



## MEET THE EXPERT

**STEPHEN CLARKE** is a world-renowned dressage judge. He's judged at all the major dressage competitions including World Equestrian Games, Europeans and Olympics. He's competed internationally and holds regular training clinics around the world.

When your horse is supple to both left and right, his paces will improve too



# Supple up for better paces

Create more ground cover and freedom, as well as a horse that feels equal on both reins, with the help of leading dressage judge and trainer **Stephen Clarke**

**A**LL HORSES HAVE a stiffer side and will find the work you ask of them harder on one rein than on the other. We're probably all guilty of spending a little more time on the rein that feels more comfortable and your horse finds easier. What we should be doing, though, is working on making the stiffer rein more supple.

As dressage judge Stephen Clarke explains at a Centaur Biomechanics rider workshop, this is really important in order for your training to progress. If you're keen to move through the levels in dressage you have to work on improving your

horse's suppleness so he becomes more even on both reins.

Without this equal suppleness to the left and right your horse will find it difficult to perform even the simplest of movements. Make it your aim to work on this area, and with improved suppleness you'll find your horse's paces will improve too, with more freedom and ground cover.

"The basis of this work comes from your horse learning to be reactive off your inside leg and accepting the contact on your outside rein," explains Stephen.

"Once your horse understands this, you'll find you don't need to support him on the inside rein anymore."

**"Take advantage when things feel better. That's your chance to ask a little bit more — there's always more"**

## Tackling the stiff side

Stephen explains that, in his experience, the majority of horses are stiffer on the left rein. This will show up most when you ride turns and circles – particularly to the left.

“What you need to think about is that it’s the reaction from your left leg that sends your horse into your right rein and lightens the left shoulder,” explains Stephen.

“Many riders get into the trap when they’re riding on the stiffer rein to try to get a softer feel by hanging on to it and to give the outside (right) rein away.

“You need to close your fingers to make a soft fist around the right rein and think of your outside rein being a side-rein. It doesn’t pull back and it doesn’t give away – you just set it there for your horse to go forward into.”

Stephen assures us that with practice your horse will begin to understand what you’re asking for – and because you’re no longer relying on your inside rein, he’ll be able to move with more freedom too.

You have two choices when you’re trying to make the stiff rein softer. You can ride your horse into the rein he doesn’t want to go into, or you can wrestle him off the contact on the stiff side. Stephen warns that if you choose the wrestling option, all you’ll end up with is a horse that goes behind the contact.

Your job is to create a reaction from the leg on the stiff side that sends him into the rein on the hollow side, so you don’t have to wrestle. Over time, this will give you a more supple left side and a more genuine connection into your right rein.

### Side-stepping to suppleness and connection

This simple exercise in walk will help your horse learn to give to your inside leg, step up into that consistent outside rein and allow you to let go of the inside rein.

- 1 On a large circle, ride a very steep angle of shoulder-in.
- 2 As your horse steps sideways off your left leg...
- 3 ...prevent his neck bending with your right rein.
- 4 And really encourage him to go sideways on the circle.
- 5 Repeat the exercise equally on both reins.



Hanging onto the inside rein won't create a soft feel



Create a reaction from the inside leg to help improve suppleness in the rein



Releasing the inside hand is a reward for your horse

## Setting boundaries

The submission to the bend comes from a reaction to the left leg into the right rein. You can then release the left contact as a reward.

Take up the contact and say to yourself, ‘I’m not going to give away the outside (right) rein, and you’re not going to pull on the inside (left) rein.’

By combining riding shoulder-in and small circles, you’ll soon get the feeling of riding your horse from your inside leg to your outside rein – becoming less reliant on your inside rein to turn. Over time this will help your horse become more equal on both reins.

- 1 In trot on the left rein, go large around the arena.
- 2 Down the long side, ride just a hint of shoulder-in.
- 3 As you position your horse in shoulder-in and he reacts to your inside leg and softens through his body, release your left rein.
- 4 Interrupt the shoulder-in and ride a small circle.
- 5 As you ride the circle, your outside rein says to your horse that he’s not allowed to bend his neck.
- 6 Your left leg is saying he has to give through his ribcage and the reward for that is a lightening and releasing of your left rein contact.
- 7 Complete your circle and then ride a little more shoulder-in.
- 8 Repeat the exercise again.

Once you’ve ridden the sequence a few times, change the rein across the diagonal. Ride your horse forwards to freshen up the pace and check he’s dead straight, equal on both reins and on your aids. Ride the exercise on the other rein.

## A GOOD SHOULDER-IN

Shoulder-in is the foundation of all lateral work and, when ridden correctly, it creates more suppleness, develops engagement and collection from behind.

A correctly positioned shoulder-in is about 30 degrees from the track. There’s a uniform bend from poll to tail and it’s the rider’s responsibility to look after the energy, rhythm and ground cover of the trot. This means your horse has no alternative but to step further underneath his body with his inside hindleg, which is why this movement can help your horse become supple on both reins.



Shoulder-in improves all-round suppleness

### Finish with a stretch

It's always good to finish any training session by allowing your horse to stretch. Especially after all the suppling work Stephen has suggested here, your horse will have engaged muscles he may not have used for a while.

