



Successful STOPS

The sliding stop is a prerequisite for a finished reining horse, here's how to keep it good

The National Reining Horse Association (NRHA) defines the sliding stop as, 'The act of slowing a horse from a lope to a stop position by bringing the hind legs underneath in a locked position so the horse slides on its hind feet. The horse should enter the stop position by bending its back and bringing its hind legs under its body while maintaining forward motion, ground contact and cadence with its front legs. Throughout the stop the horse should continue in a straight line while maintaining contact with the hind feet.'

Pay careful attention to this description as everything you need to know about a good stop is in it. Don't be impressed but super long stops of 20 or 30 feet if the stop is crooked, the horse 'skips,' or the front legs brace. A good stop where the horse is straight, free in front and round in its back will be rewarded by a judge over any of the above, even if the slide tracks are only a few feet.

Further, if you can add a degree of difficulty by keeping the horse on a long rein, all the better!

Softness, straightness and a controlled build of speed are what you want from your horse if he is going to stop well for you. I want my horses to turn off the end of the arena in a relaxed manor and wait for me to ask them to run to the stop. I like to have a stride or two on the straight with my horse waiting on me before I ask for the build of speed. Ideally I like to feel as though I'm asking for the increase in speed every stride and if I were to stop asking for more speed the horse would maintain that speed.

By definition, a finished reining horse will know how to stop and, given the quality of its training, should be capable of stopping correctly. That said, no horse will stay perfect in its stopping technique without maintenance, and problems can arise through rider error, a horse's experiences of the manoeuvre and its physical condition.

In a good stop, the horse is straight, free in front and round in its back. You can add a degree of difficulty by keeping the horse on a long rein.



SAFE STOPPING

Asking a horse to slide at speed is physically demanding so it's important that your horse is fit enough to do so. If your horse has been out of work for any length of time it's important to have a programme to get them fit again. If your horse is unfit or hasn't stopped for a time then you will need to work a lot on form, keeping the horse soft and round and responsive, taking as long as the horse needs to get strong again.

The ground is very important. Never try and stop from speed on any ground that isn't designed for reining, or at least deemed suitable by a professional. Certainly never attempt the manoeuvre on rubber, fibre sand or gel track. You need a surface with a loose top, although not too deep, and a compact base such as clay. Just having a suitable surface is not enough, it must be maintained correctly and this is a whole subject in its own right. If in doubt, get in touch with a reining arena owner and ask for their advice or hire one.

Even specialist reining arenas will vary and your horse will feel it. This is something you will need to understand when showing at a variety of different venues. On new ground, you need to start

out by stopping your horse at steady pace so you can both get a feel for the surface. Once you feel your horse's confidence grow you can start to build a little more speed.

If you want your horse to slide well you'll need correctly fitted sliding plates. My horses feet are balanced as for normal shoeing but the hind shoes are flat plates which are straighter at the heel than a normal shoe, and stick out as far as the bulb of the heel. The absence of fullering in the shoe and the extended length increases the surface area and reduces friction with the ground allowing the horse to slide more easily. Most farriers can provide sliding plates but it helps if you can find one that has an interest in the sport.

I always use bell boots when stopping as it's easy for a horse stopping hard to catch the back of its front foot with its hind shoe. I'll also use skid boots on the hind legs to help protect the fetlocks from the friction of the sand. As with all performance events, I'd recommend bandaging or using supportive boots on the horse's front legs to protect the tendons.

RIDING THE STOP

It is useful to visualise riding the perfect stop. Imagine starting your run down the length of the arena, having turned the corner at the top in a balanced manner. Sit back a little and find a point at the end of the arena to focus on to keep your line straight. Try to find a line where no one has stopped before as uneven ground will affect the way the horse stops. When you ask for the stop, think about melting down into the saddle and bringing your legs away from the horse and forward a little. Say 'Whoa' as a verbal cue and leave your hand still so the horse stops on a loose rein. This is the perfect stopping scenario.

