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Is your horse heavy in the reins? Crooked? On the forehand?

By Manuela McLean

A horse that is on the forehand feels downhill in the shoulders as he drags himself along with his forelegs. Anatomically, the front of the horse (the forehand),which includes the head, neck and shoulders and the front part of the ribcage is heavier than the weight of the hindquarters.

So naturally, horses are built on the forehand. Without a rider on board, the horse can adjust his posture to become uphill when he needs or when excited. But when you add rider weight, it is much more difficult for him to be balanced. The horse needs to be trained to carry the rider's weight better biomechanically.

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

Bottom: Forelegs much straighter under shoulders

To help train the horse to carry a rider effortlessly, it is important the rider has a balanced position and does not rely on the reins or his legs to maintain his position.

The horse’s neck and head comprise a significant proportion of the forehand. The head is very heavy and when carried over-bent with the poll lower than the top of the neck it creates great tension on the neck, shoulder and back muscles. The horse then relies on the rider’s reins and hands to keep his balance. He is not in self-carriage. It may be that he leans on both reins or just one rein. The rider can also lean on the reins for balance or for fear of losing balance and so hold the horses head

in that position. In that position, the horse may not be forward or responsive to the leg aids and therefore not using his hindquarters efficiently.

No matter what, the horse's head and neck should never be held in position by the rider's hands, nor should the horse be held forward or straight by the riders legs. Holding aids depict a lack of self-carriage, the horse endures unrelenting pressure in some way and eventually will not respond to the aids we give him. The horse does not necessarily need to be round and "on the bit" per se to be in self-carriage however he does need to maintain speed and line without the aids being held. The rider should be able to give forward with the reins to test for self-carriage, and if the horse fails to maintain speed or line then the rider needs to ride transitions and turns to train the horse to maintain speed and line. In traditional pressure-based methods, it is the pressure that motivates the horse to respond.

LEANING ON THE BIT

A horse that leans on the bit in transitions will either extend his neck downwards and forwards, shorten his neck and pull downwards, or lengthen one side of his neck by bending it to the side. When the neck does this, the shoulders and whither will also change; he may drop both shoulders or only one of them if the neck goes sideways. Training downward transitions so that the rider just

has to lightly touch the reins to stop or shorten the stride is important to create a horse that carries his own head and neck without the support of the rider's hands to continue in the gait and thus produce self-carriage.

Training the horse to be responsive to the rein aids begins on the ground. Check out my article "Is your horse on the forehand?" before progressing to under-saddle work. Problems such as bad teeth, ill-fitting bits and saddles, sore musculature etc should also be considered and checked by a professional before beginning training. Then improving the responsiveness of the 'stop', 'go' and 'turn' aids will improve the horse's posture and balance. Transitions down a gait should be performed in 3 steps from a light touch of the reins as well as changes in the rider's body such as turning the core on, maintaining elbow position, thigh and lower leg position which all help to stabilise the seat and stop it moving during the transition.

There will be a reduction in the length of the horse's steps and slowing of the tempo during the three steps of the transition.

The lightness of rein responses can be improved with upward vibrations on the reins, using one rein higher than the other (if the horse bends his neck to the left or leans on the right rein then lift the right rein more), light whip-taps on the chest, or a rope around the neck (vibrations upwards).

The rider needs to be upright and not pull backwards with the elbows. Pulling on the reins tends to produce more resistance from the horse through its neck however the rider must maintain any vibration until the horse responds even if just slightly.

The lifting of the rein lifts the bit on the horse's tongue and will result in less bracing of the brachiocephalic muscles (the under neck) and so lift the forehand. Lifting the reins will put less pressure on the lower jaw, preventing him from shortening his neck and/or opening his mouth during a downwards transition. This technique will allow the rider to use a lighter pressure of the reins to produce the transition.

Creating lightness of the forehand with downward transitions

Rein back

Begin by training the horse to step back, one step from a light touch of the rein, releasing the pressure immediately to reward the step back before adding a second step back. You will notice that one pair of legs is slower to respond and requires more pressure than the other. When a horse backs from a light rein aid, it will eventually lower its hindquarters thus elevating the forehand.

A step back response of 1-2 steps can be used after a halt to improve the lightness to the rein aid of a halt transition. The rider's cue of lower leg back or stepping into the stirrups will help and will end up being the cue to begin a rein-back which is multiple steps back.

Remember initially, that the neck does not need to be round or the horse on the bit to do this. Self-carriage begins when the horse offers the third step of rein-back without needing a rein aid. As in all training the release of the pressure when the horse gives the desired response is what motivates him to try that response again.

Walk/halt transitions

Frequent transitions from walk to halt to walk, every 6 steps or every 8 steps can improve the responsiveness of the horse's stop aid and can prevent him from falling on the forehand.

Being accurate about the number of steps is very important because in the walk aid, one foreleg will move first and if the transition occurs in an even number of steps, then the opposite foreleg will stop last and should then by rights begin first. This works on the horse's laterality and begins to teach him to use both forelegs and back legs evenly in transitions.

