

This horse is resisting the rein by overbending his neck, without softening his body. True softness goes clear through from nose to tail.

Part IV: Taking your groundwork into the saddle.

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The Meaning of the Rein

In the previous three articles, we talked quite a bit about the importance of having your horse's brain with you and how to start creating a foundation of softness through groundwork. We're now going to move into the riding realm, specifically into the meaning of the rein, but it is important to realize that if you haven't yet established a true and solid foundation on the ground, doing anything under saddle is going to be a whole lot tougher than you or your horse want it to be. If you *have* successfully used your groundwork to build a relationship in which your horse trusts your leadership, thinks that following your thought is a good idea and softens willingly when you ask him to move his feet, you are in a great place to start communicating with your horse through the rein.

Why is it, then, that even people who get their horses working really well on the ground often have so much trouble when they climb into the saddle? What has changed? From the horse's perspective, we have merely changed positions, and if our clarity and leadership remains consistent, it's not all that different to them. Sure, we are now using a bridle and rein instead of a lead rope and halter, but if you handle your lead rope and your rein right, they are pretty similar to the horse. The

reason we so often run into problems is that *we* change when we get into the saddle, mostly because we don't have a good understanding of how to communicate with our horse through the rein.

Most people have been taught that the purpose of the rein is to turn or stop the horse by putting pressure on his mouth through the bit. If you're a dressage rider, you may have been taught that the rein is used to "shape" the impulsion you create with your seat and legs in order to maintain the horse's "frame". Neither of these ideas is wrong, per se, but they are only part of the equation, and they're often misapplied in a way that actually teaches a horse to brace *against* the rein. Then the rider can't understand why the horse is always "resisting" and "stiff"! The biggest problem with these concepts of rein use is that they concentrate on the horse's *body*, and thus fail to address the most crucial aspect of successful riding – establishing a clear line of two-way communication between the horse's brain and yours.

We've talked before about how disconnected you can get from your horse when you concentrate on the mechanics of his body, rather than on the fluid focus of his brain, and this tends to happen even more

so under saddle. Some people concentrate on the horse's body because they feel vulnerable when mounted, and they believe that controlling a horse's body gives them control over the horse. However, if you've ever been on a runaway horse, you know that there isn't a person alive who can control a horse's body if the horse's brain leaves in a really big way. This should make it clear that staying safe when riding is really about connecting to the horse's brain in a way that inspires him to want to follow your leadership – something that comes through understanding and trust, not through what most of us think of as "control".

There are also those who approach riding from a very technical standpoint, essentially ignoring the fact that the horse even has a thinking, feeling brain. These riders tend to treat the horse much like a machine, believing that if they push or pull in the correct way, the horse should give them the correct response. When the horse tries to express his lack of okayness with this situation, the person commonly goes and gets a stronger bit, adds a new gadget or just uses more pressure to *make* the horse obey. The thought here is that if you can force the horse's body to do something, the horse will figure out that he must listen. What is often

missed is that these "problems" the horse is presenting are actually *symptoms*. The horse is simply trying to tell us what the real problem is, which is usually a lack of mutual understanding. Ironically, folks in this category are often very good riders, in terms of technique – but what they generally lack is *feel*. This is mostly because they have never experienced the joy of truly communicating with a horse, since their focus on mechanics blocks out so much of what the horse has to offer.

The truth is that no matter what kind of riding you do, the best results come through softness, which I define as a state of flowing responsiveness free from any mental or physical resistance. Softness under saddle starts by tuning in to your horse's thoughts, being able to call his brain if it is elsewhere, then engaging the horse in a mutually satisfying conversation. For this reason, *I like to think of the rein as being connected to a horse's brain, not his mouth, and I'm going to use that rein to ask the brain for softness, not to ask the body for turns and stops.* As we move along, softness may ultimately take the *form* of turns and stops, but what I'm seeking through my rein operates on a much deeper level than that.

If you want to get to that deeper level, you must be completely clear on the concept that applying pressure through the rein is asking the horse to soften to that rein, and therefore you are looking to release when softness starts to flow through the rein, not just when there is a turn in the body. A horse can turn light as a feather but

stiff as a board, with absolutely no softness, and if you release on that, that's exactly what you'll continue to get. A horse that turns in this way is doing only what he has to in order to get by and the stiffness in his body is a reflection of the discomfort in his mind. He cannot let go of that tension because softness in the mind is the key that releases anxiety from the body. You are the one who either provides that key or jams up the lock. The more you release your rein when your horse is soft, the softer he will become, but the more often you release your