It's important that your position is correct in the stop to help your horse balance. The most common mistake I see is people tipping forward. This is normally because they are not sat deep enough in the saddle and are tense. If you tense or try to brace yourself as a horse stops there is a good chance your horses will brace too. A brace or tense horse will stop with a hollow outline and heavy on the front end. This will make for a horrid and very uncomfortable manoeuvre!



FENCING

Fencing is a technique many riders use in maintaining the stop. It helps keep horses straight and allows you to work on the manoeuvre without needing to pull on them if they are being lazy about sliding. It also helps get a horse's hind end underneath them and encourages them to try a little harder to stay in the ground, which is useful if they are feeling new ground for the first time.

Horses are run up an arena to a wall or gate and asked to stop. The idea is not to run the horse into the wall as we definitely don't want to scare or intimidate them, and this is where skill and experience should come in. You have to know when to ask for the stop and this should be well before you are too close to the barrier you are aiming for. If working on straightness, a horse is simply jogged or loped to a spot on the wall or fence and corrected if they drift off the line.

TOP TIPS

- ★ Remember the NRHA description of the stop and think form over distance
- ★ Softness, straightness and a controlled build of speed lead to a good stop
- ★ Before stopping ensure you are riding on the correct ground, that your horse has sliding plates, protective boots and is fit enough to perform the manoeuvre.
- ★ Keep your balance – do not tip forward or brace.
- ★ Do not fence unless you understand what you are doing and always stop before the wall.
- ★ If your horse takes off on the approach to the rundown, ride some rectangles around the arena and break the horse down to a walk at the beginning of the straight, letting them relax before picking up the lope again.
- ★ If your horse rushes when asked to build speed, either pull them to the stop the moment they run off or break them down to a jog and ride them to the end of the arena depending on how anxious they are.
- ★ Keep a horse from anticipating the stop by riding 'long,' and in patterns, make sure to go way past the marker. It is good to mix things up sometimes by running your horse all the way around the arena without stopping in schooling sessions.
- ★ With older horses there's no need to stop them again and again. Work on maintaining form from a slow lope, keeping everything relaxed and add speed in the weeks prior to a show.

RUSHING OFF

Horses taking off when asked to build speed to a stop is a common problem and can really affect your score for the manoeuvre. If the horse were to take off as soon as it hits the straight then I would do some work riding rectangles, breaking it down to a walk at the beginning of the straight and letting it relax before picking up the lope again. I would then take the horse down the arena steadily and quietly turning at the end to come back up the long side. To break down to a walk I would use the same cue I'd use when asking a horse to slow on a circle and then pick up on the reins. The first couple of times the horse may fight the bridle a little but once it has the idea it'll stay soft and start to wait.

If a horse waits on you but then rushes when asked to build speed I would either pull it to the stop the moment it ran off or break it down to a jog and ride it to the end of the arena. If the horse is just getting strong but isn't anxious about the stop then pulling it up when it runs off is often enough to make it wait for you. For some horses this will make the stop more of a big deal and you'll just upset them more. By breaking them to a jog when they try and take off you keep everything very quiet, helping the horse to relax and wait on you.



Once horses are wise to when they stop in a reining pattern they may start to quit on you, either making them hard to drive on to the stop or stopping before they are asked (also known as 'scotching'). I always run my horses 'long' when showing, and even if the pattern asks for the stop after the centre marker I'll normally go past the end marker. I think this is a good way to help keep a horse honest and not anticipating.

If you have a horse that really tries to quit in their stops then I'd work them on rectangles, building speed down the arena and then slowing around the end. It's sometimes good to mix things up and run your horse all the way around the arena without stopping.

It's quite common for older horses to get excited and possibly anxious about the sliding stop. If I know a horse can stop well there's no need to stop him again and again. I work on maintaining their form from a slow lope, keeping everything relaxed. I will only work on the fast stops in the couple of weeks running up to a competition.