In fact, it is useful if the horse begins to anticipate the downwards transition as he will then be lighter to the rein aid. The responsiveness to the rein aid improves the horse's posture and helps him to lift his shoulders in a downward transition, and he learns to use his back legs as brakes too.

For the horse who is very long in the stride or quick in the steps and on the forehand this exercise will train shorter steps and become more uphill. Short and slow steps are one of the key ingredients of collection where the horse elevates the forehand.

The horse that is very distracted and looking around will also benefit from this exercise. In this case, during a downward transition, it is best to raise the rein on the side the horse is looking away from as this will have the effect of straightening his neck in the transition.

This same exercise (8 steps of trot) can be done from walk to trot to walk and will train a little trot, often called a schooling trot. The rider should aim to sit the steps of the little trot and when he is able to the horse begins to relax his back. The aim of course is regardless of the horse's head position the horse learns to maintain a rhythm without the use of the reins to maintain it for that distance. If the horse speeds up, then another downward transition should be performed until the horse is in self-carriage on a soft rein.

Once the horse has established the little trot then the rider can rise the trot and train the horse to produce a longer stride.

Gradually in time the horse will maintain a rhythm and be in self-carriage for longer and with the help of turns and straightness, he will begin to straighten his neck and drop his head into longitudinal flexion.

Improving upward transitions

Walk/trot/walk

A horse that is on the forehand can also be unresponsive to the leg aids. His hindlegs feel like they have no push or power, and the rider ends up riding every stride. Remember self-carriage means the horse should maintain doing what you ask him to do without holding aids, or in this case nagging legs.

Improving the responsiveness of a horse to the leg aids is not difficult but first think carefully about what part of your leg is used as an upward transition aid. It is the inner calf and inner upper thigh that closes toward the saddle to produce a walk from halt or trot from walk and in canter the outside leg goes back to tell him which lead to take.

If a rider finds they are using their heel in the upward transition or a strong pressure, then the horse is not responding immediately to the leg aid. The lower calf of the rider needs to hang free from the horse's ribcage as this part of the leg is what is used to make the strides longer or quicker.

Using a schooling whip is effective in improving the forward response of the horse. However, the horse needs to be trained how to respond to it on the ground first. He needs to habituate to the whip on his side before you use it and be trained on the ground to respond to two brief but light touches to go up a gait.

Once this has been established then the whip can be used at the same time as the leg to improve the reactivity to the leg aid and of course as soon as the response has occurred then both whip and leg should be released (the leg just sitting on the horse's side but not pressing). The horse should begin to move as the leg aid is applied, the leg aid should be on for 2 steps with the third step being released and the horse maintains the rhythm of the gait.

Some horses are also motivated to respond quicker to a squeeze of the calves with heel nudges after the squeeze. The most important thing is to make the initial aid a light squeeze of both calves as this is what you want him to learn and then use either a stronger pressure or nudges or whip taps to make it happen. The reason the whip works very effectively is that it can be timed with the squeeze of the calves.

Most horses will continue in the gait for at least 6-8 steps so that a downward transition can be performed and then another upward one improving again the horse's reactivity to the light leg aid. Frequent transitions with a very short period of halt or walk if trotting helps in this case. This is to keep the unreactive horse alert and attentive to the aids. The stop and go transitions themselves will lighten the delayed or strong aids that horse on the forehand generally needs if he is unresponsive to the leg aids.

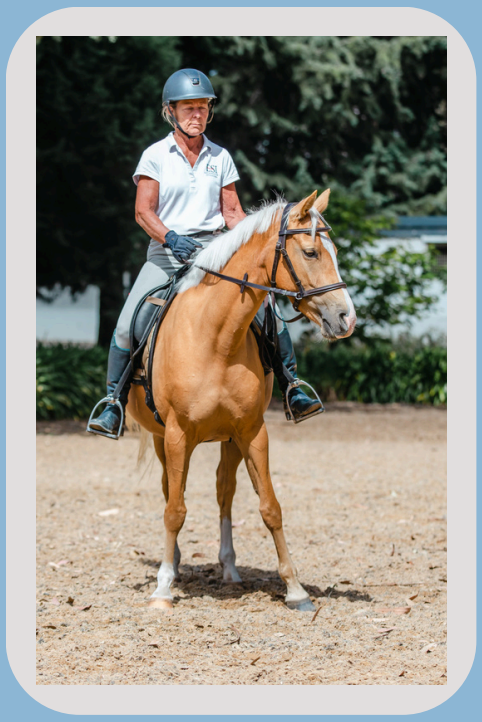
Up a gait transitions

The horse that is on the forehand will often need

constant urging from the leg and in this case, it is best to go up to the next gait rather than nagging to keep going within the gait. The test of self-carriage is to take the leg aid off once the horse is in the gait and dare him to change gait (rather than maintaining the gait with the leg) and when he does change gait then quickly reapplying the leg aid for up gait transition.

Improving the lightness of the forehand through turns

Turns will also help the horse that tends to travel crooked (where the forelegs and hindlegs are on different tracks), run or drop a shoulder during a turn or shorten the stride in the turn. And if any of these occurs then riding wiggly lines is a great exercise.



