

# AQHA eBooks

## Barrel Racing Tips



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*In “Barrel Racing Tips,” Sharon Camarillo shows you the basics of barrel racing and provides tips to improve your performance in time for your next big race.*



Sharon Camarillo of Lockeford, California, is a four-time National Finals Rodeo qualifier, as well as a national intercollegiate rodeo champion.

Sharon teaches thousands of students how to excel at barrel racing through clinics, books, DVDs and television programs.

For her accomplishments as an equestrian, announcer, educator and champion of the Western lifestyle, Sharon was inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame in 2006.

To learn more about Sharon and her upcoming clinics, or to purchase her books and DVDs, visit [www.sharoncamarillo.com](http://www.sharoncamarillo.com).

# The Approach

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Three quick turns and a race home seems simple enough, right? Take a closer look at barrel racing, and you'll begin to see there's a lot more going on than what initially meets the eye. The athleticism of balanced horses and riders who have the ability

to move around a barrel in unison is fairly amazing.

Beyond basic foundation work, we'll divide barrel racing into three elements: the *approach*, *rate* and *turn*. It all equals the A.R.T. of barrel racing.

## Classical Training Pyramid

Implementing these elements create a balanced horse and rider.

6. Collection

5. Straightness

4. Impulsion

3. Contact

2. Suppleness

1. Rhythm

# WHAT HAPPENS IN THE ALLEY

Before you enter the arena, be sure you are riding on both sides to balance your horse's shoulder, rib and hip. Make sure you aren't leaning to one side or the other. If you start unbalanced, it will throw off your whole run.

## Foundation Work

Just like any equine sport, it takes a good foundation to start your performance. Impulsion, rhythm and suppleness are key in creating a stable foundation.

An easy way to break down the elements of a solid foundation is implementing the classical training pyramid. The training pyramid identifies progressive levels of training. The elements of each level of the pyramid are such that for the horse to advance to the next level, he must have a certain proficiency at that level.

**Rhythm** – Regular, steady paces.

**Suppleness** – Ability to bend the body laterally and longitudinally in a fluid manner.

**Contact** – Acceptance of the bit and the rider's hands.

The willingness to go forward into the bit and connect the haunches to the forehead.

**Impulsion** – Propulsive or pushing energy from the hind- quarters.

**Straightness** – Sophisticated and correctly trained alignment of the body on straight and curved lines. Straightness requires attention by the rider and the skills provided by the prior levels of the CTP.

**Collection** – Balanced self-carriage in harmony with the rider.

The basis of the training pyramid is that training is never complete. The process provides a base of training and gives a common point of reference. It makes it easier to understand why a barrel horse often has a great deal of resistance in his performance and why he



Riding with your body in the correct position is a major factor in a balanced horse and rider. There are several exercises you can practice in the round pen to gain more balance in the seat.



Use cones to help visualize the correct approach and draw straight lines between the barrels.

can become anxious and sometimes volatile. He does not have the skills required for the sport, and that produces anxiety. He is frustrated and frightened by the speed and inconsistent reaction of the rider.

## Evaluation

A good evaluation is a great place to start in any training program. You must be able to understand where you're at before you can determine where you need to go. Help identify problem areas by asking yourself these questions:

- What is the symptom? (Example: My horse overran the first turn.)
- What caused the symptom? (Example: The rider pulled on the reins before sitting and cueing for rate.)
- What is the solution? (Example: Determine which exercises work on your problem area.)

## Develop an Athletic Seat

One important area to consider is developing an athletic seat. You want to avoid using your reins for balance. Developing an athletic seat enhances your ability to remain balanced, not only in drills but in competitive runs.

Riders also need to be responsible for maintaining clear communication skills. Failure to provide consistent, responsible communication leads to confusion and anxiety. Consistent commands from your leg, hands and seat are important communication between you and your horse.

There are many exercises that you can incorporate into your training and conditioning program. The most important thing to remember is to build on what you have already learned.

## The Approach

The approach consists of your start point, the angle at

which you consistently take your horse to the pocket around a barrel and the method of steering you employ to keep your horse balanced and directed to that point.

Determine the best approach to the first barrel and identify what needs to happen to obtain that approach. Use physical landmarks in or around the arena that can be seen and focused on to assist you in creating the correct approach and the correct pocket for the first barrel.

