

10 Essential Maneuvers for Barrel Racing Success

A great barrel run looks smooth and effortless, often leaving us wondering - “how do they do it”? There is often a common denominator with successful barrel horses. These horses are most often very well broke and easily maneuverable. There are several key moves we could coin as “essential barrel racing maneuvers”.

In order to save yourself a lot of heart ache later on, it is often recommended by many professional barrel racers that your horse know these critical moves before you start the pattern. Should you skip a step and start the pattern first, you will find yourself having to go back and teach your horse how to do these moves in order to solve the problem on the pattern. Save yourself time by implementing these steps early in your training program. This will help you avoid many problems and be able to stop others in their tracks having these key moves in your tool box.

1. **Lateral Flexion**

Your horse should be soft in the face and be able to move his head laterally (side to side) without moving his feet. He should also be able to flex laterally while you move forward at different gaits in a straight line (two tracking). This is important when it comes to turning and circling. We want to be able to shape our horses and have them bend while we continue with forward motion.

2. **Vertical Flexion**

Your horse should understand how to break at the poll and give to the bridle. He should be able to do this standing, but also walk forward into the bridle while broke/flexed at the pole. This is important so that your horse gives to pressure. If he doesn't understand how to give to the bridle, you will have a horse that throws its head up when you ask for it to slow down or turn.

3. **Lateral Movement**

Your horse should have the ability to move forward and to the side (laterally) across the arena. He needs to understand your leg and rein cues to have him move sideways but also continue moving forward. Because he already gives to the bit and understands vertical and lateral flexion you will be able to attain this along with the needed speed control. With this movement you will have the ability to pick up his shoulder and move him out and over (or in) whenever you may need to make a correction on the barrels.

4. **Reverse Arc**

Part of lateral movement but more specifically when the horses shoulder will be pushed to the inside of the circle. This increases his sharpness, maneuverability and finesse. A reverse arc would be performed on a circle (for example) when the horse is bent to the outside of the circle. His eye and hip to the right, but his body traveling left (more on how to in the drills site). The reverse arc/counter bend is used to move a horse away from or into a turn during corrective work.

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5. **Hip Control**

The rider should be able to move the horse's hip around its front end while standing and the rider should be able to move the hip from side to side in a straight line. If the horse's hip is in, the shoulder has to be up and elevated. If you have proper hip control and positioning you will be able to avoid (and correct) any problems he may have with dropping his shoulder at a barrel.

6. **Stopping**

Your barrel horse should have a great stop. Not every barrel horse is built to have the same type of stop but your stop should be the best it can be for his build. He doesn't need a reining horse stop but he should know to use his hind end and melt down into a stop. Being respectful at a stop will help you in your drills and keep him working from his hind end. Disrespect from your horse during stopping will lead to other problems of disrespect on the pattern. If you have any problems stopping or backing off the bridle they will be worse once you add speed. Your horse should stop slightly elevated to move his weight to his hind end. He should not be pushing down on the bridle and transferring his weight to the front. He should be shifting it back and using his hind end.

7. **The Perfect Circle**

Barrel horses should be able to carry themselves on the line of a perfect circle without a lot of help from the rider. At first, you will have to guide and coach them for a perfect circle but eventually you want them to be able to carry themselves. This is a lot like a barrel turn. At first we will help them find their way, but eventually in a finished horse we want them to be fairly automatic and carry themselves in a turn without our interference. They need to carry themselves in a forward four wheel drive way while staying engaged and on the line of the circle (no drifting no cutting in). The perfect circle is the cornerstone to many barrel racing drills and professional programs.

8. **Leads**

Being on the correct lead is very important to barrel racing. When your barrel horse is on the correct lead he will have the best opportunity to circle and turn the barrel correctly with power and efficiency. Not only is being on the correct lead important but also having the ability to pick up the lope (in the correct lead) promptly. Picking up a lope on command rather than having to trot the horse several strides into it will help with your preparation approaching the barrels. If you train in a small space this will really help your horse. There is nothing worse than trotting your horse between the barrels and finally getting your lope (in the wrong lead at that) right when you get to your second barrel. If you have the departure and leads mastered before going to the pattern you will save yourself from some potential bad habits from not being properly prepared for the turn.

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9. Transitions

Your barrel horse should have the ability to efficiently and happily transition from one gate to another. He should sharply go from a lope to a trot, a trot to a walk, a walk to a lope, a lope to a stop, a stop to a trot etc, etc. This is important when you go to the pattern to teach rate and acceleration he should understand your body language when you ask for any transition of speed. This is part of your speed control. There should be no fighting and pulling he should feel your body either sit deep or move forward depending on if you want to slow or speed up the pace.

10. Collection

Collection in horse riding terms is when a horse carries more of its weight on its hind quarters than its front legs. Some horses are more natural at this than others but they can all learn and benefit from collection. The horses back will be raised as he engages his stomach muscles while flexing at the poll and carrying himself lightly. While collected the horse will have more impulsion and power and be able to carry the rider with greater ease. The horse will reach further up underneath its body making his stops and turns more precise. When a horse rates or gathers itself for a turn it is collected. Its front end is elevated through the wither and the hind end is dropped and powerful. The opposite of collected is strung out. We want our barrel horse collected and gathered for a turn rather than be strung out. This results in faster, more powerful turns and less injuries.

In summary, if your horse has all the above skills, starting him on the pattern or correcting problems should happen very quickly and easily. If he doesn't have all these moves you will need to spend some of your time going back and learning them as you progress through his training.

There are always ups in down in the training process but with this foundation to fall back on your lows will never be very too far down, and your highs will come faster and soar higher.

A horses' foundation is just like that of a home. It all starts from the ground up and when you have a strong foundation the rest of your home (horse) will be more stable and have a long future with you.

Take these essential maneuvers with you to the barrel pen and see much barrel racing success!

Enjoy the ride,

Michelle Davey

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