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Harnessing the **POWER**

Using your seat to regulate rhythm in horses with a 'need for speed'

by Sheri Spencer, C.E.M.T., P.T.S.

Managing speed can often feel like a futile, sometimes intimidating struggle astride hot-blooded horses and those who seem to love getting everywhere quickly. When the horse gains speed, the natural reaction is to pull on the reins, and when that doesn't work, intensify the bit. The reality, however, is that hauling on the reins tends to backslide into an unforgiving cycle of tug-of-war, a fight for control that can easily escalate. (See Opposition Reflex on page 53.)

Pulling on the bit – which constricts the jaw, head, and neck – triggers a chain reaction through the horse's body that can hollow the spine, predisposing the horse to being stuck on the forehand and leaning on the bit, essentially trapping him in the very means of travel that leads the rider to pull in the first place.

Engaging seat and legs

Instead of blocking or aiming to control the horse with the reins, riding from the seat can influence the horse's movement without creating an argument or causing pain to the delicate tissues in the horse's mouth. In this way, rather than inhibiting the horse's willingness to move, they're allowed freedom of expression without a physical force essentially forcing their skeletal system out of alignment. Without the restraint against their mouths, the horse learns to not lean on the bit and can better develop the musculature for proper self-carriage. With consistent riding, the horse will learn to respond to seat and weight aids alone.



If the horse erupts in a burst of speed and the rider automatically goes to the reins, the resulting wrestling match can throw both horse and rider off balance - especially problematic in the middle of a jumping course. Through using the legs, hips and half-halts you can control the rhythm.

Contrary to instinct, the rider's legs need to be engaged. The thigh adductors (groin muscles on the upper inside thigh) should be active without clenching to stabilize the rider while the hip abductors (the closing muscles of the hip where your front pockets are) are responsible for establishing and enforcing tempo. By "holding the rhythm with your pockets" with the lower leg present at the girth, you can both regulate the rhythm while still allowing freedom through the neck and enabling the horse to elevate the back. This develops their core muscles while constructively channeling their willingness to move.

Where pulling on the rein conflicts with their desire for forward movement, you are instead facilitating a positive transformation from speed into expression.

Putting it into practice

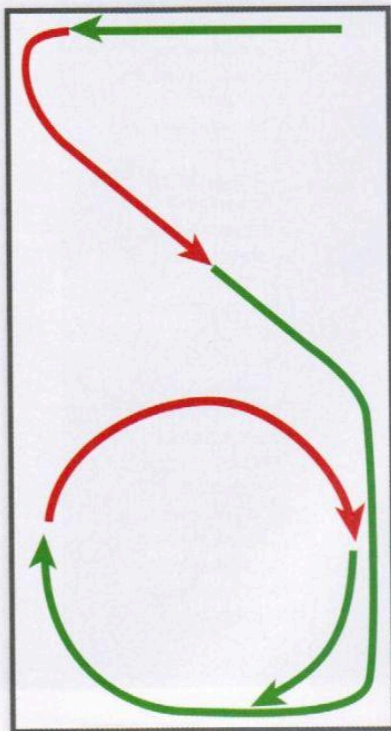
As soon as you pick up the trot, keep some tension in your "pockets" to maintain control of the posting rhythm. The sensation feels like activating resistance in front of your hip joints, deep in your pelvis. As soon as the horse's tempo quickens, use a half-halt as the immediate correction instead of the rein, and the horse will learn to listen more closely to the seat without the resistance caused by an encumbered mouth.

Cueing the half-halt is essentially like asking for a downward transition, except with the lower leg engaged at the girth to keep the gait active and to engage the horse's abdominals. Ask by weighting the seat bones towards

Basic variations in the warm-up include downward transitions on the circle where horses are more prone to accelerate. Begin with downward transitions to walk from trot, then trot on as you return to the rail. Alternately, if the horse tries to drift, running through the outside aids, downward transitions at the centreline can also be beneficial to ease your return to the rail. As the horse settles, begin introducing the half-halts instead, and manage the rhythm with your seat.

Incorporate spiral-ins at the trot, with a downward transition at the smallest revolution and leg-yield spiralling out at the walk, and work up to half-halt and "holding with your pelvis." If the horse begins rushing at any point, ignoring the seat, just do a downward transition and carry on like that was the idea the whole time.





