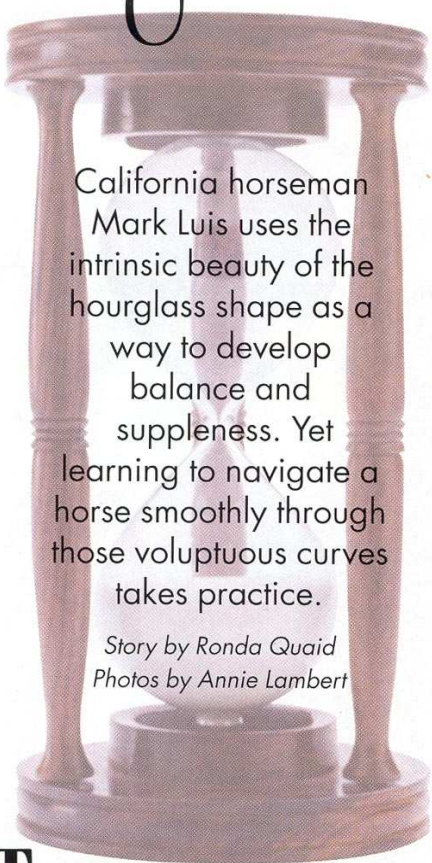


Go Figure!



California horseman Mark Luis uses the intrinsic beauty of the hourglass shape as a way to develop balance and suppleness. Yet learning to navigate a horse smoothly through those voluptuous curves takes practice.

*Story by Ronda Quaid
Photos by Annie Lambert*

The hourglass brings to mind an ancient form of time-telling, or perhaps a voluptuous female. But for reined cowhorse trainer Mark Luis, it is a shape he employs to encourage suppleness and balance in his horses.

Whether this unassuming, quick-to-smile horseman is introducing a colt to the demands of his sport or fine-tuning an



The rider must retain an arc in his horse's front end to have full control of the shoulders, which prevents the horse from swapping leads into and out of the curves. Mark Luis uses a direct rein to help maintain a consistent arc.

older horse, he contends that working in this configuration can help his pupil's overall performance.

While taking a break during a drought-quenching storm at his central California facility, Mark explained that it was Todd Crawford who first introduced him to this exercise. Proving the dictum that a true horseman always seeks out ways to hone his skills, Mark took advantage of Crawford's guidance. Although it took him some time to work the hourglass concept into his own program, Mark has been impressed with the results.

"I found this exercise really softened my horses and increased my control of the hip and inside shoulder," he explains.

Taking Shape

The premise of the hourglass exercise is to connect circles at either end of the arena with diagonals. The horse is asked to move out of his circle diagonally as he approaches the center of the arena. He will stay on the same lead and maintain the same arc in his body that he has while traveling in his circle. To create the "waist" of the hourglass, he'll have to travel in a curve until he's back on line with the same lead circle at the opposite end of the arena. The maneuver is then repeated in the other direction.

When completed, the shape of an hourglass should be superimposed on the arena. To

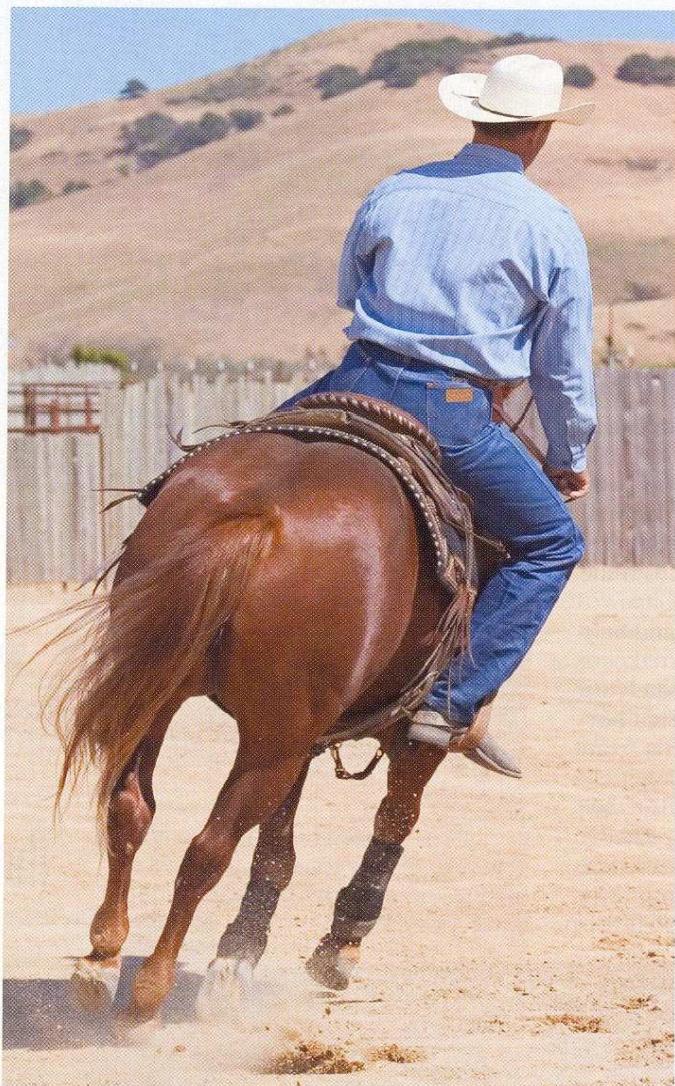
accomplish this the horse must keep his inside shoulder elevated and move his hip off the rider's outside leg. The objective is to encourage him to drive

