



# ESI NEWS

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## IS YOUR HORSE ON THE FOREHAND AND HOW CAN YOU TELL?

*By Manuela McLean*



**For a horse to feel balanced on all 4 legs, we must train him to use his hind legs as well as his front legs as brakes. That does not mean 'collected' or 'uphill' as in the dressage terms but able to carry us in whatever circumstance or terrain comfortably and safely.**

In the wild, a horse will go on the forehand to escape from predators. He drops low in front to facilitate escape manoeuvres, similar to shying. This allows him to flee faster than a horse that pushes upwards off the ground as in a canter pirouette which of course is not an efficient or fast escape movement.

Many modern sport horses are built uphill, in particular dressage and show jumping horses, but that does not always mean they travel uphill.

Western horses tend to be built downhill and that does not always mean they travel that way; you can see that when they do sliding stops and brake with all four legs.



Horses' legs work in diagonal pairs and knowing this helps us in our training both on the ground and under-saddle. There is nearly always a 'running' pair of legs, which shows up as the more dominant leg or the way the horse drifts when crooked. It's similar to human left or right handedness.

Commonly, it's the off fore (their right fore) and near hind (their left hind) that run or go quickly through the air or swing phase and the other pair (near (left) fore /off (right) hind) that is feel they stall but actually do not stabilise when on the ground or in the stance phase. Horses, therefore, tend to be more downhill on their right fore/left hind than the other pair. They tend to fall in on the right rein and out on the left rein and therefore do not push uphill on the left fore/ right hind. It is almost as if they are freewheeling. This is uncomfortable for the horse particularly with a rider on top and he may drop his shoulder, feel unlevel or twist his barrel or hindquarters to compensate. It is our job both on the ground and under saddle to help them be symmetrical and be able to use their bodies symmetrically to make it not only comfortable for them but also for us when riding.

Take a moment to watch your horse grazing. Some habitually graze with one leg more forward than the other and often always the same one. The leg that is back is often a long way back, especially if the horse has a short neck. This horse is likely to be supporting his weight with the forward placed leg, and it is likely to be the running leg.





Another way to test this is check the way he halts from the walk, a horse that runs with the right foreleg will generally do so with it more more forward than the other or if square in front will halt with it last.

A horse that is downhill or on the forehand generally does not push upwards with the legs that are on the ground, they appear out behind and the take off position of the forelegs is behind the line of the centre of gravity, and do not support the weight of the shoulders and neck.

It is best to train ambidexterity and symmetry on the ground first so you can see what the legs are doing. But before I get to that, below are signs that a horse is on the forehand while leading or being ridden.



Top: Forelegs angled backwards from shoulders – horse is ‘on the forehand’

Bottom: Forelegs much straighter under shoulders

## SIGNS OF THE HORSE BEING ON THE FOREHAND

All horses are different and may not exhibit all these signs if on the forehand. I am picking examples of a horse who runs with his right fore/left hind.

- At halt, the horse may not be square with the forelegs, a horse who runs with his right fore will tend to halt with it more forward putting his weight on that shoulder.

- At halt if square with the forelegs a horse who runs with the right fore will have his left hindleg out behind.
- When standing square, the fore legs will appear angled backwards (as if the horse is slightly leaning forwards).
- While leading, the horse may tend to walk on top of you. The right fore will be taking a longer step and likely cross it to the left, he pushes his shoulder into you (it is not upright) and this horse often shies.
- The horse crosses the left hind to the right and does not land on it squarely, it lands on an angle, and he places his right hind to the right.
- While leading, the horse often wants to walk in front of you and runs, particularly when he is distracted or shying.
- When walking, the horse may tend to trip particularly with the forelegs.
- When walking, the horse might land too much toe first and wear the front of his hooves. He should land on the ground with a relatively flat foot. Sometimes the hindlegs can be worse than the forelegs.
- He may have a tendency to scuff the sand in front of him with either the forelegs or hindlegs or both. He does not lift his hooves.
- The horse is usually heavier on the lead aid to stop and will lengthen his neck outwards or downwards.
- The horse may lurch forward with a big step when ask to lead.
- When looking at the take-off spot of the foreleg, it can be too far back: it should take off just behind the girth. This horse may have a massive over track, particularly in the walk or not much over track at all.
- The horse's knees may not bend enough when in walk and/or in the other gaits. He can only do this if he is upright.
- The horse may sound heavy on his feet.
- The horse might walk fast, but others can be super slow. The placement of the hindleg after the foreleg is too quick and is not a regular 1,2,3,4, walk

- The horse can have trouble going downhill.
- The horse may have a lateral walk.
- He may be very narrow or very wide between the forelegs, or the backlegs.

