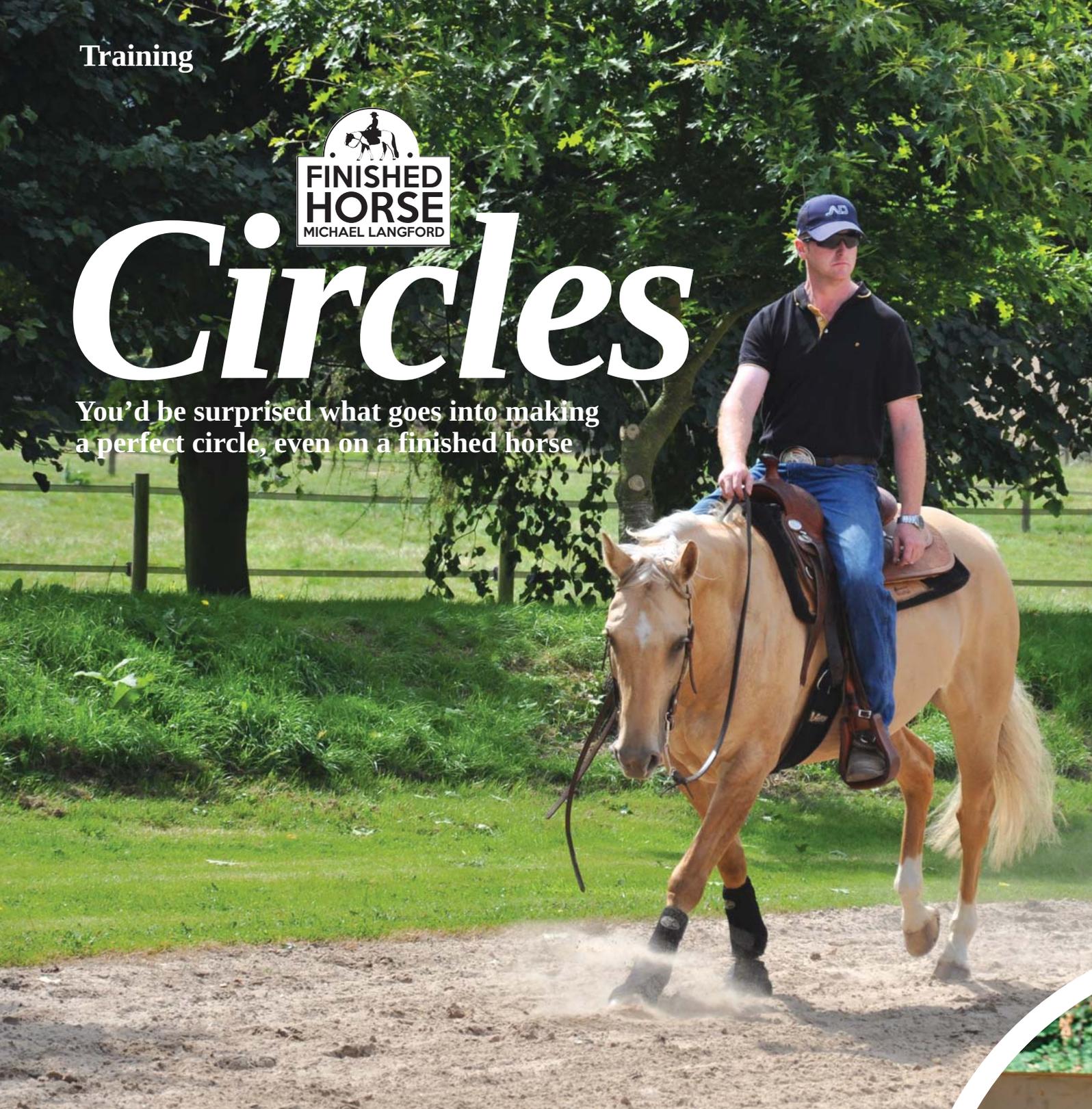




Circles

You'd be surprised what goes into making a perfect circle, even on a finished horse



A given in most pattern classes, circles are a fundamental yet challenging manoeuvre. A finished horse should know how to circle maintaining their frame and balance but they can easily cheat or become lazy. I hope this article will give you some tools to correct your horse and help you become more aware of what makes a perfect circle.

When circling a finished horse I visualise the line of my circle on the ground and sit on top of that line. It's my horse's job to stay underneath me when I ride. I'll sit in the middle of the saddle and leave my hand still in the middle of my horse's neck. I use my legs and move my weight a little to alter my

line if I need to.

To tighten the circle I soften my inside leg and may even take it away from the horse's side. I move a little weight into my inside seat bone and put a little more pressure on the horse's side with my outside leg. To move my horse to a larger circle I reverse the above. I close my inside leg against the horse's side, move a little weight into my outside seat bone and soften with my outside leg. It's important when we talk about guiding our horses from our seat to remember that it should only be a small shift of weight from our core and not our shoulders. It's quite common to see people leaning to the inside.

