

A woman with blonde hair in a ponytail, wearing a black long-sleeved top and black riding pants with a gold star on the side, is leading a dark brown horse in a gravel arena. She is holding the reins and a lead rope. The horse is walking towards the left. In the background, there is a wooden fence and a grassy field with trees. A blue and white striped pole is visible in the foreground.

# Basic Exercise #1 The Square

Manual

## **Foreword**

This document is the result of many years of research and personal experience world-wide. I sincerely hope that it will be useful for your learning experience and contribute to your personal development. This manual is complemented with a practical demonstration video to optimize the learning process. I wish you a lot of fun and lightbulb moments diving into these materials.

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## INTRODUCTION

The first basic exercise of the Square and/or Rectangle is aimed to establish **vertical balance** in the horse.

The term vertical balance refers to the position of the horse relative to the ground. A horse is vertically balanced when it distributes the weight equally over both front limbs. The trunk is then exactly in the middle between the shoulder blades. On the straight line viewed from the front, the horse travels on a vertical 90-degree angle to the ground. On a circle, the horse naturally needs lateral bending to allow the front limbs to make the right angle. The whole body should then travel on the same appropriate angle fitting to the demand at hand.



Achieving vertical balance is an absolute necessity to prepare the horse's body and mind to coordinate its posture and movement in such a way that it can carry itself and a rider with minimal effort and optimal efficiency.

Vertical balance as the first basic is essential for:

- Alignment
- Straightness
- Horizontal Balance



By nature, all horses are vertically imbalanced to some extent. Within their natural environment, this asymmetry is no problem and even offers certain advantages:

- Left- or right footedness allows the horse to quickly turn to one side and flee if needed.
- For the harmony – and thereby safety – of the herd it makes sense that herd members develop the same footedness.

Vertical imbalance thus only becomes a problem when a horse is placed in a domesticated environment where the horse is asked to be trained and ridden.



When a horse is vertically imbalanced, it will lower and rotate the thoracic spine on one side, at the point of withers. Therefore, the spine cannot align properly, predisposing the horse to injuries. Furthermore, it leads to strain an asymmetrical development or use of the thoracic sling muscles.

Finally, a horse that is vertically imbalanced is unable to step under with the hind limb due to the blocking front limb. It is also therefore, that a horse that is vertically unbalanced can never achieve horizontal balance.

It is for all those reasons mentioned above that establishing vertical balance is one of the first essential key stones for any horse.



## HISTORY

The term vertical balance is not mentioned directly within classical literature. However, enough has been written about the importance of straightness.

From a historical perspective, straightness was mostly linked to lateral suppleness:

*“Through improving the lateral suppleness of the horse, we will be able to make him straight ” - Miguel de Lancastre e Tavora*

Although lateral suppleness is indeed required to achieve straightness, science has enabled us to learn that correct lateral bending requires adequate preparation since it is an alien concept to the horse that by nature mostly moves on straight trajectories.

Since the square / rectangle consists of more straight angles compared to most figures requiring lateral bending, it has two main advantages that makes it suitable as a preparatory exercise for lateral bending later:

- It speaks to the horse's nature (by going mostly straight)
- It reduces chances of fatigue (since the circle is the hardest exercise)

Thus, through the exercise of the square / rectangle – we can properly prepare the horse's body and mind towards straightness by working on alignment and establishing basic vertical balance. This lays the foundation for proper lateral bending later that will then in turn enhance and refine the vertical balance within the horse.



However, since each horse is an individual, we must realize that there is no vast formula to the order of exercises. For many horses, the square serves as a preparation exercise towards exercises and angles requiring lateral bending. But for some horses, lateral bending might have to come first to calm and/or supple the horse.

In the end, the horse should be able to maintain good vertical balance on both angles: straight and bended. It is the interaction between the two that promotes more dynamic movement and prevents fatigue and overload. It is thus crucial to keep observing your horse to determine its needs and select the right type of exercises to work towards vertical and horizontal balance.

### **PREPARATION**

Since obtaining vertical balance is one of the first key basics towards optimal movement, this exercise does not require any mandatory preparation apart from basic horsemanship and a good relationship with your horse.

To set the horse up for success, there are two mobilizations that could be considered:

- The sternum rock
- The diaphragm pump

These mobilizations are great to perform before you get started, or even in between your training session.



## ESSENCE

The exercise of the Square / Rectangle is based on moving the shoulders and to coordinate the use of the thoracic sling muscles in such a way that it rebalances the weight on both front limbs, thereby achieving vertical balance:

- The square / rectangle can be considered as a “whole body” exercise.
- The exercise can be performed both on the ground and ridden in walk and trot. In canter it is advised to use other exercises such as shoulder-in to improve vertical balance.



## PRACTICAL EXECUTION

For all positions, the basic aids include:

- Inner intention
- Body posture
- Secondary rein
- Secondary whip

### GROUNDWORK – ONE REIN (CAVESSON)

1. Outline the figure of traveling with either cones or poles. This will help you to provide a reference frame and not deviate from your line of traveling.

Make sure to outline the figure off the wall for the purpose of self-carriage.



2. Preferably start walking backwards to observe your horse's tendencies
3. Based on your observations, help the horse towards vertical balance by moving the shoulders back in front of the hind limbs:
  - When the horse is falling in on the inside shoulder and front limb, rebalance the weight by a subtle turning action using your inner intention and body posture. If needed, supplement these primary aids by secondary aids such as the whip on the horses inside shoulder. As soon as you feel a weight shift and the spine is more aligned, pretend to have changed your mind by releasing the aid and continue forward on your original line of traveling.