## **EXERCISES ON THE GROUND TO IMPROVE YOUR HORSES POSTURE & BALANCE**

Before beginning these exercises in-hand, make sure you have trained a forward lead aid for up a gait and a backward lead aid for down a gait or to rein back. The best exercise for this is to walk 6-8 steps and halt. Notice that when the horse halts with his right foreleg last, it is the first one to go when you move forward again. Aim for your horse to halt with square forelegs. Apply a contact on the lead at step 4 if doing 6 steps and stop the next 2, use your body, brace and walk slowly into the halt remaining level with his head.

This exercise is not always easy to do perfectly, but mostly good really helps us analyse the pair of legs that are strong in the swing phase and weak in the stance phase.

### **Exercise 1: Stepping forward and back one step.**

Choose an area where your horse is relaxed, along a wall or fence is useful to control sideways deviations but not essential.

Use a halter or bridle or lunging cavesson for this exercise, you get greater control in a bridle or cavesson particularly of his head, try to make his head as straight as possible during this exercise.

Begin at halt and face your horse standing level with his head. You are going to train one pair of legs to take a step forward and then take a step back a step back.

Try to stand still, maybe one leg forward for better balance. Stay strong in your position on the ground and don't allow the horse to push you over, you may need to brace in the core and glutes quite strongly at times.

Since the right fore/left hind are generally the running pair it is easier to train the left fore/right hind as a pair first.

With a lead back aid (as light as possible), step back one step, (left fore/right hind) the pair of legs stepping back should do so diagonally and then let the horse stand for a moment, 2-3 seconds until he is quite stable.

Then, with a lead forward aid (as light as possible) ask him to take one step forward. He should step forward with the leg that is back and the diagonal hind, those two legs should move forward one at a time. Then again wait for 2-3 seconds till he is balanced and not tottering.

When working with the right fore / left hind use your left hand on his shoulder to stop that leg moving forward a lead aid back helps just as the left hind is going forward.

Once you have done this pair 5-7 times then swap and do the other pair of legs 5-7 times. This will generally give you 3 improved responses.

**Remember to reward your horse when he gives the correct response by scratching his wither or neck or wherever he likes to be scratched.**

Horses get mentally tired quickly when learning something new so let them rest by halting and parking. Enjoy scratching time. They don't need to be square but may choose to be, this is not a problem. Wait till you see he is ready to work again often a few minutes, watching his eyes and ears to become alert before doing a second set of 3-5 repetitions, then rest again before the last set of 1-3 repetitions.

You may notice some awkward moments where the horse struggles to balance on the diagonal pair of legs. You might experience one or more of the following:

- If the horse takes two steps instead of one eg right fore and left fore as well, try to stop him earlier with the back/stop aid, using your hand on his left shoulder during that time also helps to resist the forward movement of the left fore.
- If the legs supporting the moving legs totter or shake, wait a little longer until he is balanced.

- If the foreleg takes a bigger or smaller step than the diagonal hind leg, keep repeating the exercise. Aim for even length of steps even if it is a small step. A step of each diagonal gait of 30-40 cm is ideal.
- If the hind leg takes a bigger sized step than the foreleg, again repeat until they are similar in size.
- If the hindleg won't come forward with opposite foreleg, keep repeating the exercise and it will eventually. I sometimes click my tongue to help or try a little pull, but it doesn't always work so repeating is best.
- If horse goes crooked, use a fence or wall on the side he drifts towards to improve control or keep practising.
- If the horse is too strong when asking for forward and walks into you or takes more than one step, vibrate the lead aid, rein aid or use a bridle or cavesson and really brace against the movement. Do not let him displace your feet especially with his head.

## **Watch your horses body language**

Your horse will tell you with his head, neck and body if he would like a massage or rub in a particular area. This should only be done at the end of a set of repetitions as it can become a habit to dislodge you.

- Yawning is a sign he may want between the cheek bones scratched.
- Pushing his head into you may mean he wants his poll rubbed (between his ears) or his face.
- Pushing his neck toward you may mean he wants the top or sides of his neck rubbed.
- Turning the head to scratch his tummy may mean he wants a rub in that area or even his rump as he can't reach that far back.
- Licking and chewing is a sign he is resolution or assimilation of the response, give him a big rest.

This is the time to connect with your horse and have a nice time, watching his nose will tell you how much he likes it, like a horse scratching another.

When your horse responds to this exercise from light aids (is obedient) and steps back and forward smoothly (rhythm), he will become straighter and keep his forelegs and back legs on the same tracks,



, like railway tracks. You are then ready to do the very slow creepy-crawly walk.

## **THE 'CREEPY-CRAWLY WALK' (SLOW WALK)**

Training a very slow walk is extremely useful for getting a horse more uphill and less on the forehand and helps achieve control during situations where your horse might run or shy.

Begin with your horse either in a halter or bridle or cavesson. Face your horse so you will be walking backwards whilst he walks forwards.

Lead your horse one step forward and stop or pause, then another step. Try to step your legs in time with his so that you are walking backwards very slowly using your heels and glutes to brace if he quickens or takes a big step, particularly that right foreleg or the left if he happens to be a left foreleg runner. Try to match your left leg going back as his right fore goes forward, this will develop with time and is difficult to do initially. We are trying to be in synch with them and them with us, however all responses should be initiated by some sort of lead aid, visual or aural cue not from us moving as "park" or the ability to stand still will be compromised.