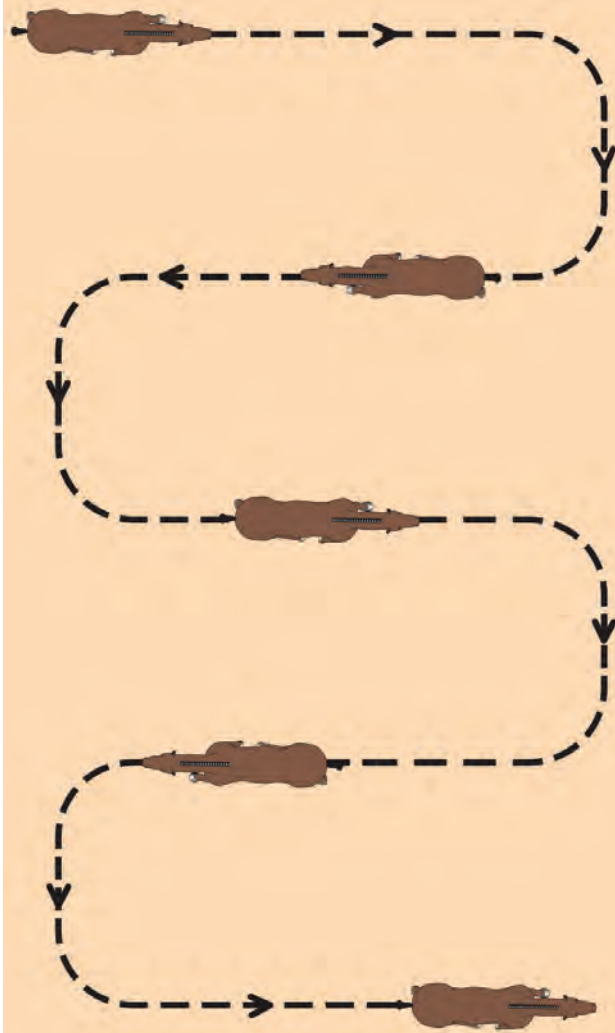
Identify whether the horse should be positioned on the left, right or center of the alley to create the approach to first barrel. If the entrance is a side gate, locate a point on the arena fence that the horse will be ridden to before allowing him to turn and begin his approach to the first barrel. A line between the start point and the landmark of the pocket point determines your approach.

## COMMON ERRORS IN THE APPROACH

1. Poor selection of a start point
2. Failure to keep the horse straight
3. Dropping shoulders
4. Dropping rib cage
5. Approaching the barrel in the wrong lead
6. Riding one rein in between the barrels
7. Hands too high or low
8. Balance issues with horse or rider
9. Legs too far forward or back
10. Inappropriate equipment

## BARREL HORSE DRESSAGE

Riding a horse straight is difficult. A rider's time is well spent finding opportunities to practice straight lines. Be creative in your arena work. Don't ride your horse next to the arena fence. Practice riding down the center. Use these opportunities to "train your eye" and visualize an imaginary straight line. Be precise. Remember you can't steer the horse if he is not moving.



# HOMEWORK

## Corkscrew Exercise

It is difficult for a horse and rider to perform in a precise circle. The corkscrew exercise helps horses with their leads, reinforces their body suppleness, and encourages them to work off their hocks. It's a great warm-up and can be used to help condition a horse as well. Working the exercise at a variety of speeds introduces the horse to speed without getting excited him or intimidated.



### Goal:

Get your horse to be able to complete a corkscrew circle at a variety of speeds, in perfect precise circles. The horse should remain relaxed, maintain flexibility in his neck and spine, and be able to execute a quick change of direction.

### Process:

- Ask your horse to lope on the correct lead in a large circle, at least 50 feet in diameter.
- Visualize the corkscrew pattern with the center of the circle as the eye of the corkscrew.
- Look ahead, and once the horse begins to relax, gradually make smaller circles by about 5- or 10-foot increments, until you reach the eye.
- Apply even rein pressure back toward your pockets and ask your horse to drop down to a trot.
- At the trot, maintain the forward motion of the front and rear end. This establishes the arc in the horse's spine and creates a similar maneuver as turning a barrel.
- When the horse relaxes and responds with a flexible spine and forward motion, release the rein pressure. Cue him to lope out of the circle in the opposite lead, directly into a large circle in the opposite direction.
- Repeat the exercise in the opposite direction. Two to three direction changes are usually sufficient.

