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Head Tilt in Horses

I was speaking to a trainer friend of mine recently, and she suggested I write an article about head tilt in horses, since this is a problem trainers often encounter with their students. So, for Diane, here it is.

IDENTIFYING HEAD TILT

The importance of understanding when the horse's head is held in an improper position lies in the fact that this interferes with straightness, therefore function. Additionally, it can be indicative of a physical problem, or discomfort in the head, neck or teeth. So naturally, we need to identify if this condition exists, so we can properly know how to correct it.

I think the biggest confusion on the part of the rider is they can't distinguish the between proper head position which results from bend or jaw flexion, and abnormal head position which results from improper training or a physical problem.

The easiest way to determine if your horse has an abnormal head tilt is to observe your horse moving toward you. The horse's eyes and ears should stay parallel with the ground. If you see one ear lower and the nose is carried toward one side or the other, then your horse probably has a head tilt. When turning his head to the side, the horse should never lead with his nose or jaw. To understand this, try these two movements yourself. 1) turn your head to the left by leading with your chin. As you do this notice your right ear drops down and the alignment of the spine is disturbed. This is a head tilt. 2) Now turn your head to the left, but keep your chin level with the ground. You will probably notice that there is greater tension in your neck muscles with the movement which creates the head tilt. It's the same for your horse.

One problem associated with identifying a head tilt is that it is easier to see it from the ground than it is from the saddle. Understanding and utilizing correct methods of training will help keep the horse straight and will decrease the occurrence of the head tilt.

CAUSES

Horses can exhibit a head tilt as the result of either a physical impairment or a resistance directly resulting from improper riding. Physical causes include vestibular disease such as infections, neurological disorders such as EPM or West Nile, spinal subluxation (vertebral misalignment), dislocation or injury, and dental issues or mouth and tongue problems such as abscesses and lacerations. Even a problem with the fit of the bit can cause a horse to have a head tilt.

One way to help determine the origin of the head tilt is to observe if it is apparent at times when the horse is not ridden. If it is, this usually indicates a physical cause and it then becomes necessary to perform additional diagnostic testing. Once we rule out a physical origin for the head tilt, we can consider rider related schooling as the primary cause.

CORRECTING THE PROBLEM

If the head tilt is the result of a physical problem, the correction will be dependent upon the specific diagnosis. For purposes of this article, we will address only head tilts which developed as a consequence of incorrect use of the aids.

First, we need to consider that head tilts commonly result from the riders overuse of one rein. This not only affects the horse's head position, but it affects the overall balance & gait of the horse. Therefore, the horse will not travel straight and performance will be affected. Likely, the stride will be shorter and the ability for the horse to elevate his forehand will be compromised.

The issue here is *why* the rider feels the need to over use one rein. One lesson which inevitably finds its way into the training of horse and rider is the ability to develop energy from behind and direct it so that it travels straight through the horse to the bit. Often this involves a certain connection to the outside rein while there exists an even bend through the horse's body with no loss of energy. When the rider is unable produce this, they use the reins to falsely create a flexion in the horse's neck which twists and rotates the spine, particularly at the poll. The result will be a horse that travels heavier on one shoulder, overbent in the neck, and develops a head tilt.

Correction of this problem involves riding the horse straight, forward with impulsion, and into an even contact. If the horse has a head tilt to the *left*, the rider is probably using too much left rein. Assist the horse carrying his head straight by supporting the horse on the *right* rein a bit more. Relax your left rein contact a bit but make sure your horse is yielding (bending) to your left seat and leg. To summarize- a horse that tilts his head left should be asked to activate the corresponding left hind leg while you support him on the opposite right rein, remembering to keep just enough left spinal bend so that the horse travels straight, with no loss of energy to an even contact. Head tilts can, and should, always be corrected. Now you know how.

Until next time,

Dr. Bev Gordon