

Get him going *forward!*

Achieving forwardness is key to your riding success, whatever your discipline. Here our team of experts explain how, why and when to master it with their five-step plan

Key



Horse working forward correctly



Horse not working through properly



Meet the experts



Sisters **Becky and Hannah Moody** run Gunthwaite Dressage near Sheffield and have ridden to Grand Prix level and enjoyed success at national level. Call 01226 762074 or email moodydressage@gmail.com



Nutritionist **Rachel Parrott** of Allen & Page is involved in product sampling and testing, as well as helping horse owners with their nutritional queries. Call the Feed Helpline on 01362 822902 or visit www.allenandpage.com



Performance analyst **Russell Guire** of Centaur Biomechanics has a wealth of experience in helping thousands of horses and riders improve their way of going. Visit www.centaurbiomechanics.co.uk

1 Banish the myths

Let's get one thing sorted right from the start - forwardness isn't about speed. Instead it's about getting your horse to react quickly off your leg, be alert, active and focused - and it's one of the key foundations in riding, whatever your discipline. "Forwardness is all about getting your horse moving smartly off your leg and ensuring he stays in front of the movement," says Hannah Moody. "Horses are far bigger and stronger than we are, so they need to be willing to go forwards and carry us without force."

"It's important that when a horse moves forward he stays in balance and doesn't drop onto his forehand. He also needs to create a moment of suspension, which should come from the thrust and release of energy stored in his hind legs."

Forwardness is associated with impulsion, so it involves ground-covering steps as well as a clear rhythm and tempo



REMEMBER...

The key words to remember when tackling forwardness are reaction and adjustability. Your horse should be quick to react to your aids - and continue to be quick to your aids - as well as able to go forwards off your leg in any pace and situation.

2 Understand why it's important

Fail to achieve forwardness and the signs are obvious. You'll find it difficult to get your horse to do as he's asked and feel as though you're spending most of your time having to nag, nag, nag with your legs.

"It's crucial that your horse respects your leg and learns to move away from it - if he isn't listening to your leg aids then it becomes nigh on impossible to ask him to do anything," says Hannah.

"However, forwardness shouldn't be confused with fizziness. It's not just about your horse moving in a forwards direction off your leg really fast, it's about him moving energetically off your leg in any direction. A rider will always find it easier to sit to a horse who's forward - if he's not in front of your aids everything you do with him will be compromised."

It's crucial your horse respects your leg aids



The inside story

Performance analyst Russell Guire explains why it's so important to get your horse going forward and working correctly...

Physical effects If your horse isn't working correctly his strides may become shorter and uneven. Not working forward will mean he isn't using all of his muscles correctly, and this may lead to him developing the wrong muscles. His topline will also be affected if he isn't working through properly - it's likely to be weaker and underdeveloped. If your horse has been working incorrectly for a while it can take some time to get him working correctly again and build up the correct muscles.

His natural ability

Horses out in the field work forward

naturally, so if your horse isn't going correctly when you're on board it's worth having a look at your position as the rider.

Common rider faults Many riders can often find themselves wary of a forward horse and may find themselves tensing up. Some riders may mistake forwardness for fizziness, so taking the time to work on your own position and tackle any confidence issues will be time well spent.

Improve core strength Having good core strength is essential. Consider taking part in activities such as pilates or yoga as these are very useful for getting yourself in good physical shape to achieve the best possible position.

Lungeing with side reins can be useful to help your horse achieve the desired way of going.

Forwardness shouldn't be confused with fizziness

3 Know your role

In order to encourage your horse to carry himself correctly you have to be consistent and fair, explaining in simple black and white terms what reactions you expect from him. He should respond to the lightest squeeze and relax of your legs, and if he doesn't, you need to form a plan of action.

"Your position needs to be as relaxed and supple as possible," says Hannah. "You should be able to move comfortably with the motion of your horse's gaits in order to allow him to move as freely as possible."

"If you become too tense in your seat, hands or legs you act like a straitjacket for your horse and he'll struggle to move freely."

"Forwardness can be hard to achieve, and if you're tense this makes it even more difficult. Non-stirrup or long stirrup work can really help to relax your position and teach you not to clamp with your legs."

A good instructor will be able to assess your position and your horse's way of going and help you develop a plan to achieve greater things. A lesson on the lunge is a particularly good idea to enable you to concentrate solely on your position.



A poor or tense leg position will hamper your horse



An effective leg position is vital in order to achieve forwardness

4 Feed for success

Achieving forwardness isn't just a matter of improving your horse's way of going from the saddle - what you feed your horse can have a huge influence, too. "Your horse's diet can play a big role in helping him

'fuel'. Fibre-based feeds are often enough to satisfy a

Feeling fit?