from behind, because that's where all his power lies.

The key is to maintain the arc in the horse's body rather than simply following an hourglass outline. You could follow that line without holding the arc, but the point is to keep the horse driving underneath himself as he moves away from the initial circle. A successful hourglass should be navigated smoothly without a change in gait or any resistance.

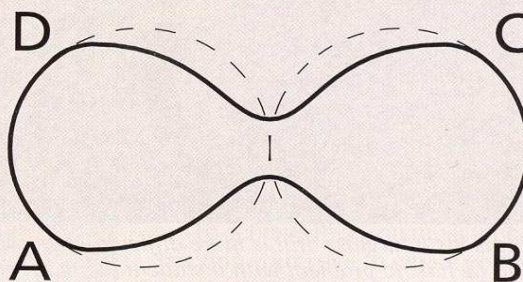
Mark recommends looping a few big, relaxed circles at both ends of the arena before you begin. Concentrate on the arc in your horse's body. Prepare mentally for maintaining it throughout the maneuver.

The exercise begins as you approach the center of the arena. The horse's hip is pushed over with your outside leg while the reins help guide him off the circle onto the diagonal track. This must be a coordinated effort. For every step the horse takes to the inside with his hind end, he must take a compensating step to the outside with this front end. If you don't help direct him with the reins, there will be too much arc in the horse's body and he'll lose his forward momentum.



Pushing the hip inward, toward the waist of the hourglass, without allowing the horse to change leads drives the outside hind leg under the horse, giving him balance and added power.

A horse traveling counter-clockwise on the left lead would travel from point A to point B arced to the right, as in a counter-canter, with outside leg and rein pressure from the rider. At point B the rider releases the outside pressure to resume a normal arc to the left around the end of the arena. At point C the rider again applies pressure on the right side to push the horse through the narrow waist of the hourglass before going back to the normal inside arc at point D.



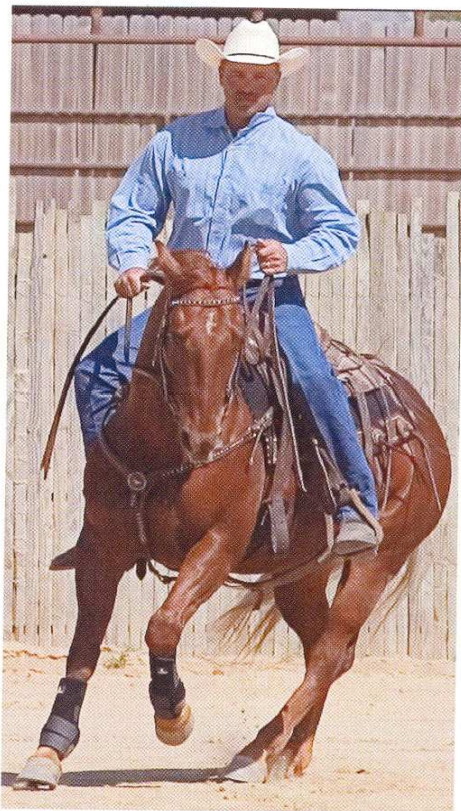
Staying on Track

The request from your leg should come from steady pressure, not bumping or kicking, which might be interpreted as a request to speed up. The pressure should be maintained until the "waist" curve is completed and you're on line to pick up the new same-lead circle. When you intersect with the new circle, you release your outside leg and return your hands to center. This must be synchronized. If you don't continue to help the horse with the reins until you release your leg, he's going to straighten out and square off the new circle. If you release your leg too soon, he'll want to change leads. It's important to maintain his arc position until you're on line with the new circle.

