

## TRAINING

### **Creating Connection: Finding harmony with your horse through the bit**

Getting a horse “on the bit” is a result of a kind and consistent hand, and influencing the body, which in turn creates the desired neck/head carriage.



*With the rider's leg engaged at the girth, the barrel is flexed outwards, creating space to deepen the step of the hind leg. The activation of their core and slight lateral flexion helps release through the spine. A soft, steady contact encourages reaching forward into the bit.*

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One of the most profound stages in the education of the rider is the ability to shift the focus beyond what is seen out in front – the head and neck – to what is happening beneath. Getting a horse correctly “on the bit” is a result of influencing the body which in turn creates the neck/head carriage. If the focus begins at the head, the result can be restrictive to the function of the neck, freedom of the shoulder, and ripple adversely backwards. Still, even the kindest of hands may be met with resistance or evasion, above or behind the bit.

Connection into the bit, therefore, comes from everything beneath and behind the rider. The position of the neck should be a direct result of what is happening through the body. If the neck is stiff, hollowed, or over-curved, it's likely to be a result from tension, a disconnect or lack of engagement somewhere else in the body.

The function of the rider's hands is merely a boundary, channelling the horse's enthusiasm like the banks of a river, allowing the energy somewhere to go. If the energy needs to be constrained for any reason by the hand, it should never be for more than an instant to reinforce the aids of the seat.

Ruling out pain or injury, occasionally horses shy away from contact or rebel against it. Lunging with side reins can be helpful between rides to acclimate the horse to steady contact, and can be especially helpful for horses who lean, pull, or shy from the bit.

With a consistent anchor point and length, the horse can begin to anticipate the boundaries created, and generally learn to find a comfortable position within. For those who duck behind the bit, it's an excellent way to ensure the only accidental jarring on the mouth will be a result of their own actions, and the consistency helps overcome any uncertainties associated with contact. For the horse who yanks against the reins or roots downwards, side reins give him no one to argue with but himself.



*If the horse is able to stand comfortably with side reins attached, he'll maintain enough freedom through the neck and shoulder to be encouraged to reach into the contact without restriction.*

The side reins should be introduced with enough length that the horse can still hold his head comfortably and naturally while standing. If the side reins are too tight, the horse may start backing up, and if so, especially if he fights against them, they should be removed immediately as this reaction can easily escalate. Ensure the side reins are lengthened and comfortably long enough before re-attaching them.



*With the horse looking straight ahead, a simple trick to confirm if the length of the side rein is adequate is by measuring it to the line of the throat.*

On the lunge, it is encouraged to warm up without side reins before attaching them. Once familiarized with their use, if the horse is visibly comfortable, they can be adjusted so that the inside side rein is slightly (one hole) shorter than the outside rein. Just be sure to lengthen it again for the change of rein.

When back under saddle, it can be helpful to think of your forearms as side reins anchored at the elbow to create consistent, inviting contact. The upper arm allows for elasticity from the shoulder to follow any sudden movements of the head.



*When the back is rigid or dropped, the same tension or inversion often replicates through to the poll. If a heavy-handed rider tried to coerce a frame, it would restrict the neck, in turn blocking the shoulder, and perpetuate the cause of the issue.*

## **Remedying Resistance**

Bracing or going above the bit, while commonly regarded as forms of resistance of contact, are often a result of tension elsewhere in the body. To achieve softness through the neck and poll, it must first be achieved with softness through the spine.

Creating lateral bend is often an effective way to release through the spine, and in turn release through the neck. Using circles, serpentines, shoulder-ins, and leg yields to create a lateral bend, it in turn encourages a longitudinal release over the topline.

With widened hands to facilitate bend, in the rising trot cue with the inside leg at the girth as the inside hind comes forward (during the post) to encourage the abdominals to activate and the rib cage to bend outwards. This helps unlock tension over the back while simultaneously deepening the

step of that inside hind. This technique, “enlarging,” is a staple for encouraging roundness through the spine, and is even useful on straight lines to cue the cascade of activity over the topline from the hind end forward.

Throughout, the hands should be soft with never more than a few grams of weight in the rein. When the neck and poll soften, the hands should immediately reward with a slight release. Even if the rhythm increases, it should be corrected by slowing the post and limiting tempo with the rider’s body, not the hands.

In this way, the hands establish a consistent boundary like the side reins, but also reward desirable movement and behaviour. When the hand is consistent and kind, it becomes more inviting.



*(Left) In dropping behind the bit, the horse disengages the muscles that support the base of the neck. This drops the chest as well, forcing more weight onto the forehead, and causing the hindquarters to trail behind.*

*(Right) By using an inside leg cue at the girth then asking for a slight shoulder-in with the outside thigh, the horse first engages through his core, then is encouraged to lift through the shoulder as well. This inspires him to elevate from the base of the neck and in time will develop the musculature to better support the carriage. (Joe Frechette photos)*

### **Creating Reach from Behind the Bit**

Consistently ducking behind the bit with the chin curled toward the chest is an evasion from contact and usually a sign of lack of fitness over the back. Focus on keeping the shoulders aligned while increasing the activity of the

haunches and, provided the hands are giving and soft, the head will sort itself out in time.

Shifting your hands slightly forward can help encourage a more forward reach, but ultimately the position will improve as the base of the neck, back and abdominals strengthen.

In the trot, “enlarge” with the inside leg at the girth as you rise to activate the core muscles and deepen the step of the hind leg. Increasing the engagement of the trot from the hind end strengthens the topline and abdominals, which in turn frees up the movement of the shoulder and helps elevate from the base of the neck.

Another technique to encourage raising of the head and neck is by mobilizing the shoulders. While keeping the body aligned through to the poll, asking for a slight shoulder-in with the outside leg forces the horse to elevate through his chest to accommodate the change in travel with his forelegs. Practicing this intermittently helps activate those “new” muscle groups while breaking up the habit of over-flexing.

When introducing these changes in movement, bear in mind that it will take time for the horse to develop the strength to carry himself consistently, and growing tired can easily cause him to fall back on old patterns. Walk breaks are a great reward after completing a movement successfully, or if he has traveled well for a length of time.

Ultimately, the best way to get a horse consistently on the bit is by not worrying about it. Focus on their body and movement, and it will come.