## Leg Yield

The basic forward movement developed in this exercise is used in approaching a barrel and maintaining a pocket. It encourages the horse to engage his hindquarters for impulsion and to lift his inside shoulder. The leg yield helps support a horse that wants to drop his shoulder or fade into a turn.

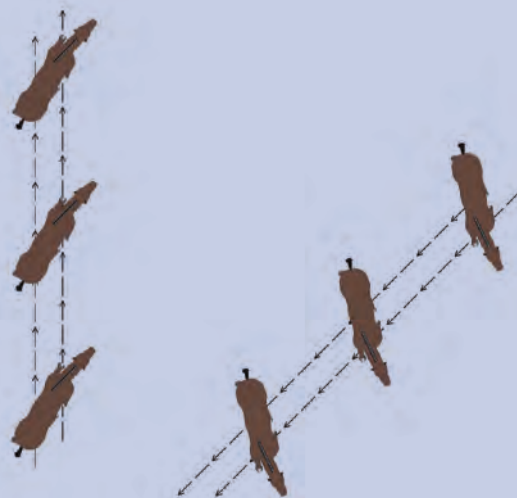
It's also a great exercise to teach a rider to use her legs as driving aids to encourage a horse to step up with the inside hind leg. Rider position in this exercise is important. Make sure you don't lean to one side or the other. Your shoulders should be parallel with the horse's shoulders.

### Goal:

Create a supple response in the horse's body and increase the use of his inside hock.

### Process:

- Walk with the fence to your side, for example to the left.
- Take your horse's nose away from the fence with a direct rein, and move the horse's front end slight away from the fence. Keep his hindquarters parallel to the fence with your right leg. The front and hind feet should cross over each other as he moves down the fence.
- Once you can maintain the arc in a straight line on the fence, try the two-track. Begin by moving forward in a straight line in an open area.
- Ask your horse to arc his body and direct him to travel to the left, away from the direction in which his nose is pointed, with your left rein and right foot. Maintain the arc with your right rein.
- Practice the leg yield arc for short distances, and then gradually increase them.



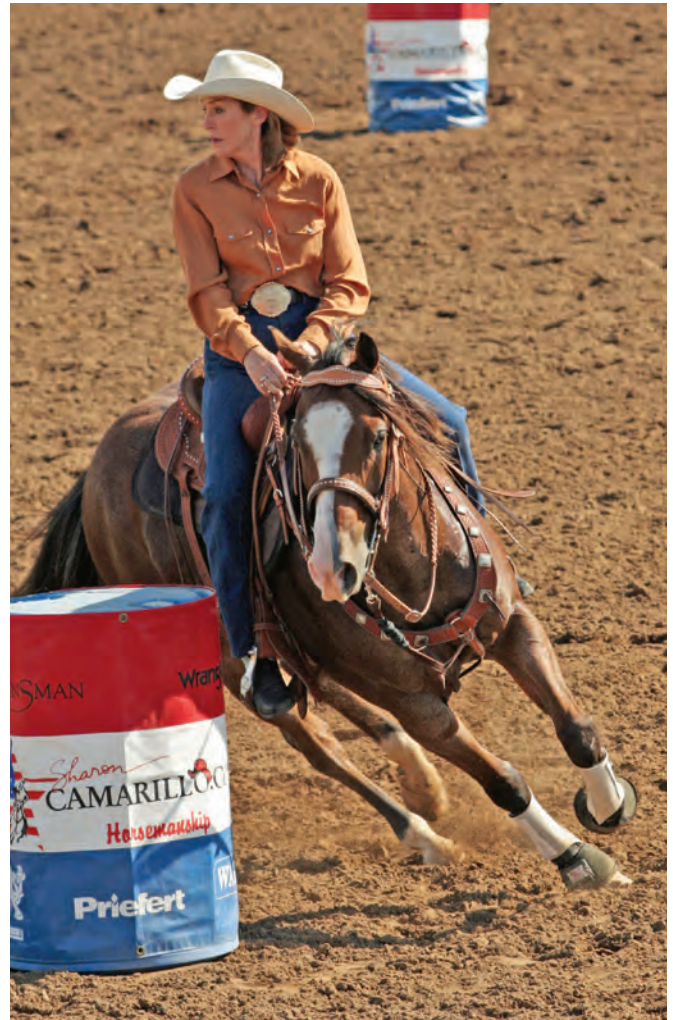
# The Rate

Now that we have set the stage for a good foundation and know how to approach each barrel, let's pick up the pace and figure out how to rate your horse's speed as you move into the turn.