The horse is essentially two-tracking as he negotiates the "waist" curve. He'll have to stay balanced in the front end and supple in the hip to travel from the larger circle into this smaller shape.

"When you push that hip in and help him away with the reins, it makes a horse's hind end come completely up underneath his body, driving his outside hind leg up in between his front legs," explains Mark.

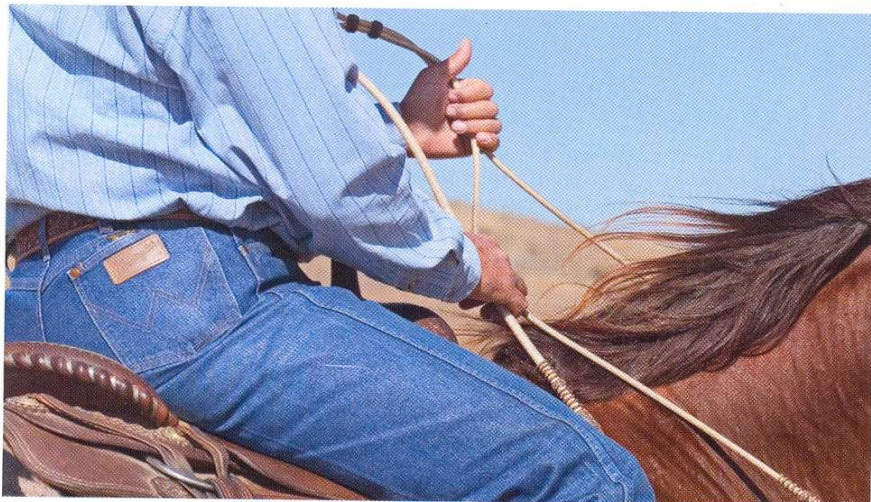
"If your horse is dropping into his circles, you could just keep repeatedly pushing him back with your inside leg, but that's not really teaching him to stay correct," he adds. "With this



The hourglass will teach a horse to remain squared up as he turns into a rundown. The approach allows for a long, straight run because the horse is not spending the first four or five strides getting lined out.



exercise you teach him that outside leg pressure means to drive forward and lift the shoulder. It's an easier, subtler correction."



Luis admits his hourglass drill is more difficult when riding one-handed with romal reins, and he has no problem with a student using the free hand to improve the curve of the arc.

Rundown Remedy

"One area where I think this exercise has tremendous potential to improve performance is in rundowns," Luis suggests. "By teaching your horse to stay squared up and moving freely off your leg, he's ready from the very first step to make that rundown straight. It will help him navigate the turn without dropping his shoulder in. You won't have to take four or five strides to straighten up after that turn," he notes.

"If he's leaning as he comes around, it means he's taking a lateral step and he's not balanced. He cannot be straight if he's not balanced."

Once you're confident that both you and your horse are adept at this hourglass maneuver, experiment with a rundown and see if he responds to pressure from your outside leg as you drive through the turn that begins your rundown. If he's not as responsive as you'd

like, go back to your hourglass for reinforcement.

Mark also suggests asking for a lead change to see if your horse responds in a softer, more fluid way.

Potential Pitfalls

Acknowledging that this is mighty advanced maneuvering, Mark has introduced the hourglass to his students. It's a great tool because it addresses so many fundamentals: Perfect timing, soft hands and effective leg cues all play a role. Negotiating this shape, he contends, really focuses the rider's mind on how the horse moves.



Mark positions himself at the waist of the hourglass to give his student, Susie Madonna, an obstacle to arc her horse around. The trainer encourages non-pros to use the entire arena and to look where they are traveling rather than down at their horses.



