

# Have

# FEEL

# IN YOUR ARENA

If you've fallen into a riding rut, try our 10 basic arena exercises. They'll have you moving in a whole new direction.

BY **DEBBIE MOORS** AND THE **H&R STAFF**

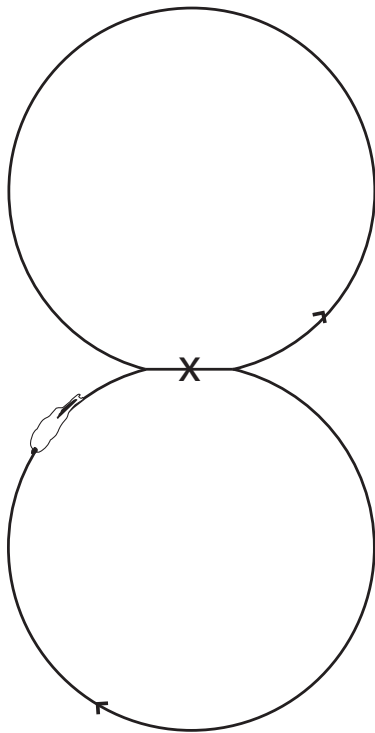
YOU'VE GOT THE ARENA TO YOURSELF, SO YOU SETTLE YOUR horse into a nice warm-up jog, moving along the rail. Soon, you reverse, jog in the other direction, circle a few times...and your mind begins to wander. Schooling in circles *can* be boring—for you and your horse. And if your mind is wandering, chances are, his is too.

Break out of that rail rut with arena exercises that will freshen your workout and your horse's outlook. Use them to ease into your regular training sessions, warm up before your classes at a show, or get the "fresh" out before a trail ride. As you break the monotony, you also improve your horse's responsiveness, suppleness, and muscle tone, plus polish your own horsemanship skills.

The following 10 exercises include options to increase or decrease the level of difficulty and skills required, so you can customize each exercise to your and your horse's level. To add even more interest, combine two or more of the exercises, or make up your own, using the resources in "Don't Stop Now," page 57. →

#### TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THESE EXERCISES:

- Be sure to always ride each exercise in both directions.
- Use your inside leg at the cinch to bend your horse on circles and through turns, and your inside rein to tip his nose in the direction of travel. Use your outside leg just behind the cinch, plus your outside rein against his neck to reinforce his bending. Use your leg at or just behind the cinch and the same-side rein against your horse's neck to ask for lateral movement.
- Work to make your cues as light and subtle as possible.
- Look ahead to where you're going (not down at your horse or at the ground).



### THE BASIC 8

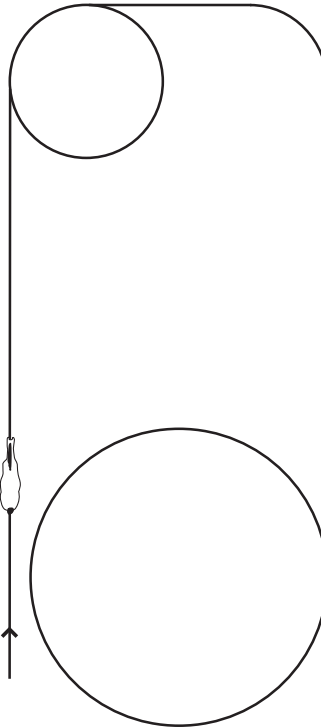
**How to ride it:** Make a figure eight, using the straight line of the center (marked X) to change your horse's bend before heading in the new direction.

**Perks for you:** Improves your ability to bend your horse, guide him precisely, and keep him straight between your reins ("straight" on a circle, meaning bent to the curve of the circle).

**Perks for your horse:** Encourages him to bend equally both ways and stay attentive to your steering.

**Success tips:** Focus on keeping your circles round and equal in size. Pay attention to the amount of rein and leg needed to get the right bend. Add a cone at the arena's center for a visual cue.