The rate is your horse's ability to shorten his stride and prepare for the turn. It is also the most misunderstood part of barrel racing. You are basically asking your horse to lengthen, then shorten a stride while maintaining collection to create an efficient powerful turn, all within a second or two. To put things in perspective, the type of collection it takes to get this accomplished is

## COMMON ERRORS IN THE RATE

1. Poor selection of rate point.
2. Failure to keep the horse straight until he rates.
3. Rating one-handed.
4. Overuse of the inside rein.
5. Failure to ask for the rate.
6. Ineffective rate cue sequence.
7. Loss of impulsion.
8. Sitting too early.



Rating your horse into the turn is key to having a fast run.

comparative to the athleticism required of upper-level dressage horses. That's why it is important to master the basics of the training pyramid from Page 3.

### **Determining the Rate Point**

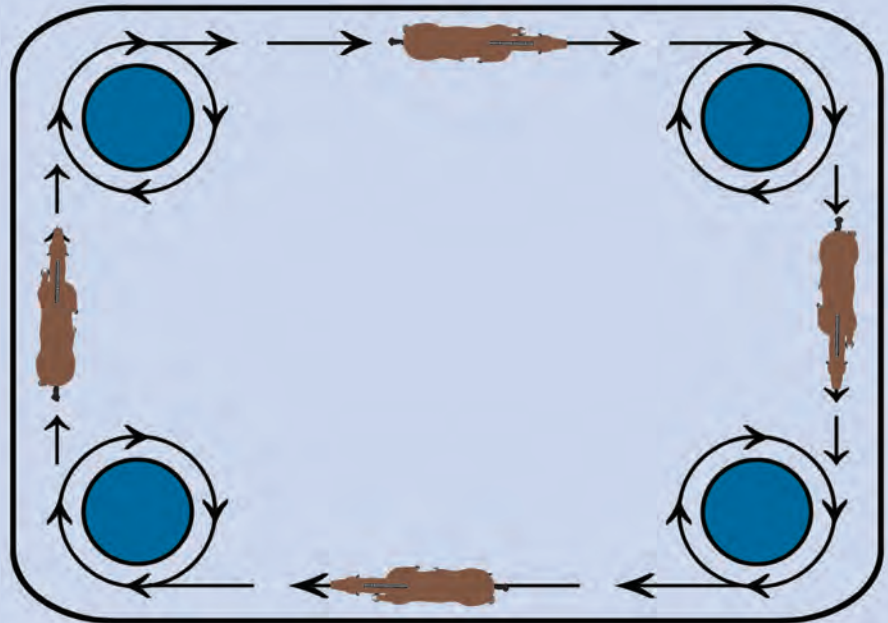
Selecting the right point and obtaining an effective rate are key to an efficient turn. Running by and shouldering into barrels are byproducts of a rider's inability to identify where to rate her horse. Keep in mind your horse's ability, the arena size and ground condition when identifying a rate point for the first barrel. Remember to always be consistent. Practice cueing your horse to rate with consistent cues and work on them at different speeds.

# HOMEWORK

Use these exercises to help your horse learn how to lengthen/shorten his stride and improve his ability to rate.