It's important your horse is fit enough to do the work asked of him, and regularly monitoring his weight and condition will help with this. Ultimately, a fitter, healthier horse will have higher levels of natural energy and find working forwards easier.

horse's energy needs, in particular for those beginning training or mature horses in light work. A high-fibre feed is an ideal choice, supplying a great source of slow release, stamina-type energy."

to work forward," says Rachel Parrott. "However, feeding to achieve the necessary power and control can prove challenging as every horse is an individual and has different nutritional needs. Your horse's age, health, type, temperament, condition and workload all need to be considered.

"The connection between food and behaviour is much debated in human terms, and similar links are now being made in horses. It's important to consider how the choice of diet, and the ingredients within it, can directly affect your horse's ability to work.

"While feeding doesn't necessarily change your horse's fundamental personality, incorrect feeding can affect his performance. Provide too much energy and any coolness and control may be lost, but provide too little and you may lose stamina and sparkle.

"Fibre (in the form of grass, hay or haylage) should form the foundation of all horses' diets, as it provides a great source of

If your horse needs more oomph...

When more oomph is needed it can be tempting to replace a fibre feed with a higher energy, cereal-based feed. However, these are often high in starch and, if fed in large amounts, can have an adverse effect on your horse's behaviour, resulting in fizziness or excitability, which may be difficult to control. A diet with a high fibre and oil content can provide the higher level of energy needed without the behavioural issues associated with traditional cereal-based feeds.

If he runs out of steam...

Fast release energy mainly comes from cereals and is easily burned off. In contrast, a diet containing high levels of fibre and oil will release energy slowly - ideal for those horses who have plenty of energy to begin with, but become 'flat' after the warm up or lack energy during a competition. Overall, sustainable, slow-release energy is ideal for achieving stamina, concentration and forwardness.

If he's laid back...

For those who are naturally laid back, feeding for forwardness can often be a challenge, especially if they're good doers. It can be useful to feed small quantities of a higher energy feed when short periods of intense work are required.

Asking your horse to stretch out and go faster along the long side of the school for a few strides will get him thinking forwards and he'll be more energised in his walk (see inset picture)



5 Exercises to achieve forwardness

SEND HIM FORWARDS

One effective exercise - and the one Hannah and Becky find works best - is to send your horse forward and ask him to gallop, either out on a hack or along the long side of a large school for a couple of strides. If you find he isn't responding to your aids then giving him the reins and asking him to really stretch out and have a good gallop should wake him up and encourage him to be more responsive. It's great, particularly if your horse is lazy, and will also help introduce some fun to the ride. It's a case of taking him beyond what you want from him - in order to bring him back to where you want him to be.

During our photo-shoot Becky finds her horse Salsa is becoming a little behind the leg and lazy so she sends him forward down the long side. As soon as Salsa comes back to walk he's much more alert and energised and produces an energetic walk. As she explains, sending your horse forward a couple of times down the long sides of the arena should be enough to wake him up.

REMEMBER

There's no moment of suspension in walk, so many horses can become lazy - but a quick burst of a faster pace will encourage him to work forwards when he comes back to walk.

TRANSITIONS

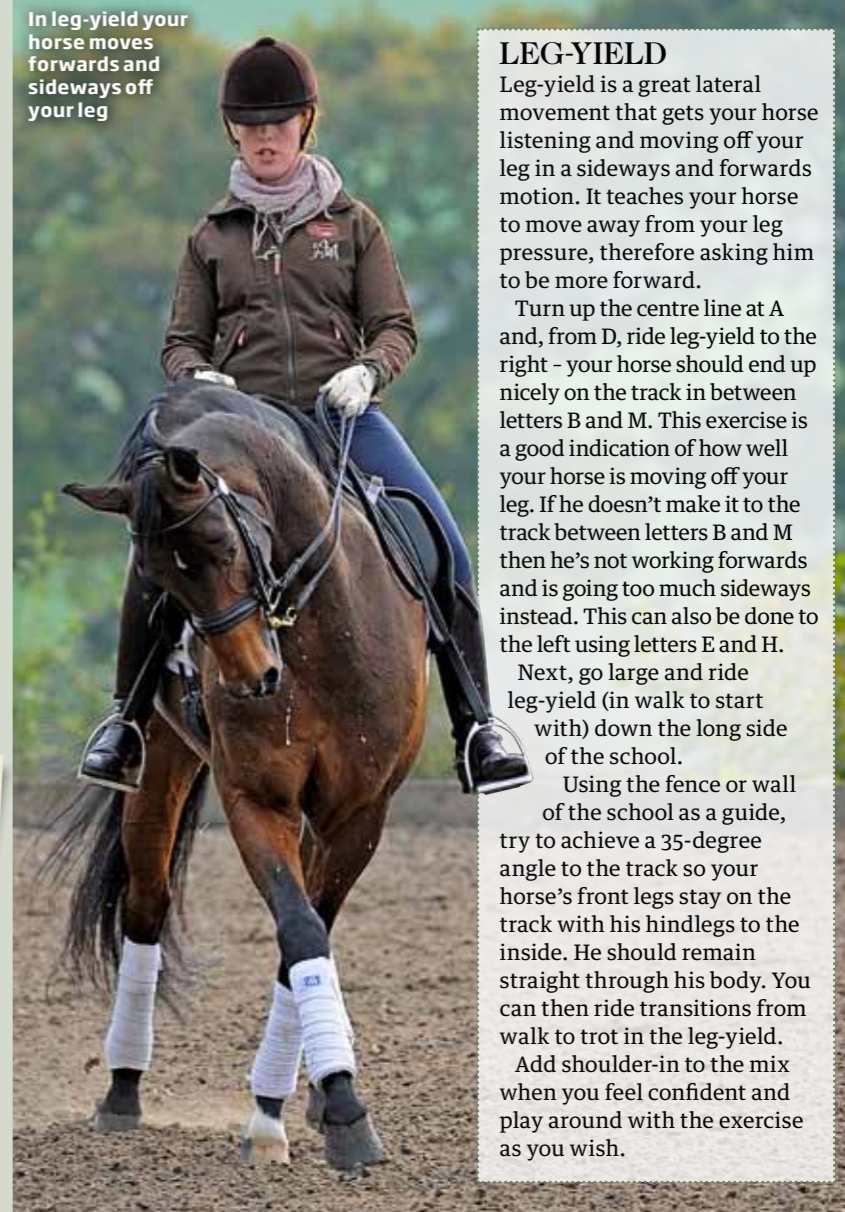
If your horse is naturally a hot head and you don't feel confident in sending him forward, transitions - both direct and within the pace - are a great way to get him listening and engaged.