**Change it up:** Keep it simple by staying at a walk and jog. Make it more challenging by varying your speed, changing gaits at X, or riding it at a lope and changing leads at X.



### BIG CIRCLE/ LITTLE CIRCLE

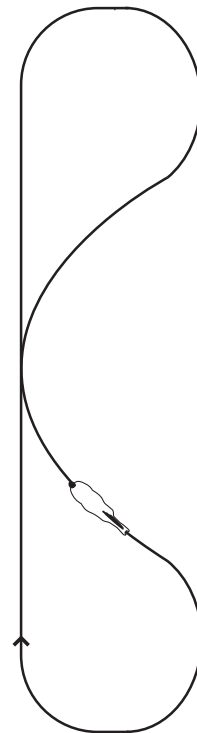
**How to ride it:** Go down the long side of your arena, making a smallish circle in one corner, then a larger circle in the diagonally opposite corner.

**Perks for you:** Enhanced ability to bend your horse to varying degrees.

**Perks for your horse:** Increased suppleness thanks to the smaller circle; teaches him to balance on circles of varying sizes.

**Success tips:** Choose "landmarks" around the arena to help you circle at the right point for the correct size circles.

**Change it up:** Vary which corners you ride the small and large circles in. Make it more challenging by varying your speed, or lope the large circle and jog the small one.



### LOOPY B

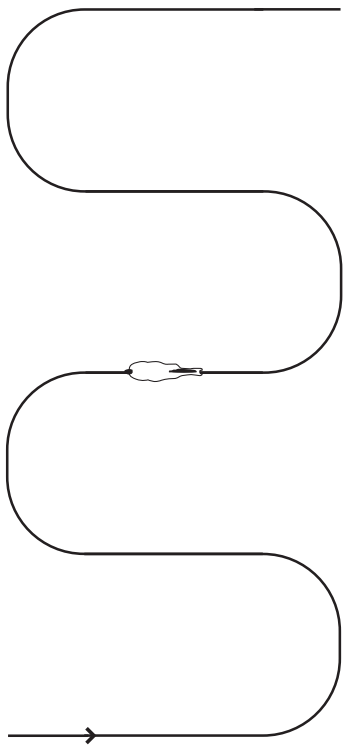
**How to ride it:** Go down the long side, turning the corner as if to make a circle, but instead angle back to the rail. Go straight a stride or two at the rail, then angle back out and circle around toward your starting point.

**Perks for you:** Improves your precision in bending and straightening your horse.

**Perks for your horse:** Prompts him to "listen" rather than assume he's to make a full circle; if you two-track him (see "Change it up," below), it improves his lateral flexibility.

**Success tips:** Try to make each end of the loop the same size and shape.

**Change it up:** Keep it simple by staying at a walk and trot. Make it more challenging by riding it at a lope and changing leads on the straight line in the center. Up the ante at any gait by using your outside leg and rein to move your horse *laterally* back to the rail in a forward-and-sideways two-track.



### SNAKY SERPENTINE

**How to ride it:** Make a series of connected S's back and forth across the width of your arena.

**Perks for you:** Forces you to focus on each new turning point, changing your rein and leg cues at each change in direction; really sharpens your horse-bending skills.

**Perks for your horse:** Improves his lightness and flexibility as he bends, changes direction, and listens to your cues.

**Success tips:** Try to make each loop the same size and shape.

**Change it up:** Keep it simple by making only two or three loops. Up the ante by making four or five narrower loops. This exercise is very challenging at the lope, where you must repeatedly change leads on each straight line, or ask your horse to counter-canter (lope on the "wrong" lead) around every other loop.