## Lengthen/Shorten

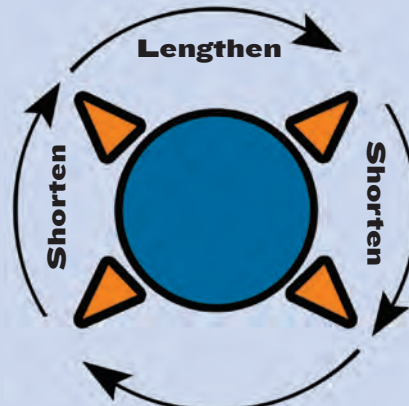
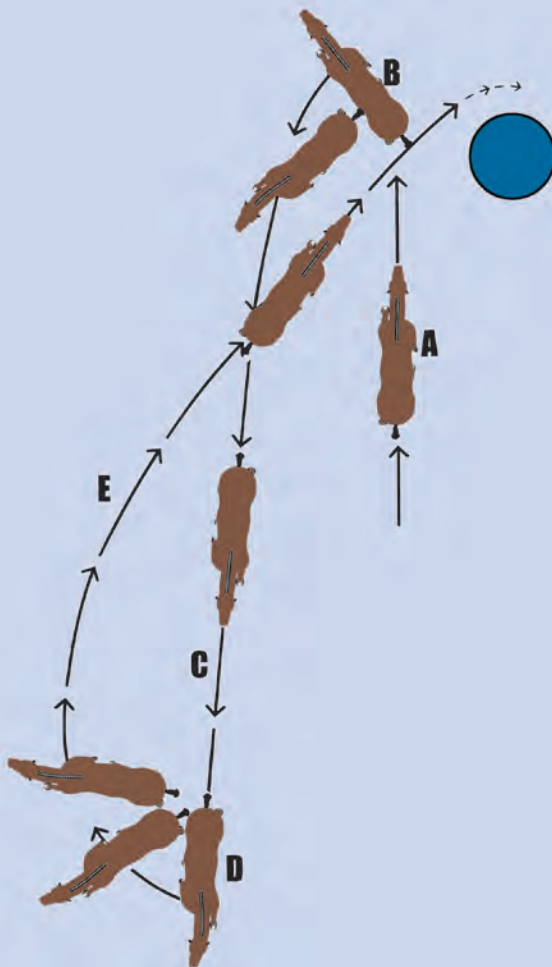
Lengthen your horse's stride on the long ends of the arena and shorten his stride on the ends. Circle your horse in each corner in the direction you're moving around the arena.



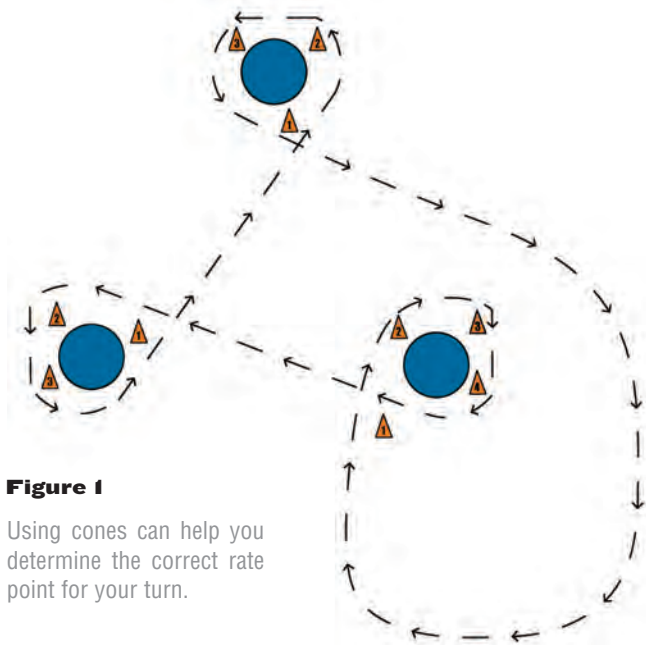
## Rollback

The rollback exercise can be used to develop a consistent response to your request for stop/rate and collection.

- Approach the first barrel. Once you reach the proper rate point, cue your horse using the correct sequence and body position.
- Maintain solid rein contact until your horse stops.
- Back your horse a few steps to take his weight off the forehand. (Make sure to position him on his outside turning hock before requesting the rollback.)
- Roll back away from the barrel using direct rein to start the turn and reinforcement from the outside rein and leg to send your horse in the reverse direction.
- Depending on the level of training, trot or lope your horse back to the arena fence. Use the fence as an aid to help shift the horse's weight off his forehand, before asking for another stop.
- If you are loping, make sure to ask for the correct lead.
- Repeat each exercise at each barrel, and until your horse gives a satisfactory response.



Use your cones to practice lengthening and shortening your horse's stride in a circle. Vary your speed and direction



**Figure 1**

Using cones can help you determine the correct rate point for your turn.

## Cone System

The cone system is an easy way to help you visualize the pattern and pinpoint each element of the approach, rate and turn. Each cone serves as a marker to remind you where you need to cue your horse for a specific response. Set up the cones around all three barrels to help visualize cue points and adjust your rate points to fit your horse.