A useful exercise is trot-walk-trot transitions. Trot down the long side of the school and, as you cross the half-way point, slow him down to a walk for one or two strides and then ask him to trot again. This should really get him listening and responding to your leg.

Also try collecting in the corners. Ride a medium trot down the long side of the arena, then collect your horse around the corner before asking for medium trot on the short side. You can vary this by asking for medium and collected trot in different places in the school.

These exercises are all about getting your mind active and engaged as well as your horse's - if you're not focused then your horse won't be either. You need to be able to react quickly and think forward in order to help him.

In leg-yield your horse moves forwards and sideways off your leg



LEG-YIELD

Leg-yield is a great lateral movement that gets your horse listening and moving off your leg in a sideways and forwards motion. It teaches your horse to move away from your leg pressure, therefore asking him to be more forward.

Turn up the centre line at A and, from D, ride leg-yield to the right - your horse should end up nicely on the track in between letters B and M. This exercise is a good indication of how well your horse is moving off your leg. If he doesn't make it to the track between letters B and M then he's not working forwards and is going too much sideways instead. This can also be done to the left using letters E and H.

Next, go large and ride leg-yield (in walk to start with) down the long side of the school.

Using the fence or wall of the school as a guide, try to achieve a 35-degree angle to the track so your horse's front legs stay on the track with his hindlegs to the inside. He should remain straight through his body. You can then ride transitions from walk to trot in the leg-yield.

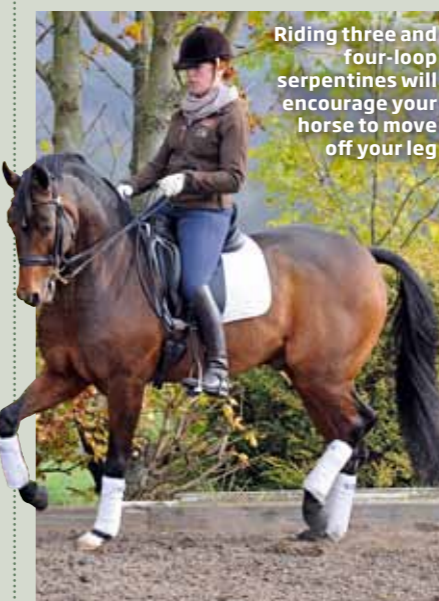
Add shoulder-in to the mix when you feel confident and play around with the exercise as you wish.

TRANSITIONS ON A SERPENTINE

Schooling figures are a great way to get your horse to move off your leg in different directions, and add a little fun and variety to your schooling sessions. A four-loop serpentine is a great figure to assist with forwardness, particularly if you introduce a transition every time you cross the centre line to really get your horse energised, listening and motivated.

Riding a three-loop serpentine is another useful exercise if four loops is a step too far. Try cantering the serpentine and then walk as you cross the centre line for a step or two, before asking for canter again straight away.

Riding three and four-loop serpentes will encourage your horse to move off your leg



TURN TO PAGE 58 FOR FOUR EXERCISES TO IMPROVE YOUR WALK TO CANTER TRANSITIONS

