



THE BACK UP

A manoeuvre that all western trained horses should be familiar with, the back up is essential in a variety of training and show ring situations



The back up is an important exercise when training the western horse. It's required in most western disciplines and is a great tool to help collection in forward paces and downwards transitions when training. As with everything that we do, we want our back up to be soft with a nice cadence. A back up should be a two time gait with the horse's feet moving in diagonal pairs, the same as the jog.

The cue I use to back a horse up is to sit deep in the back of the saddle, bringing my legs forward a little and rounding through my lower back. I lift my hand, taking a light pressure on the reins and cluck to my horse when I want more effort. It is important not to pull your horse back with your hands as doing this can cause them to lean and lock up in their shoulders.

No matter what their discipline, western horses need to be engaged from behind, driving underneath themselves with their hind end. Incorporating the back up into some transition training will really help a horse get underneath themselves. A back up is also useful for teaching certain manoeuvres correctly too, such as the sliding stop and roll back.

In the show ring, western trail horses need to be able to master complex back ups between poles with accuracy and cadence (see pages 30-32) from the lightest cue, and all reining patterns require a back up, preferably with speed. Western pleasure, horsemanship and showmanship may also require the horse to go backwards and a back up is sometimes called for to differentiate between equally matched horses, so it is important that you have mastered it.



LEG POSITION

To cue a horse to back up I would usually take my legs slightly forward of the cinch. However, if I feel that the horse is not putting enough effort in, I will bring my leg back and bump him in the belly to encourage him to lift his back and drive from behind. If he is down in the flanks (as if he were squatting) I take my leg back further still to encourage him to lift. On some horses I may take my legs forward and bump them on the shoulders with the inside of my stirrup. When using my legs I'll think about the horse's stride, using my legs alternately to encourage individual legs to stride further.

BACKING CIRCLES

Backing circles is a great way to encourage softness and straightness in your horse's back up. I do a lot of circle work in my back up programme, and always work every horse on circles both ways. With a horse that wants to go left in the back up, because he is pushing on the right side of the bridle, I will work on circles to the left. This will soften the right side of the horse's face as you'll be bending his head to the outside. The softer he gets on the right side of his face the easier it will be to straighten him out and then back circles to the left.

When I back a circle I like my horse's head to be to the outside with his outside shoulder elevated. I achieve this by lifting my outside hand and shoulder up. My outside leg will come back slightly with my inside leg forward. I want to feel that the turn is coming from the horse's shoulder.



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STRAIGHTNESS

To get a good back up it is very important that both you and your horse are straight. Backing up doesn't come naturally to a lot of horses and it can take a lot of time and patience to get a good back up. If your horse doesn't back up easily then you want to determine what it is that is causing him difficulty.

As the rider, the first thing you need to think about is sitting squarely on top of the horse. It's really easy to think you are correct when you are not truly sat straight. I think about having an equal weight in both my stirrups and my legs the same distance away from the horse's side. I make sure I'm sitting right in the middle of the saddle with an even amount of weight through both seat bones and that my lower back is rounded and shoulders are level with my head in the centre. My hands also need to be level and an even distance away from the horse, and my reins the same length. Once you are sitting straight you can begin to feel what's causing the problems with your horse.

Most of the time when a horse won't back up straight you will feel him push his hip in the direction he is trying to travel. Some of the time this can be caused from him pushing in the bridle, when he pushes in the left rein it will cause his hip to travel to the right. One of the best exercises to work on straightness through your horse is backing circles (see left).

DOWNWARDS TRANSITIONS

The back up can be used to improve slowing down and collecting a horse, (especially for horse's that are on the forehand and are used to going this way), downwards transitions and the stop. When you ask your horse to transition down or stop you want him to use his hind end and balance himself. If I ask a horse to walk from a lope and he makes little

effort, not getting his hind end underneath himself, then I quietly pull him to a stop and back him for a few strides. I want to feel that his shoulder is up and that he is driving from behind for this to really help his transition down. I then go and ride that transition again. It doesn't normally take long before he is more balanced and correct.



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