Cautioning that it takes some time to get the feel of this exercise, Luis prescribes introducing the move with a broader "waist." Start with a plus-size

figure before you tighten the corset. Make your request as soon as you curve toward the arena center and let the horse have several strides to create a soft curve. Following the "crawl before you walk" philosophy, he recommends starting easy to build your horse's confidence. As you become more proficient at maintaining the arc of his body and he is more responsive, you can cinch in your hourglass, making it almost a "v" shape.

When you ask for that diagonal move, he adds, you may discover that your horse isn't really moving off your leg at all, but pushing against it. Increase your demand with a roll of your spur until you really feel that hip break loose. Don't be afraid to abort the mission. Go back to bolstering his responsiveness to your leg at the walk.

Make sure that your request isn't confusing. The pressure from your outside leg should come from your calf well behind the cinch, and you should keep your inside leg away.

"Also, use the whole arena," Mark says. "If you keep the horse's body in the same arc throughout the maneuver, you should be able to come back to a nice, full circle when you release your outside leg and drop your reins."

To achieve this, you must look up, directing your gaze to where you want to go and following your line. While it's a

Mark Luis: From Roping to Reined Cowhorse

Mark Luis grew up steeped in central California's cattle culture. He learned how to rope and ride as the fourth generation in a Los Alamos ranching family.

Mark took his skills from the branding pen to the high school rodeo arena, competing in calf roping, team roping and steer wrestling. He won three district championships and a state final before going on to college teams.

After experimenting with some non-equestrian professions, Mark came back to his roots working for local rancher John Branquinho. His duties included helping the Branquinho sons with their high school rodeo skills (both Luke and Casey are currently PRCA competitors).

Mark eventually took on some outside horses at Branquinho's and also gave lessons. He was especially gifted with children. Many a local youngster credits his guidance for the development of his or her skills.



A client talked Mark into taking a lesson with Ron Ralls, and the rest is history: Ron offered him a job on the spot and he ended up working there for five years.

When Ralls moved to Texas, Mark decided to start his own facility on the land that had been in his family for almost 100 years.

"I wouldn't be doing this without the support of my father-in-law, Chuck Doss," Mark credits. Doss is a partner in Mark's entire operation. "He bought my first futurity horse, Forest Acre Chex, and we partnered again on a colt purchased at the 2002 Snaffle Bit Futurity Sale."

A dramatic fence run on that SBF sale colt, Playdox Taco Peppa, helped Mark pass the pack at the 2003 San Lucas Ranch Cow Horse Classic Futurity in Santa Ynez in the limited open – his first win at a major show.

And, despite his busy training schedule, Mark is always on hand to help with local brandings.



nose tipped slightly in," Mark explains. "Maintain light, steady contact."

Luis has observed that an hourglass novice is often tempted to start thinking about the new circle before completing the "waist." This is liable to encourage arcing the horse in the wrong direction. Don't get ahead of yourself. When you begin your diagonal move, continue curving until you reach the point of a counter-canter. Take several strides on this counter lead until you're in line with your new circle. Left lead, left arc – no matter what direction you're headed. Visualize your horse always to the inside of your imaginary line.

Fluid Movement

The rider's hands should be low and wide, and the request should be smooth. Don't let your outside rein get too long or you'll lose contact.

"If your inside rein is too tight, you'll bind him up and he'll want to stop," Mark reminds.

It's important to stay relaxed and keep riding. If you stiffen up, you're likely to have your reins too high and you'll lift his head out of position. If you're wound too tight, you're also liable to pull back or make your request too abruptly.

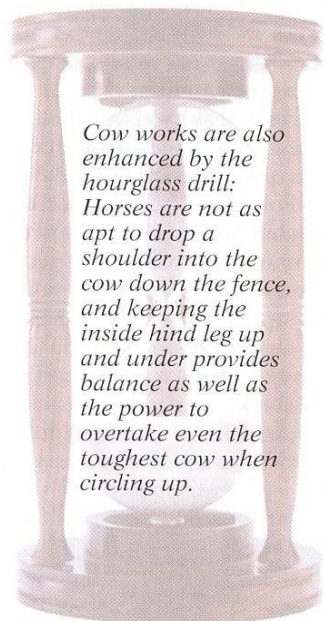
"Sometimes as riders we try so hard to figure out what we should be doing that we completely release telling the horse what to do," he laughs with characteristic good humor.

Mark adds that, although it's okay for the horse to slow down slightly when negotiating the curve, he should maintain his drive from behind. It should feel fluid with consistent cadence, not jerky. If the horse does break gait or wants to stop, simply ask him to regain his lope and start over. Assess which pilot error may have been responsible for this dilemma.