Minimizing rushing when changing rein across the diagonal can be helped by performing a downward transition either as you approach or round the corner, or as soon as you're aligned on the diagonal. If the horse settles, you can trot on at your leisure, with your pelvic muscles engaged. Begin preparing for the downward transition a few strides in advance using half-halts, and in time you may find that even just preparing to walk is enough to control the tempo and help manage it with the seat alone. Circling with transitions/half-halts before or after diagonals can also help settle the horse and regulate the rhythm.



Lateral work can easily scramble into disarray if the horse rushes. In shoulder-in or leg yield, for example, by asking for a downward transition at the onset of the movement, or even part way through if rushing occurs, you can instill patience. By introducing movements with a downward transition or half-halt, you also ingrain the habit of slowing down before the movement starts, and the horse may even start to anticipate "braking."

your heels as you suspend the follow-through of your seat against the horse's movement in the sitting phase, then resume following the movement with your seat and cue at the girth as you rise. A gentle squeeze and release on the rein at the start of the cue can be helpful when introducing the half-halt, but ultimately it is best to work towards not using the rein at all. Use resistance in your pelvis instead.

To regulate the horse's reaction through the rising/release phase of the half-halt, repeat the retarding effect of the seat into the following strides, and wean down the degree of "halting" motion of the seat as the horse's rhythm stabilizes.

By keeping the holding muscles in your pelvis engaged and setting the rhythm, it is easier to control the gait through the movements wherever the horse's tendency is to accelerate.

Even in the canter, this same practice can be applied. Keeping your "pockets"

activated maintains engagement with the seat through the canter effectively whether seated, in half-seat, or in two-point. That active tension or "holding" resistance actively maintains tempo and enables the rider to better respond immediately to sudden bursts from the horse.

Half-halting in the canter is essentially the same for the rider as in the trot, but timing may vary depending on the horse. Generally, applying the half-halt as the horse's body rocks from the leading foreleg back onto the haunches tends to be most effective. The release phase can then follow immediately as the first hind leg bears weight, cueing with the lower leg at the girth for a deeper step with the inside hind. Resisting with your pelvis will help limit the stride length and tempo.

As in the trot, for best results, make the initial corrective half-halt the most firm, then in the strides that follow, lessen



Over fences, holding with your pelvis using half-halts as necessary will help control the approach, and if after the fence the half-halt is not enough to bring the speed back into control within the first few strides, use your seat into a downward transition and take full advantage of the corners. This teaches the horse to “down-shift” after fences, and using the corners helps prevent them from leaning and charging off, while also facilitating a safer space if you need to circle. Getting speed managed as early as possible after a fence will encourage better habits, and make it easier to safely progress into lines and courses.

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the intensity as the horse responds. With practice, it will become easier to gauge the degree of lower leg as well. Often it doesn't take much, but as the horse learns to respond more to the seat aids, the lower leg cue will be especially helpful for improved activity.

Once this has been understood by the horse and practiced consistently on the flat, it can become an effective first response to sudden bursts even during a jumping course.

Proactively engaging with your “pockets” as you recover from a fence or come out of a line or corner will remind the horse to listen to your seat, checks their rhythm, and better enables them to rebalance and prepare for whatever comes next.

When the rider defaults to the rein, especially

over fences, wrestling with the head can very easily throw the horse off balance or obstruct their own preparations for the next obstacle.

During schooling, if the horse is excitable, it's always a good idea to tone it down and return to the basics. Practice transitions through walk and trot, and even walk and halt, holding the rhythm with your pelvic muscles and half-halting as necessary. This will get the horse listening to the seat again, reducing the likelihood of “arguments” while also letting their mind and body settle down.

Riding effectively from the seat is a far more effective means of communication that facilitates freer movement and happier rides for both rider *and* horse. 🐾

OPPOSITION REFLEX

Have you ever been in a crowd of people and someone pushes you? Your immediate reaction is to push back. If someone tries to push or pull you to wherever they want you to go, your immediate response or natural reflex (when you don't know it's coming) is to resist. This is “Opposition Reflex” the reaction to pull or push against someone or something that is pulling or pushing you. This reaction, first noted by Ivan Pavlov, is inherent in most mammals, including horses. Also called thigmotaxis, it is the positive or negative response of an organism to physical contact – a survival instinct from birth. An example is trying to teach a foal to lead; its opposition reflex is to pull back when forward pressure is applied.

Try suddenly pushing on your horse's shoulder or hip when you are standing next to them. Moving away is a trained response; the more natural one is to quickly correct its balance by pushing back. The same happens with bit pressure where the instinctive response is to resist the pressure, which can be problematic when trying to slow down an agitated or excited horse just using the reins.