Cone No.1 is the first point where you can ask your horse to rate. Depending on your horse's ability and the arena condition, your rate point can be anywhere between the first and second cone. (See Figure 1.)

Cone No. 3 is where you begin your turn. Pick up the inside rein and shift your weight to your outside stirrup. Then look and drive your horse to the last cone.

## TROUBLE PICKING YOUR POINT?

Choosing your rate point can be tricky and is usually a matter of trial and error. Sometimes even the most experienced rider lets the horse drift in at the rate point, and it leads the horse to slice, or drop his shoulder into the barrel.

To avoid this problem, pick your point before you begin your run and look straight beyond that point to the fence or some other visible aid. The barrel doesn't move, so you can keep it in your peripheral vision and look directly at the pocket point. This will help you maintain an upright, balanced body position and will help keep your horse honest. Always be aware of your rein and leg position. The same technique can also be applied to the second and third barrel.



Using a marker on the fence is an easy way to find a steady point to focus on.



Using cones can help you determine the correct rate point for your turn.

# The Turn

**I**n the past two sections, we've built a solid foundation for your barrel horse, set up the perfect approach and learned how to correctly rate your horse when coming into each barrel. It's time to bring things full circle and dissect the turn.

The turn is the method used by a rider to precisely

place and position her horse around each barrel. The key is to know what you want, and how to communicate to the horse. As a rider, you must cue correctly to obtain the desired response. The approach and the rate determine the success of the turn in each individual barrel.

## Dynamic of the Perfect Turn

Correct hand and body position are key to a good turn. Proper approach and rate mean your horse is balanced and has been taught to collect himself for the turn.

You can use your cone system (see Figure 1 on Page 10) to help cue yourself at certain points through the turn.

It is important to stay relaxed when you increase speed in the turn. Your horse is a mirror image of your emotions and training ability. Stay consistent to your training philosophy and ride your horse between your hands while looking and riding straight to your chosen pocket position.

Rate, then feel your horse shorten his stride before asking for the turn. This makes it easier for him to stay balanced and hold his leads with speed. The position builds a productive, well-planned turn.

Use both hands to help your horse maintain posi-

## COMMON ERRORS IN THE TURN

1. Poor selection of a pocket point
2. Dropping leads
3. Overuse of the inside or outside rein
4. Loss of impulsion
5. Not driving into the turn and squeezing with your legs
6. Balance issues with the horse or rider
7. Failure to finish the turn because the horse doesn't answer the outside rein or leg
8. Stirrups too long

tion coming into the barrel. Once you determine your pocket point, use your inside rein to start the turn. Go to the horn with your other hand to keep your balance, ride to the last cone position, and if necessary pick up the outside rein to direct your horse's body to complete the turn.

As you leave the barrel, your position will create the correct approach to the next barrel's pocket point. Your horse's hindquarters and chest should be aligned in a straight position to the next pocket point.

## Final Thought

The payoff for investing in this program comes from achieving a comfortable ride for the rider and the horse. Riding the whole horse to eliminate confusion and frustration is the main goal.

Consistent, efficient performance comes through learning evaluation skills that help identify your strengths and weaknesses.

Successful outcomes with your horse depend on your ability to learn to think like your horse, handle our horse in a consistent manner and provide appropriate rewards. Seeking a responsible mentor or instructor is a great first step to understanding these basics.

### Always ride with

**Purpose:** Select daily, weekly and monthly goals. Establish a schedule and routine. Learn to evaluate each ride and each competition.

**Patience:** Wait for your horse to figure out your request. Work on your personal skill level. Seek responsible instruction and cross train. Training takes repetition and patience.

**Passion:** Love what you do. Be grateful for your opportunities. Get excited about developing new skills and learn to be rewarded by your performance outcomes versus competitive outcomes.



Use the cone system to help you cue your horse through the turn.



Use your inside rein to start the turn after you set your pocket point.

## OBSERVATION

Sometimes riders approach a barrel, then ask their horse to speed up for the turn. The belief might be that the speed aids in creating a quick turn; however, it makes most horses high and silly as they approach the barrel.

Snap and quickness in turns are certainly important, but effective turns are built with precise and proper body position and consistent cues.