When working on circles I like to have a

small amount of inside bend through my horse's neck but it is fine for them to be straight. The most important thing is that they are soft through the face, neck and body. If I pick up on the inside rein I want them to bend to the inside without any resistance.

The aids to guide your horse should be subtle. Whichever discipline you are riding in you want your patterns to flow and fast, harsh cues from the rider will lead to untidy circles and ugly patterns.

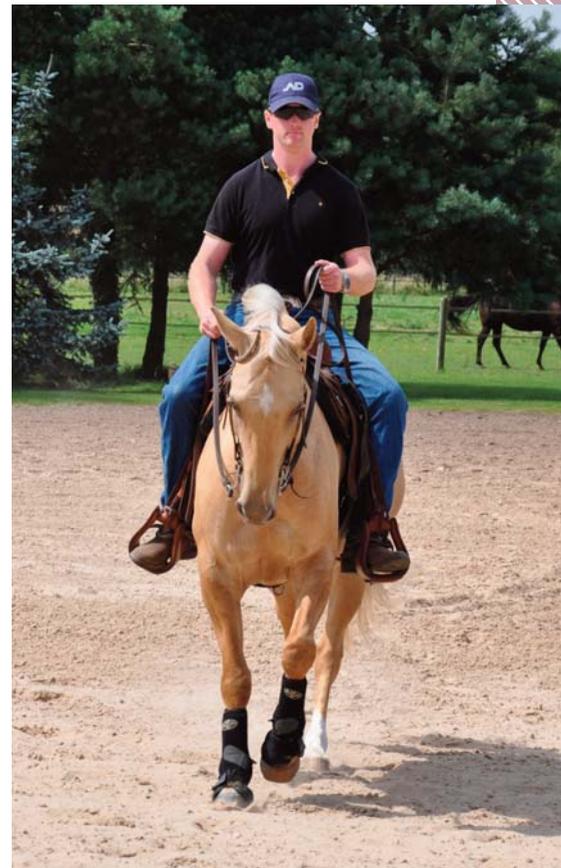
Making sure you are looking far enough ahead will make a big difference to your accuracy

Problems and Fixes

One of the most common faults I see in riders is doing too much with the hands. As an exercise try leaving your hand two inches above your horse's neck and not moving it from left to right at all. Now see if your horse can still work the circle.

If I were on a horse that were to 'fall out' (lean to the outside) on a circle I would start by using my outside leg and perhaps the spur to teach him to stay underneath me. If he continued to push against my aids I would make a 90 degree turn and ride a straight line across the middle of the circle, picking up the line at the other side. I would do this every time we deviated off my line.

If I had a problem with a horse falling in on the circle (collapsing to the inside) I would use my inside leg to correct it. I may also need to pick the horse up into the bridle to help it balance. The main reason for horses falling in is that they are dropping their inside shoulder. To correct this, make sure that you are sitting in the middle of the saddle. It's easy to try and help your horse balance by moving your weight outwards and while this may help them balance it won't fix them. On a finished horse I should only need a little more inside leg to remind them to carry themselves but if they have become really lazy then I may need to bridle them up. To do this I should only need to lift my rein hand but if they are pushy I'll need to slide my free hand down the reins to trap their face so I can drive them into the bridle. Once they are correct I'll release them as a reward. If they fall out of position I repeat



If a horse is really leaning through their inside you can help lift their inside shoulder by picking up on the inside rein

the process until they stay correct.

In some cases you may need to go back to working with two hands if a horse is really leaning through their inside. You can help lift their inside shoulder by picking up on the inside rein and lifting your inside hand to lift their shoulder.

Reining Circles

When running circles in a reining pattern it's important to remember that all the parts of your circles are taken into account when it comes to the manoeuvre evaluation. The lope departure needs to be soft with a gradual build of speed through the first quarter segment of your first circle. You then need to maintain that speed through your fast circles until you shut down to your small slow. The stop or lead change is the end of your circle manoeuvre and as important to your final score as any other part.

The cues I use when asking my horse to build speed are to bring my hand forward and come out of the saddle a little with my seat, driving with my legs. When I want to slow my horse I bring my hand back towards the front of the saddle a couple of strides before I sit back down and use a hum as a verbal cue to slow down. When schooling, if my horse makes little or no effort to slow when asked I quietly pull them to a stop, stand for a couple of seconds and then lope off slowly. I lope one small circle followed by one fast circle, then I ask them to slow again. Once they slow well for me when asked I reward them by letting them rest.

Accuracy is very important in any discipline and hitting your markers is essential if you are going to score well. Making sure you are looking far enough ahead will make a big difference and help a lot with this. I typically look a quarter of a circle ahead of where I am.