### OFF-THE-RAIL RECTANGLE

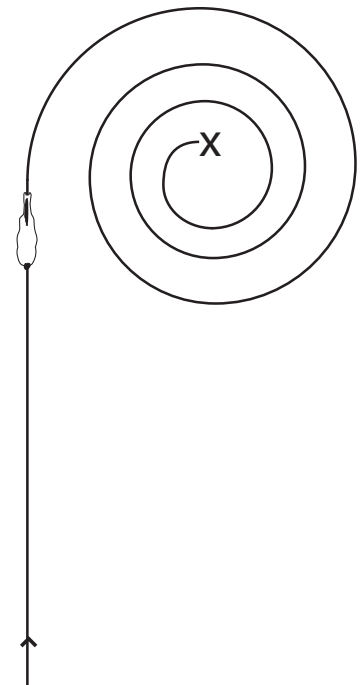
**How to ride it:** Rather than staying directly on the rail, ride a parallel path, about 8 to 10 feet to the inside of it.

**Perks for you:** Teaches you to keep your horse straight between the reins—with no rail to guide or support you or him.

**Perks for your horse:** Teaches him to rely on your cues, rather than "coasting" on the rail.

**Success tips:** Start at a walk, then move to a jog, then trot, then lope.

**Change it up:** Make it more challenging by varying your speed along the straightaways.



### SPIRAL

**How to ride it:** Move from the outside of a large circle to the smallest circle possible by spiraling in toward the center; then spiral back out.

**Perks for you:** Improves your spatial sense of circles; improves your go-lateral cues.

**Perks for your horse:** Improves his bending and collection, plus his responsiveness to your outside leg and rein (to spiral in) and your inside leg and rein (to spiral out); keeps him supple and limber and engaged behind.

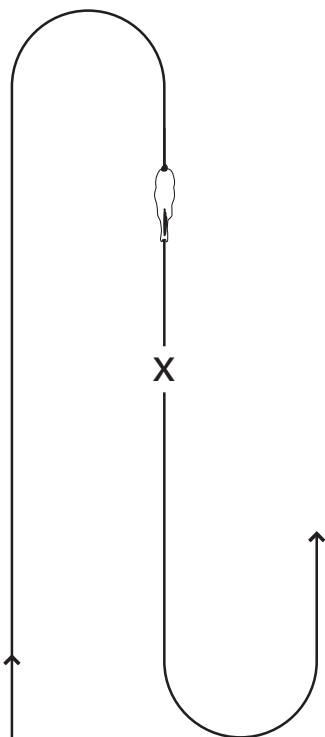
**Success tips:** Focus on maintaining a consistent speed.

**Change it up:** This is challenging at any gait; stay at a walk until you get the hang of it, before attempting it at a jog or lope.

### DON'T STOP NOW!

Build your arena-exercise arsenal with these books and Web sites:

- *101 Arena Exercises*, by Cherry Hill (Storey Books; available at HorseBooksEtc.com).
- *101 Horsemanship & Equitation Patterns*, by Cherry Hill (Storey Books; available at HorseBooksEtc.com).
- *Reining Essentials: How to Excel In Western's Hottest Sport*, by Sandy Collier, with Jennifer Forsberg Meyer (Trafalgar Square Books; available at HorseBooksEtc.com).
- *Arena Pocket Guides: Western Exercises*, beginning, intermediate, and advanced, by Cherry Hill (Storey Books; available at HorseBooksEtc.com).
- *Western Practice Lessons*, by Charlene Strickland (Workman Publishing Co.; available at HorseBooksEtc.com).
- Collection of arena exercises: [horsechatting.com](http://horsechatting.com); click on "Arena Exercises."



## LONGWAYS SERPENTINE

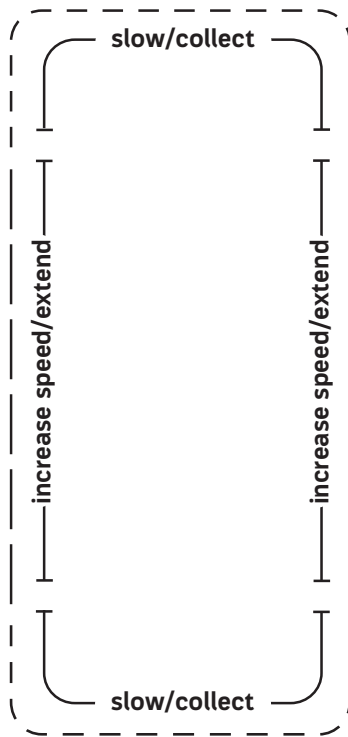
**How to ride it:** Make a serpentine the length of the arena, rather than across the width. At the X, “do something”—stop; perform a maneuver (sidepass, pivot, back-up, whatever you choose); or cue a lead change. Then continue down the remainder of the centerline, turning back up the rail in the opposite direction.