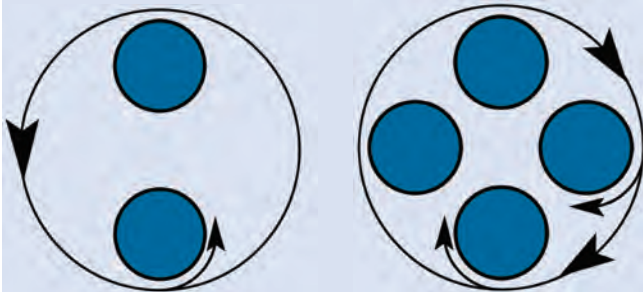
It's important to realize that the faster a horse is traveling, the more critical your precise request for rate. Where you ask for rate will depend on your horse's ability to respond.

# HOMEWORK

Use these exercises to help your horse learn how to perfect your turn.

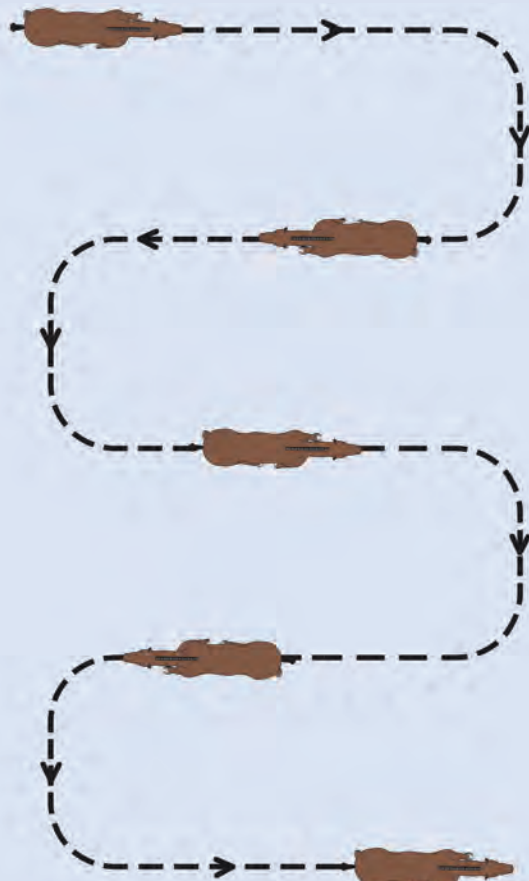
## Circle on Circle

Use two circles within the circle when getting started and eventually increase it to four. Start out at a slow pace and gradually increase your speed as you and your horse become comfortable and balanced.



## Serpentine

The serpentine exercise is a useful tool in riding straight lines and preparing for a turn. It works on lengthening and shortening strides by working on half turns.



## All Right/All Left Objective:

This exercise can introduce the barrel turn to young horses developing their ability to shorten their stride and move fluidly through a turn. It can also help horses that develop problems in the turn.

## Process:

Lope a large, 40-foot neutral circle in the central of the barrel pattern. When your horse is relaxed, ride 40-foot circles (either all right or all left) around the barrels in any order. Make as many 40-foot circles as it takes to calm and balance our horse.

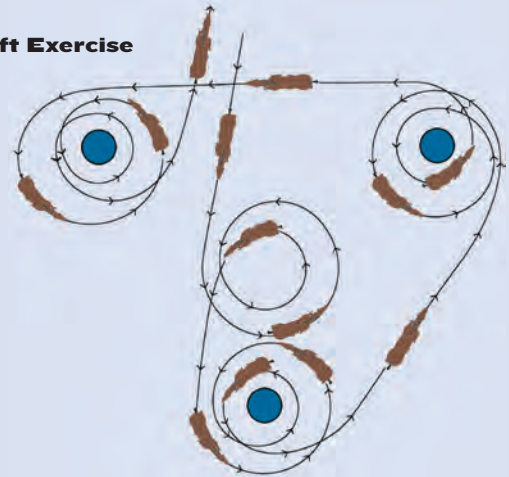
Once you feel him relax and maintain balance, lope one smaller circle around each barrel before leaving.

Don't ask a young horse for a circle smaller than his ability allows him to make.

To change directions in the exercise, simply drop to a trot and change leads. This helps a horse gain confidence in his ability to change leads, and helps him stay calm and balanced.

\*You can also use the corkscrew and rollback exercise from last month to tune-up your turning skills.

## All Left Exercise



## All Right Exercise