Riding wiggly lines

Tuning up the turns by riding wiggly lines (turning left and right every 6-8 steps) is beneficial for all horses. To do this, use direct turn aids (the rein away from the neck, the elbow is at the rider's side and the forearm is used to turn).

The turning rein is ideally positioned away from the neck during the forward movement of the leg that is turned so if turning right the right rein is used as the right foreleg goes forward to position the foreleg to the right. The hindlegs will turn as a consequence of the forelegs turning.

The horse that is on the forehand is likely to find turning one way more difficult than the other. Using vibrations upwards and away from the neck will improve the lightness of the turn. Eventually the horse should turn from a light touch of the reins both ways.

Lifting the rein to the side when turning will lift the shoulder of the horse that drops his shoulder or runs during the turn and for the horse that pulls down, the rein lift will facilitate the turn.

A horse that still has difficulty turning may need to be trained to turn from touches of the schooling whip on the shoulder. Touching the right shoulder should make him turn left and this is best trained on the ground first before attempting under-saddle.

Riding forward out of the turn

Many horses will shorten their stride during the turn. In this case the rider will need to apply a leg aid to lengthen the stride after the horse has turned his forelegs. Make sure you don't use your lower leg to turn however as this is confusing for the horse as the leg means to accelerate, while the rein is the steering wheel. The thigh of the rider can be used and learnt as a cue by the horse, so if turning left the rider's right thigh goes toward the saddle during the turn and the left knee opens a little away from the saddle. The pelvis of the rider should not twist in the turn. Thinking of turning the belly button in the direction of the turn helps.

Generally, most horses will need a little acceleration from their outside leg to help straighten and go forward after the turn aid of the reins. This leg aid is not an upward transition leg aid (using both calves) but rather the longer aid which is a nudge of the heel or ankle on the horse's outside ribcage (right leg if turning left). The response of the nudge may need to be improved with a touch of the whip on the same side as the leg as the leg is used.

As a rule, when riding wiggly lines, the turn to the outside is the one that slows the most as horses don't like going to the edges of the arena. In this case the nudge is with the riders inside leg but it is still the outside leg of the turn.

The rider will feel the horse push against his leg during the turn not only through the ribcage but also through the outside shoulder as it bulges toward his thigh. In this situation it is useful for the rider to not let the thigh be displaced by the horse but rather imagine kicking a ball with the knee into the knee roll of the saddle and pushing the horse's shoulder forward to make room for the same side hindleg to step forward from the nudge of the heel or ankle. This push of the knee eventually becomes a cue for lengthening the stride.

Indirect turns

Indirect turns are extremely useful to train as they help the horse to straighten his neck, bend laterally and begin to flex. The inside rein is used toward the horse's neck like a neck rein and the horse should move his shoulders away from the rein, it can also be lifted to encourage the horse to flex while moving away. The rider's thigh goes

toward the ribcage as the rein touches the neck as a cue and if the horse slows then the same side leg may be needed to make the horse quicker in the tempo and also encourage it to move away.

This leg aid is either a light squeeze of the rider's ankle or heel or small nudges and if the horse is unresponsive then the whip can be used as quick touches to produce a quicker tempo.

The outside rein can also be used as an indirect turn if the horse persistently bends it neck too much in the turn. The neck rein helps to straighten the neck in the turn. This is a particularly useful tool if the horse persistently falls out through the shoulder.

Riding the horse straight

The forelegs and hindlegs of the same side of the horse should travel as if on two railway tracks.

This is where it is important to check for self-carriage of line.

Testing for straightness of line is done by giving on one rein only on a straight line.

The rider of course needs to be as straight in the upper body and even in both seat bones as possible for the horse to be straight, but a horse can make the rider crooked if drifting offline.

Corrections of line are done with the reins so if the horse drifts right when giving on the left rein then the left rein is used to correct the deviation of the left foreleg. The rider may then need to use his right leg to re-establish the length of stride since the left foreleg is likely to have done a shorter step and it is paired with the right hindleg doing a shorter stride. In this case the rider can also test straightness from the leg by not supporting the horse with it but quickly applying it to correct the hind leg drift offline, it is used as a forward aid but not a yield aid where the lower leg is back.

If the horse drifts left, then the left rein is used toward the neck to straighten him, and the left leg used to maintain the forward movement if need be.

Once the horse is straight and on two even tracks then further movements such as shortening the stride, beginning lateral work such as leg yield, introducing bend and beginning shoulder in and travers will also help the horse to come off the forehand.

If the stop, go and turn aids are not responded to by the horse from light aids and he does not maintain self-carriage of line and speed regardless of his frame then the horse will not be able to advance further without using very strong aids. For the horse's physical comfort and well-being, as riders we are obliged to train him to respond to light aids and be in self-carriage, the added benefits are that the horse will relax and so be more comfortable to ride.

Ride your horse at your speed and on your line and enjoy having him in self-carriage.

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Self-carriage is not just a desirable trait—in my opinion it is a fundamental key to sustainability

"If you are telling me you have trained a bird to sit on your arm, you have to let go of its wings. If it flies off, it is held, not trained."

Andrew McLean

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