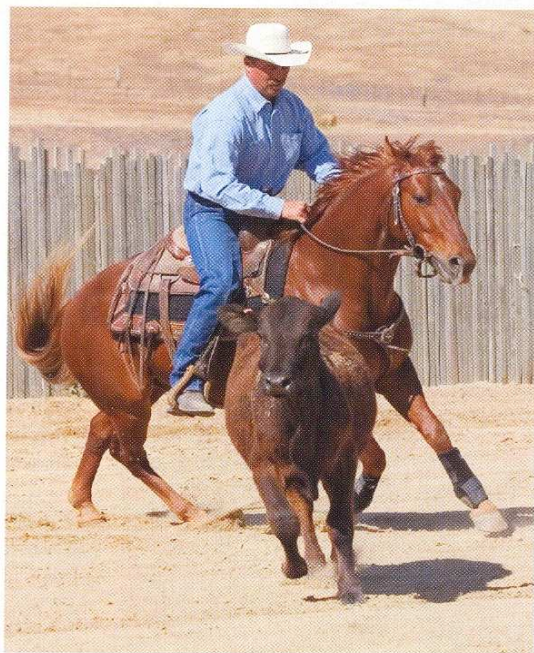
Mixing It Up

The quest for a responsive, balanced performer has inspired a long list of suppling exercises. The hourglass is just a

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Cow works are also enhanced by the hourglass drill: Horses are not as apt to drop a shoulder into the cow down the fence, and keeping the inside hind leg up and under provides balance as well as the power to overtake even the toughest cow when circling up.



common mistake, and probably just human nature, looking down at your horse to check on his position or watching your hands will likely throw you off course. Don't despair if your hourglass looks more like Quasimodo than Marilyn Monroe during your maiden voyages!

When working with his students on this maneuver, Mark likes to position himself horseback near the center of the arena just outside the waist of the hourglass. He becomes the pivot point, and the rider has a tangible target to

curve around while creating the hourglass "waist."

"This also puts me in a good position to look for problems and help the rider make adjustments," he points out.

"Another mistake riders make when they try this exercise is to pull the outside rein too much and just pitch the inside rein away, which will pull the horse's nose out of that arc position. The reins must work as a unit. As you help him move away with the outside rein, the inside rein should keep his

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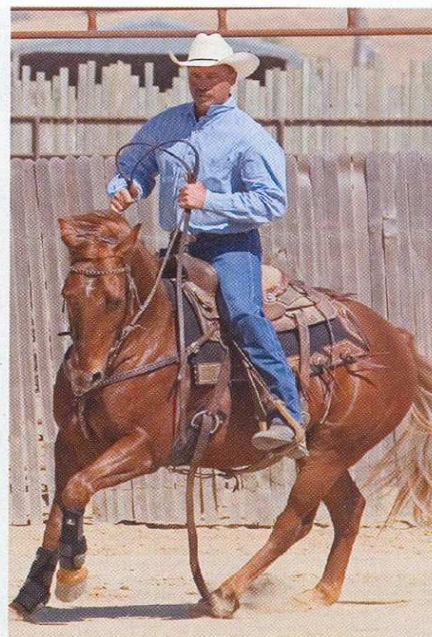
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Too long an outside rein can cause the rider to lose contact with the horse, while too snug an inside rein can bind a horse up, causing him to seek relief by backing off and losing forward motion.

fresh way to provide variety and thwart drudgery for both horse and rider. As with all schooling exercises, however, don't overdo it. If your horse has succeeded consistently, don't keep drilling him.

Mark recommends changing it up with this maneuver too: Put your horse to the test. When you reconnect with the circle by releasing your leg and returning your hands to center, allow the horse to be on his own and see what happens.

"If I feel him dropping in, I'll press with my outside leg and help his front end away to maintain his same lead arc," Luis explains. "I'll continue curving him away from the circle until he's counter-arc-ing in a small circle. When we intersect back with the original circle, I'll put him back on his own."

Once the horse realizes how much easier it is to lope correctly after that more difficult, small counter-lead circle, it's a powerful motivator to stay on line.

It won't solve every problem. But adding the hourglass to your schooling routine just might shape up your ability to put your horse anywhere you want with elegance. ☺

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