

USING THE REIN-BACK TO IMPROVE OVERALL PERFORMANCE

Author's note: Because of the complexity involved in understanding how to perform a correct rein-back and use it to improve overall performance, this article will be divided into three parts. Part 1 will be a basic introduction into understanding the rein-back, along with a description of the aids used to execute it correctly. Part 2 will introduce backing circles which will help improve the quality of the rein-back. Part 3 will consist of training exercises for more advanced riders and horses to help refine overall performance. While I try to write articles which are informative to the majority of Sidelines readers, I must take the liberty of occasionally writing an article which includes a higher degree of scientific information, or advanced riding techniques. Parts 2 and 3 will progressively be such articles. Please forgive this occasional diversion and I hope everyone will be able to gain a bit more understanding from all three articles, regardless of your riding level.

Part I - Understanding the Rein-Back

Introduction

If there is one equine skill which is underused and yet over-abused I would have to say that it would be the rein-back. It's benefits in training are frequently misunderstood, and trainers often resort to backing horses only as punishment. But there are many benefits associated with proper schooling of this important skill ranging from lightening the front end to strengthening the back and stifles. Correct schooling of the rein-back demands increased flexion and weight bearing of the hind joints, and helps elevate the back. Schooling thereby can be used to strengthen the horse's hindquarters along with the supportive structures of the hind joints. And from a strictly practical sense, there are times we need to be able to maneuver our horses to either back out of a tight spot on a trail, open or close a gate, or work one horse while horseback on another (something I often have to do).

The rein-back, and exercises associated with this skill are rarely included as a regular part of the horse's daily schooling, particularly when training out of the dressage school. Some trainers argue that if they school it regularly their horses begin to back up when they haven't asked them to do so. An example would be the horse stepping back after a halt in a dressage test, which is certainly an undesirable response. But what is commonly misunderstood is that this response by the horse is not the

result of too much backing, but a distinct lack of separation of aids in the horse's mind. Which brings me back to the importance of *properly* schooling this movement.

The Basic Movement

First, let's understand the basic movement. One might think the rein-back is simply the horse walking backward instead of forward. However, the correct rein-back is performed at the walk but with the footfalls of the trot. Each pair of diagonal legs should move *simultaneously*, the same as the trot, but without the suspension. Diagonals in the rein-back are often named using the front leg of the diagonal pair. For example, movement of the right front and left hind together is referred to as the right diagonal.

In order for the rein-back to be successful, certain criteria have to be considered in training the movement. They are:

- a) clean, even diagonal (front and hind) steps
- b) diagonal pairs must step backward an equal *distance*, with the same *elevation* and at an *even tempo*
- c) steps should be lively and active
- d) the horse needs to back straight
- e) the horse should lighten his forehead and step backward in a willing state of mind, without losing frame or self-carriage, and must remain on the bit

Some common faults include:

- a) dragging feet along the ground
- b) dropping the back and raising the head
- c) hesitation, uneven rhythm, or uneven diagonals
- d) crookedness, swinging haunches (so common and so easy to correct!)
- e) rushing backward or reluctance to move
- f) ineffective, displaced rider weight or leg position
- g) rider pulling on the reins
- h) resistance of any kind

Schooling the Rein-back

Backing-up is not a preferred movement by the horse. While horses will often back a few steps when frightened, their natural inclination is to turn and flee. Awareness is the key to correct training of this skill. As is softness. Because backing repetitive steps is somewhat unnatural for the

horse, resistances frequently occur as a result of the riders pulling on the reins to perform the skill without giving enough consideration to the quality of the movement. These resistances can often be seen in the horse's mouth, back and hind quarters resulting in a stiff, uneven and most certainly unappealing movement. (figure 1)

(PICTURE BAD REIN-BACK)

The rein-back is actually a forward movement, that is, it possesses the impulsion necessary to move forward, though the horse is actually moving backward. When performed correctly, the horse will be properly prepared to move forward with impulsion *immediately* afterward in any gait requested by the rider. The overall picture should be one of softness with the horse stepping backward in a willing frame of mind. There should be no impression of the rider pulling the horse backward. (figure 2)

(PICTURE GOOD REIN-BACK)

As the horse becomes stronger and more supple in his hind joints, you can introduce rein-back exercises (we will discuss this further in part 2) which improve performance of other skills. For now however, we will discuss classic theory and aids for performing the rein-back.

The Aids

The rein-back will be more successful if you keep your horse round and on the bit. Since this is actually a forward movement performed backward you need to prepare to move the horse forward by developing and initiating impulsion. With your legs positioned at the girth, "ride" the horse forward with slight leg pressure. It will be helpful to lighten your seat bones to encourage the horse's use of his back, and not interfere with his backward movement. Before the horse actually takes the first step forward, you will redirect the energy you created backward by closing your hands on the reins. Be very careful that you do not *pull* the horse backward, but that you *ride* the horse backward. Your legs exert less pressure and soften as the horse begins to move back. Sit up, don't lean, and most important don't pull! It is advantageous in the training to require the horse to move *forward* without hesitation after the last step in the rein-back. Ask for a specific number of backward steps each time so that you are sure you are riding with clear aids. Remember, the horse should shift his weight and step back in response to *specific* aids, not because you pull back on the

reins. This separation of aids is necessary for the horse to understand when to back up and when to halt.

The benefits derived from including the rein-back regularly in your schooling sessions are many, least of all that when performed correctly the rein-back looks fluid, smooth and pretty.

Next article will be Part 2 - Backing Circles to Straighten your Horse

Until next time,

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