

UGLY LOPE

Michael Langford answers a reader's question regarding their horse's form in the lope

QUESTION

I am competing in novice classes and seem to be hitting the same problem over and over again. I also notice it in my fellow competitors. I can have my horse nice and soft in the walk and jog but when I ask for a lope she flings her head up and gets faster. She braces her neck and we lose all shape. Do I need to change from a snaffle to a curb?

MICHAEL ANSWERS

This is a common problem with a lot of riders out there, especially in the show pen. For starters this is normally a lack of collection and while changing the bit may help to a small degree it is not the best answer. The biggest cause of the problem is that most riders rely too much on their hands and don't do enough with their legs to

encourage their horse to collect at the lope. The reason that your horse speeds up and braces its neck after the transition to lope is likely to be because she is unbalanced and more than likely on her forehead.

If a horse is on the forehand it will naturally raise its head to regain balance. We need to teach our horses to drop their heads while keeping their shoulders up. A horse that maintains a level topline and is able to make a smooth transition without throwing its head up is a horse that is driving from behind and taking good steps underneath itself with its hind legs. You need to remember that your hands are only supposed to position the horse's head and your legs and seat do the rest. If your horse is collected then achieving a soft face and a slow lope becomes a lot easier.

Your horse should be able to perform all the basic manoeuvres in a snaffle and you should only change to a curb as a means of refinement. I would have your horse's teeth, saddle and back checked as a matter of

routine but it is my feeling that this problem is more likely to be coming from a lack of education and communication between horse and rider than any physical pain in the horse.

It is typically a time consuming process teaching a horse to maintain a collected frame on a loose rein. To teach a horse to collect I wrap my legs around their rib cage and squeeze until I feel them lift their back. A lot of the time when you do this on a novice horse they will try and quicken the lope instead of collecting more. When this happens most people take the leg away, teaching the horse that the release is for going faster, not for collection. If a horse quickens when I ask for collection I pick up on the reins and hold until I feel them lift their back and soften in the face. Then I put the slack back in the rein and soften with my leg. I always start with the lightest of pressures in both hand and leg, and then build to a pressure which is meaningful to the horse.

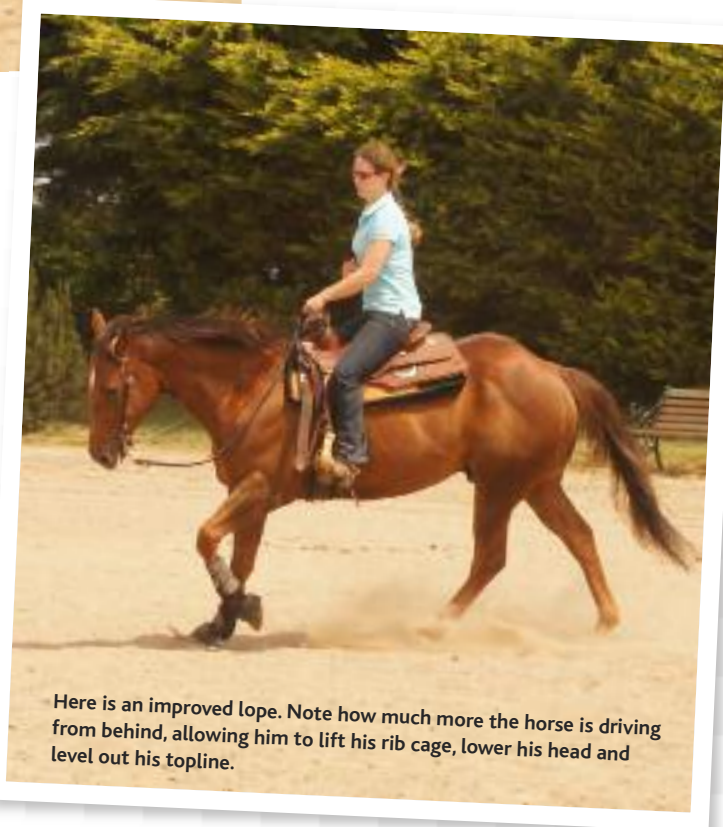
Also think about your effect on the horse.



This rider is demonstrating a typical problem in the lope. Note how the horse is on its forehand (and not really driving from behind) causing it to brace its head and neck in order to balance.

Any tension in your body will block the movement of the horse and put them off balance. Show nerves will often result in a rider carrying tension in their body and altering their riding position. Just being aware of any tension is a good start. Think about the position you know is the most effective. Sit in the centre of the saddle and lean a little back if you feel yourself perching forward and adding to the weight over your horse's front end. Keep your pelvis loose with your legs relaxed at your horse's sides when she is going well. Have your toes turned slightly out and keep your shoulders up and back. Being mindful of any deviation from this ideal will help enormously. Even if you struggle to fix it right away you will have identified a problem area and can work on fixing it.

Finally, having a good warm up plan will help you iron out any difficulties before you enter the show pen itself. Some horses come off the trailer stiff or will be distracted by what is going on out side of the arena. Give yourself plenty of time to iron out any kinks in your horse in the warm up, working to soften them on each rein and accustom them to the show ground environment so they are ready to listen to you and do their best when it matters.



Here is an improved lope. Note how much more the horse is driving from behind, allowing him to lift his rib cage, lower his head and level out his topline.



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