



GETTING Moving

This series deals with the 'finished' horse and how to keep him responsive and honest. Here we look at seat and leg aids

Part of the appeal of western riding is the joy you get from a responsive, honest horse. In western more than any other discipline we talk about 'finished' horses, meaning horses that have been trained to do their job and now just need maintenance. I hope this article will help you on the first step towards maintaining a finished horse at home - keeping him off your leg.

There is nothing more enjoyable than a horse which is responsive to your leg but without proper maintenance they can become dull. Be it in generating forward motion or lateral movements, if you need to do more than apply your leg with moderate pressure then your horse needs sharpening up. It is easy to understand why an experienced horse may evade the leg if he is being ridden by a less experienced or demanding rider than his previous trainer, but there is no excuse for letting him get away with it.

THINKING FORWARDS

Starting with the very basics, I want you to think about how you cue your horse to move off from the standstill. I personally apply slight

pressure with my lower leg and 'cluck.' That is all I need to do. However, I get this response because my horses know that if they do not react to this polite ask, I will use increasingly more pressure with my leg and then spur until I get the desired reaction. I do not mind if they take a couple of seconds to quietly respond and I am especially pleased if my reiners act in this way as there is nothing worse in the show pen than a reining horse who explodes away from the leg. However, these being finished horses, if they steadfastly ignore me then I will hastily remind them.

I use my seat to control a horse's speed, feeling the movement created by the horse in my body and controlling that to quicken or slow the horses in his gait. I also use my leg in time with my seat to reinforce the cue. I cluck if I want the horse to move at speed and if a horse were being lazy I maintain the same rhythm but increase the pressure through my leg. Once the horse is moving I soften my leg while keeping the same rhythm.

If I want to slow the horse I can then 'hold' my seat against the movement and encourage them to slow back down. I use the 'kiss' sound for a lope

transition but, once in the lope, I will cluck for more speed.

Some rookie riders with more experienced horses get into the trap of nagging with their legs to get the horse to move. By this I mean a rider who rightly uses leg pressure to get a lazy horse to move off but then continues to apply pressure even once the horse is moving. Once the horse has responded in the way you desire go back to the soft leg position described previously. If you continue to apply pressure you will numb your horse to your leg and will eventually have a very difficult horse to ride, and one that will use any break in your leg pressure to quit forward motion.

The only way to fix this is to make it very clear when the horse is expected to move and then soften the pressure while still maintaining the rhythm with your seat. The first few times you do this he will probably break gait or even grind to a halt so you are going to have to come up with a way to drive him forward again immediately. In extreme cases you may have to go to your spur or use the ends of your reins to flick him on his sides where your leg lies to reinforce what you are asking. Whatever



Here the horse is moving forward nicely from a quiet leg, which I have softly against his side in a central position

SOFTLY DOES IT

It's really important that you always ask your horse with the softest of cues first even if you know he's going to take no notice. If you always go to the pressure it takes to get him to move first then you will always have to go to that amount of pressure. I will always ask with the lightest of pressure first and then reinforce that cue if necessary. This way the horse has the option of going when asked nicely. I want the time from the initial soft cue to him 'trying' to be as short as possible and I'll always stay soft when they try. This way he can associate the light pressure with the reinforcement, if it was necessary to do so, giving him the desire to stay light.

you do to get him moving again, once he is where you want him to be, release the pressure. Keep going until he is truly listening to your slightest leg and voice cues and reward him with some rest.

THINKING SIDWAYS

Another problem is a horse that will not move away from the leg laterally. As we are talking about finished horses here I am assuming that your horse will know his lateral work. By that I mean side passing and leg yielding, and how to move his shoulders and hip.

Lateral exercises are quite hard work for some horses, especially if they haven't done them for a while or are out of shape. Combine that with a rider who isn't really demanding a whole lot from them and they are likely to give you a hard time when you ask them initially. If your horse hasn't done this work for a while start off with something easy like a leg yield in walk, where he moves away from one of your legs with a slight arc in his body away from the direction he is moving. He will probably not be straight and may lead with his shoulders but just get him in the mode of moving off your leg.

Next try working on circles with direct and indirect bend. This is less about lateral work and more about softness and flexibility. It will also get the horse's shoulders working. A direct bend is when the horse is bent in the way he is travelling and an indirect bend is where, for instance, he is travelling on a circle to the right but is bent to the left. When he is performing



Here the horse is moving away from my right leg

this well in the walk move him up to the jog and lope, and work on different diameters of circle. This is a good test of how off your leg he is as you may find that he quits wanting to go forward as you are making him work

his body. Again, if he is physically out of shape you may be asking for too much so make the exercise a little easier by making the circles larger. However, if you feel he is just trying to evade work that he is capable of performing you may have to increase your leg pressure until he gets the message that you are serious and that he better get moving or the pressure will increase.

Even on a finished horse it's still important to work through the most basic of exercises from time to time as these will help keep him honest. To move a horse through his shoulders I move my weight slightly in the direction I want to travel and softly close my opposite leg on his side. If he does not follow my seat I then drive him with my leg in time with the desired speed of stride. Once he has moved I centre my weight for a couple of strides and then ask again. When asking a horse to give his hip I take my leg back a little. I always slide my leg back slowly and softly, giving him a chance to move away from the light pressure. If he doesn't move I quickly increase the pressure until he does. I then walk straight for a few strides and ask him again.

In my programme, all my horses can perform side pass, small circles with direct and indirect bend, and small circles with their hips in and out at the walk, jog and lope in both directions. Work on your horse's fitness and response to your seat and leg so that he too can perform these exercises. These really are just foundations that all fully trained western horse should have. They will help with suppleness and softness, and come in useful if you have to fix anything later on down the line. We'll be using them in future articles so get practising so you have them in your toolbox in readiness for the next edition.



This is the central leg position. Note the alignment between ear, hip and heel

LEG POSITIONS

I ride with my toes turned out to wrap my legs around the horse. I keep my heel down so not to make contact with the spur

- ★ Leg Centre – When sat up straight in the saddle there should be a vertical line through my head, shoulders, hip and heel. My leg is here most of time. This is the position I use to cue my horse to move forwards and when my leg is passive
- * Leg Forward – I use my leg forward of the cinch to ask the horse to stop and move backwards
- * Leg Back – I take my leg back slightly to move the hip
- * Feet – I ride with my toes turned out to wrap my legs around the horse more. The more leg I use the more my toe is turned out. I keep my heel down so not to use the spur when it is not needed