#### Achieving a good stretch

"When you ask for a stretch, first focus on the rhythm," explains Stephen. "The aim is to see if you can stretch your horse's neck forwards and down, so he almost touches the ground with his nose. To get that, you're going to – without hurrying – create a reaction from your leg to your hand."

Remember that your horse needs to be on a contact and working freely forwards before you ask him to stretch.

"A good stretch doesn't happen by magic or by just simply offering the reins away," stresses Stephen.

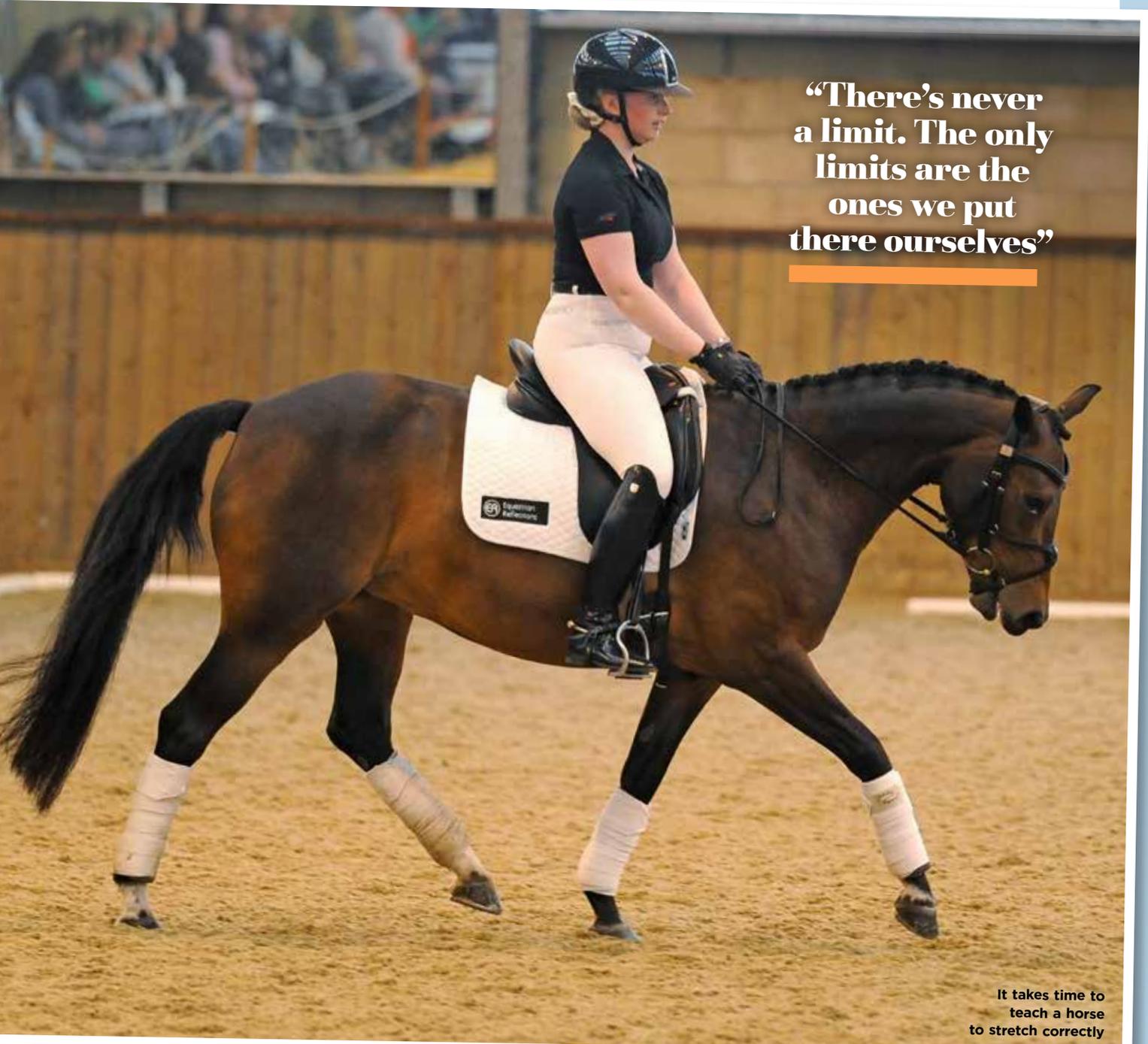
"You ride from behind into a contact and then use that contact to manipulate where his neck is. When your horse lets you do that, then you offer a longer rein for a longer stretch."

- 1 Ride on a large circle in trot.
- 2 Make sure your horse is in front of your leg and on a contact.

- 3 Gently flex his neck down a bit and gradually, inch by inch, allow your reins to become longer to encourage your horse to take his head and neck down.
- 4 As your horse stretches, you'll feel the quality of his trot steps will improve, showing more elasticity and swing. 🐾

■ Thank you to Russell Guire and the team at Centaur Biomechanics for their help with this feature. To find out more visit [centaurbiomechanics.co.uk](http://centaurbiomechanics.co.uk).

**"There's never a limit. The only limits are the ones we put there ourselves"**



It takes time to teach a horse to stretch correctly