



Using your rein to achieve softness clear through can improve not only the relationship you have with your horse, but every aspect of your horse's performance, as well.

Softness Clear Through

In our last article, we talked about the importance of taking your ground work principles with you into the saddle, and we emphasized the idea of connecting the rein to the brain in order to ask for and receive softness. For those of you who may not have read the previous articles, I define softness as a state of flowing responsiveness free from any mental or physical resistance. In this, our final installment of this series, I would like to take the thoughts from article four a little deeper to show you how using your rein to achieve softness clear through can improve not only the relationship you have with your horse, but every aspect of your horse's performance, as well.

The longer I work with horses, the more I believe that most of the actions we want from our horses come best when we ask a horse to do something, get ourselves out of the way, then allow the horse to do it. Of course, this requires a horse that responds freely and willingly to his rider's requests – not a resistant horse that must be held, pushed, shaped and driven into every movement. While many people would admit that their horses fall into the latter category, few people realize *that they themselves have created the resistance in their*

horses through all the holding, pushing, shaping and driving they have been taught is necessary to train and ride a horse. They are not aware that such methods actually interfere with a horse's ability to use himself well or move in a balanced carriage and they fail to understand that they are denying the horse the opportunity to be a willing partner.

Because many training methods create resistance instead of softness, people often find themselves struggling with even the most basic maneuvers, as the horse's thought is to go one way, while theirs is to go another. Unfortunately, all their efforts to make the horse comply only succeed in pushing the horse's thought even further away from what they want. Remember that a horse's mind will continually attempt to take his body to wherever his brain is, so as long as that brain isn't with you, anything you ask will create a degree of resistance, which you will feel in the rein and throughout the horse's body. Continuing to ride in this manner actually conditions the horse's muscles to work against what you are asking, as horses become really good at contorting their bodies to travel one way while trying to be somewhere else.

Part V: Heighten your sensitivity to feel and to your horse.

WITH JOSH NICHOL
TEXT BY SUSAN KAUFFMANN

Riders usually interpret this brain/body division in the horse as a lack of straightness and/or balance. Talk to most riders about something as basic as riding a circle, and they will tell you about their constant battles with shoulders falling in or bulging out, horses that are crooked or unbalanced, and so on. When they try to deal with these problems, they focus on what the horse's body is doing, using their reins and legs in an attempt to correct the horse's shape and movement. What they are missing in this approach is the crucial truth that such difficulties are not so much a *physical* issue as a *brain* issue. The real problem is that the horse's brain is working to be away from them because there is no foundation of communication that will allow togetherness and softness. This is why doing the groundwork and redefining the meaning of the rein as we've discussed in previous articles is so important. Without that foundation, these holes start appearing and the battles begin.

On the other hand, if you use your rein to ask for softness and your well-timed release rewards the horse when he begins to soften, the whole experience becomes much more positive for both horse and rider. When a horse begins to soften to your rein, your lead rope or to you directly, there is profound change going on in the horse's mind. First of all, the horse starts to change its thought from working *away* from you to working *with* you, which establishes a basis for a real conversation. Only then can the horse actually begin to "hear" what you want him to do, and only then can he willingly flow with your thought. Once you have the ability to use the rein to draw the horse's brain to the line or circle you are working on, the horse's muscles will work to stay with your thought, not to push against it – and this is how a horse develops true balance and straightness under saddle. If you then keep your thought moving ahead in the direction you want to go, the horse's brain *and therefore his body* will follow without any pushing.

Think of a child pulling a toy train of several cars attached to a string: as the child turns or circles, the train flows along the same turn or circle. The train doesn't need to be pushed from the side or from behind to accomplish this, and in actuality, any such pushing would likely topple the train. A horse works very much the same way, moving with greatest straightness and impulsion when something is drawing its brain forward. This may sound a bit contradictory in light of the fact that impulsion comes from the hind end of the horse, but it really is not. Why? Because *impulsion is a direct result of a brain motivated to go forward*. Like everything else, it starts in the brain, not the body, and any time you use your legs to "drive the body" in an attempt to



This horse is mentally present and moving forward together with me, so I can now use a rein and get a change that will allow softness to flow through a turn.

force impulsion out of a horse that isn't thinking forward in unison with you, you only succeed in jamming up the horse even further. This can result in a multitude of problems, from soreness and lameness issues to dangerous behaviours such as bucking and rearing. Driving from behind also has the negative effect of making the horse's brain want to leave you, so even if the horse does move out, he is once again working to get away from you, instead of working to stay with you. The rider often feels this as the horse rushing or getting "strong in the bridle" – neither of which promotes balance, straightness or unity.

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So, how do we use softness to create the free and true movement we want from our horses? Well, in our last article we talked about the idea of "connecting the rein to the brain", and that's where it starts. I'd now like to take that concept a little further and show you how connecting the rein to the brain also connects the rein to the feet, allowing you to ask for softness clear through the horse and thereby create correct, balanced movement.

I often begin to work on achieving softness in movement by teaching a horse to soften when I ask him to move either a front or a hind foot. Ideally, I would like to be able

to use a rein to pick up and move a particular foot in any direction with no resistance from the horse. If, for example, I pick up the right front foot and move it to the right, the horse's entire spine should soften into a C-shape to the right as he flows with the direction of that question. The degree to which I am able to do that will tell me how much that horse is able to soften to what I'm asking. Remember that when doing this exercise, you are not merely looking for the horse to turn, as a horse can turn light as a feather without softening through the spine. This is where you must learn to distinguish between lightness and softness. If you have softness, you will also have lightness – but it is very possible (and quite common) to have lightness without softness.