Start with 3 steps and gradually add extra steps when you have control aiming for 6-10 steps that are very smooth, measured or controlled and rest at halt. Believe it or not this is incredibly hard work for them as they are adjusting their posture and balance off the forehand.

Should your horse habitually runs with the same foreleg then you can delete the running step by stopping reversing a step and asking for forward again. This takes some controlling and is best done facing the horse. We habitually lead from the near side and when you feel you have control try leading from his off side too.

He should begin to land with his hooves more or less flat and lengthen the top of his neck in front of the wither, relax more and may even snort or sigh and in particular breathe if he has been tense. He might begin to lift his knees more as he walks, this is also the beginning of piaffe training.

In the beginning, it will not be in a rhythm, (the diagonal pairs go one at a time slowly) this will develop gradually and when he has slightly



longer walk by giving a light lead aid forward and taking a longer steps yourself.

There are often little signs that your horse needs to rest such as:

- He does not try anymore; his eyes look sleepy and blink a lot and the ears are out to the sides.
- He licks and chews.
- He wants to scratch his sides, shoulder or ribcage or his leg.
- If he goes to bite you which is not uncommon and may be a sign of pain, try to step him back and then move out of his way and park.
- Groan! It is hard work but just do a few more steps to build up his strength. It is like pilates, when you think you cant do more but just need to get that last bit of energy to get the full benefit.
- He is puffed or yawning.

*Remember to rest by parking or let him walk freely for a few minutes.*

## **Slow walk to longer walk**

Once the slow walk is established with you walking backwards, next try doing it while you walk frontwards (rein in right hand). Remember

to take very measured slow steps landing with your heel first and pushing off your toe to lift your other leg. Eyes up helps! You are becoming more uphill too and will start to not have to look at the legs and be able to look straight ahead, which is also good for your posture. This reminds me of my deportment lessons at school trying to walk with a book on my head!

You can now change your lead position to be facing forwards as it is easier to take longer steps that way. Try yourself to land on your heel first and then roll down to the toes.

Now while walking forward in the slow walk, every 6-10 steps try for a little longer walk. Increase the size of your steps but not your speed as you ask with a lead aid for the horse to do so too.

You may find your horse loses his balance and goes on the forehand or might even quicken and run by taking bigger steps than you. If this occurs, stop or slow and change your steps to be in synch and ask for the slow walk for a few steps before asking for long walk again.

Look for the same signs that your horse may be tired or need a scratch as before and give him plenty of rests. You can practise the slow walk, longer walk to and from the paddock, 5-10 minutes a day is a good start.

Your horse will eventually match your feet and learn your body language. I don't get this - it seems like the opposite to what we teach about leading? Clarify body language.

## **Slow walk down a hill in a zig zag**

Horses in the wild often walk down hills on an angle or in a zig zag pattern, partly because it is difficult for them to brace with both back legs equally if they go straight down. The trot is particularly difficult for them as there are only two legs on the ground at a time. In canter they prefer to canter up and down on a slight angle as in the canter stride the hindlegs are very close together in beat, eg. 1,2,3. It is not

the hindlegs but the instead is the bone angles of the forelimbs that aren't made for down hill. That's why true thoroughness only ever occurs in trot, canter and gallop and why horses rarely halt with hindlegs square unless you train them to be ambidextrous and is an outcome of a downward transition being light in a rhythm and straight or balanced.

The hill does not need to be steep for this to be an effective exercise. Again start facing him.

When turning left try to make your horse pause his right foreleg before turning asking him to turn, he has to push off that foreleg and diagonal hind leg to turn well. This is like ice skating or roller skating to turn. Turning left will be easier than turning right as remember he would like to lean on the right foreleg for balance.

Zig (turn left) then walk on an angle 6-8 steps before doing a zag (turn right the same number of steps before zigging again. Staying upright yourself and matching his legs will help but again takes some time to control. When you can, you will be dancing with your horse!


There are so many benefits from the slow walk:

- It trains the horse to come off the forehand and be uphill.
- The horse becomes more level in the shoulders and hindquarters.

- It builds the horse's back muscles.
- It trains him to use his hindlegs as brakes and 'engage behind'.
- It trains a better frame particularly the roundness in front of the wither and trapezius muscles, and a lifting of the back, just watch for the lengthening and arching of the neck as he walks, the frame is a consequence of the legs in control and balanced. There are no gadgets or forced postures that can help him properly.
- And there are many more!!

*Enjoy your training! I would love to hear about your progress as I am quite fascinated with the progress I have made with these exercises myself. I am rehabbing Vinnie and although he is now 24, and I have made many mistakes on my journey to become a better trainer, I feel he is getting a better posture and balance.*

***Cheers, Manuela***



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