- On the opposite, when a horse falls to the outside, ask the horse to rebalance the weight by means of a directional aid in a counter bend type of fashion. Use your inner intention and body posture as primary aid, potentially followed by a secondary whip aid over the outside shoulder or under and across. Again, as soon as you feel a weight shift and the spine is aligned, release the aid, thank the horse, and return on the original line of travel.



4. Only act on what is happening, not on what you expect to happen.

5. Take plenty of breaks and make sure to not tire your horse too much. The process of finding vertical balance is both mentally and physically draining as you are asking your horse to change its posture and establish new neuromuscular pathways. In the beginning, your horse might only be able to maintain vertical balance for short periods of time and thus make sure to be content with little and reward the horse abundantly.

Enjoy the process and be patient.

### **WORK IN HAND & LONG-REIGNING – TWO REINS**

1. The process is the same as described under the groundwork section, apart that you now have a direct outside rein to control the outside shoulder when needed:
  - When the horse falls on the inside loading the inside front limb, use a directional turning rein aid the moment that the inside front limb is in the air. As soon as you feel the weight shift and the spine is aligned, give forward on the reins.

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- On the opposite that the horse loads the outside shoulders, you can induce a slight counter-bend using your body posture and reins. Make sure to have equal contact on both reins and don't just pull on the outside rein. Bring both reins a bit to the inside and mainly focus on the rebalancing of weight on the shoulders and not about steering the head and the neck.

2. Again, enjoy the process and make sure not to tire your horse out.



**RIDING – TWO REINS & SEAT (CAVESSON OR BRIDLE)**

When ridden the aids of the seat are added to those of intention, body posture and reins.

1. Remain in a neutral soft seat to stay vertical over your seat bones and guide your pelvis in the direction of travel you want the horse to go. Reduce your range of motion to match that of the horse.
2. Use the reins the same way according to the descriptions in work in hand. To give the proper action on the reins, turn your shoulders where you want the horse's to be without twisting in your waist:
  - If you want to turn a bit to the outside, you can take some contact with your inside thigh to guide the ribcage while opening with the outside thigh
  - If you want to support a counter bend type of action you can take some contact with the outside thigh while opening on the inside thigh.

Mainly just consider your thighs as boundaries to help the horse to stay within them to stay “on the line”

2. Again, enjoy the process and make sure not to tire your horse out.



## VARIATIONS

Once you and your horse are getting familiar with the square and/or rectangle, you can consider the following variations to enhance a dynamic approach to your training:

- The diamond
- The hexagon
- The circle

The diamond and hexagon include more diagonal lines which will enhance more self-carriage as well as coordination.

The circle can be a great variation to further refine your vertical balance. To get started, you can start with the cone exercise presented in the accompanying video. However, be aware that to perform a circle correctly, the horse will need lateral bending. For more information, please refer to the manual and video concerning this topic.

## CHALLENGES & TROUBLESHOOTING

1. The horse is not rebalancing the weight.

This often happens due to incorrect application of the aids:

- Check the position of your horse's head and neck. A common mistake is that you (unintentionally) move the head and neck instead of the shoulders. This will only increase the vertical imbalance rather than solving it. To fight this challenge, apply fewer secondary aids and make more use of your body:  
go where you want the horse to go.

- Make sure to release and reward timely. If you don't release or reward at the right time – i.e., when there is a reaction to your action – the horse might not understand the intention of your aids.

### 2. The horse is too fast / pushing

If your horse is too fast to keep up for you there are three solutions, you can try:

- Give an upwards half halt
- Adopt a different position
- Adopt a larger angle

When the head and neck are too low and the horse goes too fast, the first action you can try is an upwards half halt aimed to engage the thoracic sling bilaterally. However, keep in mind that if a horse is too unbalanced, they simply need to speed up to prevent themselves from falling and thus, cannot slow down yet.

The slowing down will then come because of this exercise. In this case you might want to choose to adopt a different position where you can walk forward yourself instead to make it easier to keep up with the horse.

Furthermore, you might also try to move on a larger angle. For example, moving from the square to the rectangle.

### 3. The horse is leaning or bracing in the hand

Always remember, what you feel in your hands is information about the horse's body and mind.

A horse can only lean or pull when there is something on the other hand leaning or pulling back. Thus, make sure you always have a giving and open hand instead of closed hand.

### 4. Stepping sideways

It can happen that instead of a "turning" action the horse will step sideways or wide instead. This might give the optical illusion of straightness but does not tackle vertical balance. When this happens there are 2 solutions:

- Increase the angle – i.e., from the square to rectangle
- Improve your own coordination (see point 1)



When this happens, the best solution is to improve your own coordination by using fewer secondary aids, and more with your own body posture.

### 5. Fatigue

Acquiring good vertical balance in self-carriage takes time. Therefore, don't overdo it. Ask a lot, be content with little and reward abundantly

## WHAT'S NEXT

When basic vertical balance has improved, you can continue with the following exercises that will optimize alignment, enhance suppleness, and establish horizontal balance:

- Lateral flexion of the jaw
- The B-loop
- The circle
- The Shoulder-In

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**GOOD LUCK!**