So, what do you do if you go to pick up a front foot and the horse doesn't soften completely or maybe won't move the foot at all? That's difficult to answer in the context of a magazine article, as every horse is different and my response will depend upon many factors particular to an individual horse at a given moment. Sometimes I might just keep a steady pressure on my rein and wait, giving the horse a chance to figure out what I want. Sometimes I will decrease my pressure, thereby asking a less intense question and helping the horse to find an easier answer, if that seems appropriate. I may change how I ask with the rein by altering the position of my hand or I might add a bit of energy with my seat to encourage movement if a horse seems particularly "stuck". What is universal, however, is that you first need to make sure it is possible for

the horse to pick up the foot you are asking for. A horse can't lift a foot if he's got a lot of weight bearing down on it, so you need to get a horse to shift his weight back onto his hindquarters. Since shifting weight to the hindquarters is also a requirement for any correct, athletic movement you want from a horse, this exercise is doubly valuable.

If your horse is present and attentive but still seems unable to shift his weight back and pick up a front foot, you may be looking at some kind of physical problem or saddle fit issue, though most cases of "stuckness" are a result of the horse trying to follow his own thought instead of yours. It may also be that you are not communicating your question clearly or that you are missing a small try on the part of the horse due to a need to develop your own sense of "feel". If you think either of these last two things might be the problem – don't get down on yourself! This is a great opportunity for you to heighten your sensitivity to feel and to your horse.

Sticking with the front feet for the moment, what you want to do is sit balanced in the middle of your saddle and attempt to feel the rein to ask a question and receive information from your horse. If your rein is filled with pressure and weight as you ask your horse to make a change or pick up a foot, you may need to make a change in how you ask to make it easier for your horse to respond. Experiment with different hand positions and different degrees of pressure; just make sure that when the horse softens, *you* soften back with a release, which will encourage the response of softening from your horse. Some



As I use the rein, the horse's body begins to soften into the turn. Only when a horse is soft on both reins will I ever use two reins to ask for a collected movement.

people find it useful to close their eyes when trying to develop feel of the horse, as our natural dependence on visual information can prevent us from developing feel. When you can tune into feel and not be so visual, you will find a great deal of success with your horse. Of course, this "closed-eyes" exercise is only something you would try if you feel safe and comfortable doing so.

Once you have those reins truly connected to the brain and thereby to the feet, everything suddenly becomes much easier.

If you continue to struggle and are not sure you have gotten the horse's weight back enough to free up a front foot, you might find it helpful to try backing the horse up a step or two, and observing the shoulders to see which foot is moving as he backs. When he stops backing, the shoulder that is further forward indicates the leg that has less weight on it, and therefore it is that foot which you could most easily pick up and move. Do keep in mind that you want to stay centered and balanced in the saddle, so try to just glance down with your eyes without leaning forward or to the side, which will unbalance your horse and make it harder for him to lift the foot you want.

Now, it is entirely possible that you might do everything right and still find that your horse will not move his front feet or that when you ask for the left foot you get the right. In this case, we must get

that rein to mean something to the hindquarters – something we want to do anyway! It may sound a little odd to go to the hind end when it seems that the issue is in the front end, but the hindquarters (or "engine") are always directing the weight of the horse. What we need is for the horse to disengage his forward weight shift, so I'm going to use a rein and ask the horse to soften his hindquarters.

When the hind end begins to move, the door opens to redistribute the horse's weight. When a horse truly softens his hindquarters, his inside hind foot reaches forward and across to a point under his centerline and becomes the primary weight bearer, allowing lightening of the front end – and he does this without leaning on the rein. If the horse continues to lean on the rein, he still has his weight on his front end. However, if you are just beginning this exercise, your horse will likely not do everything perfectly right away, so you want to be sure to reward the horse for trying, even if it's only a little try at first. If you do this, the horse will soon come to understand what you are asking and you can then ask for a little more.

As the horse begins to soften to the rein and get more onto his hindquarters, you will be able to ask for and receive a front foot – or move that hind end over by using just one rein. Once you have those reins truly connected to the brain and thereby to the feet, everything suddenly becomes much easier and you can get just about any movement out of a horse you might want, whether it's a spin for reining, a canter pirouette for dressage, a leg-yield, a shoulder in, a collected jog or an extended trot – you name it.

We have come to the end of this five-part series and I feel as though we have merely scratched the surface of a few important aspects of good horsemanship. Though they are far from comprehensive, I hope these articles may have given you a new perspective, and perhaps a different level of awareness of how important it is to understand and consider the mind of the horse. I also hope they have given you some ideas you can play with, and that you will continue to explore the ways of horsemanship that can bring you to the kind of true human-horse relationship most people – and all horses – want to have. I encourage you to trust yourself and enjoy your horse – and if something is not working, make a change and have fun.

I would like to thank Northern Horse Review for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts with you. I'd also like to thank Susan Kauffmann for the thoughts and skills she contributed to the writing of these articles. I hope to see you and your horse down the road some day.

~ Josh Nichol

Editor's Note: For information on Josh's clinics visit www.eaglesranch.ca