**Perks for you:** Makes you work to keep your horse straight down the center of the arena, before and after the maneuver at X.

**Perks for your horse:** Enhances his bending, traveling straight, and transition skills.

**Success tips:** Add a pylon at the center for a visual cue.

**Change it up:** Keep it easy with a simple stop or gait change at X. Make it more challenging by varying your speed and/or performing lead changes at the arena’s center.



## CADENCE BUILDER

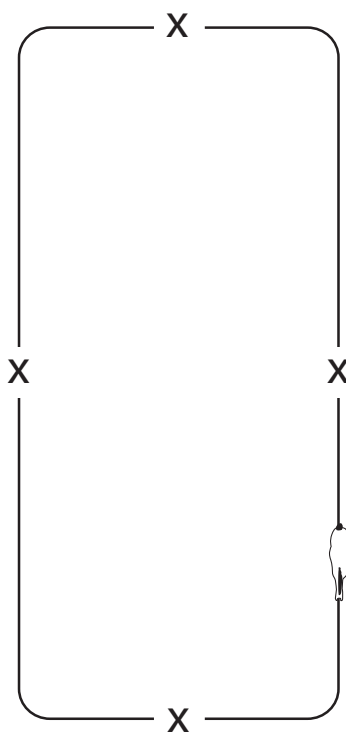
**How to ride it:** Increase speed riding down each long side of the arena; slow and collect around the short sides.

**Perks for you:** Helps you learn to increase and decrease speed smoothly, and encourages your horse to collect himself.

**Perks for your horse:** Teaches him to increase/decrease his speed without excitement; helps develop the muscles he needs for collection.

**Success tips:** Steady your horse just before the slow-down going into the corners.

**Change it up:** Keep it simple by staying at a walk and trot. Make it more challenging by riding it at a lope, or loping the long sides and trotting the ends.



## TRANSITION TUNER

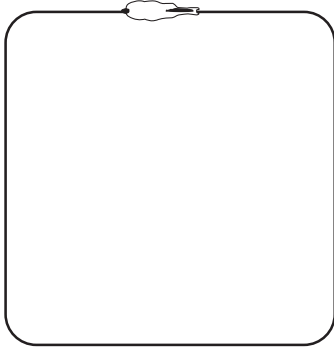
**How to ride it:** Work on the rail, performing gait transitions at the mid-point of each straightaway. For example, start at a walk; at the first X go to a jog; at the next X return to the walk; and so on. Or, make it walk, jog, lope, walk—or however you like.

**Perks for you:** Helps you smooth your upward and downward transitions, plus enhances your overall control.

**Perks for your horse:** Maintains his focus; improves his collection; builds his hind-end muscles.

**Success tips:** Make mental notes of transition points before starting, so you can begin prepping yourself a stride or two before each X; add visual markers, if need be.

**Change it up:** Make it more challenging by working at faster gaits, or asking for complete stops at some of the X’s.



## **SQUARED-OFF CIRCLE**

**How to ride it:** Think of a square with rounded corners. Ride straight to each corner, bend your horse through the turn, then realign him for the next straightaway.

**Perks for you:** More challenging than riding a circle, it keeps you thinking and really *riding*.

**Perks for your horse:** Helps him understand the difference between bending and traveling straight.

**Success tips:** Add a pylon at each corner for a visual cue.

**Change it up:** Make it easier by keeping to a walk or jog and/or widening the turn at each corner. Make it more challenging by working at a lope and/or making the turns a bit tighter.