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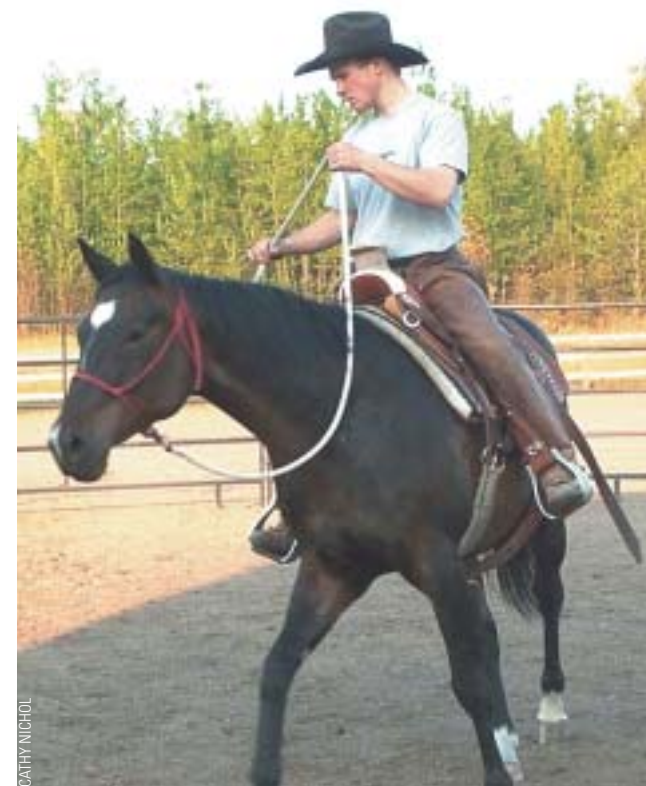
rein when the horse turns stiffly, the more resistant and stiff your horse will become.

Ultimately, I want my rein to function much like a telephone line, with feel taking the place of words in a two-way communication through which I can gain directability of a horse's brain. When a horse softens to the rein, it means his brain has made a change and that's what directability is all about – being able to ask for and receive changes in the horse. Now, if all this talk about softness, the brain and directability sounds a lot like what I said in the groundwork articles, that's because it is. I really can't emphasize enough how important it is to take all those "groundwork" principles with you into the saddle, because it's the same horse, with the same brain and the same desire for okayness. You

still need to get the horse's brain working with you, not against you, you're still going to use pressure and release to communicate what you're looking for, and you must still do all those things with clarity and consistency.

So, how do we get started with this? Well, it may be helpful to stop thinking so much about *what* your horse is doing, and instead, start paying attention to *how* he's doing it; beginning with the very moment you begin to use your rein. The way a horse responds when you use a rein provides a whole wealth of information that most people either miss completely or gloss over as unimportant. To the horse, however, this moment is very important, because that is when he is going to communicate to you what he thinks his response to the rein should be. Unfortunately, many horses have been taught to resist the rein instead of soften to it, which is only reinforced if the rider increases the pressure in an attempt to discourage the resistance or pull the horse through a turn. The truth is that your horse will not get much more than a sore mouth out of a battle with you and the rein. Therefore, I will attempt to stay as far from this situation as possible.

When I go to use a rein and my horse responds with some kind of resistance, this does not upset me, but clues me in that my horse is having a tough time understanding what it is I am attempting to communicate to him. He is simply expressing to me that I have not presented my question clearly enough, so it is then my responsibility to make a change to help him understand what



Josh asks Jet to soften to the right, but Jet continues to go straight, trying to take his feet to where his brain is.

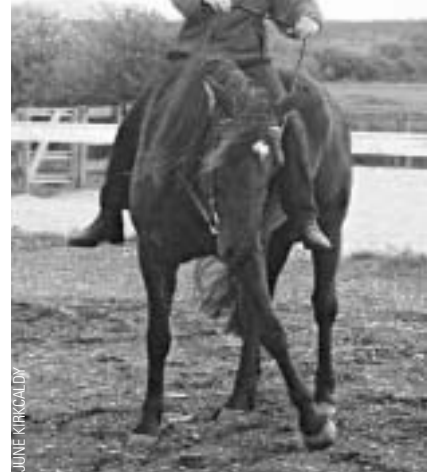


Josh has successfully called Jet's brain back to him, so this time, Jet softens to Josh's rein.



If your horse has been taught to soften to the feel of the leadrope...

...softening to the rein is usually an easy and natural progression.



I am asking. There is no point in just applying more force, as that is not going to make my presentation any clearer. Think of it this way – if you were in a strange country and someone came up to you, speaking in their native language, you would have no idea what they were saying. If they then pushed you real hard and began to holler the same words, you would still have no idea what they meant, as making the words louder didn't make them any more understandable. What's more, you'd probably get a bit worried about what was going on and want to get away. Well, that's not unlike what most horses go through every time they get ridden.

The person's interpretation of the situation, however, is usually very different. Most people, when they feel their horse resisting the rein, think this means the horse is being "lazy" or "defiant". Let's take a moment to look at this interpretation from a logical perspective. Horses are not lazy, though they do have a strong instinctual desire to be at peace. Given that desire, why would a horse who knows what a person wants choose to resist, when resisting creates so much stress for him and requires far more energy than simply doing what was asked? The simple truth is, he wouldn't – he just doesn't understand what is being asked. The same usually goes for the "defiant" horse, though there are some horses who might resist what you ask because they don't feel safe following your leadership. In this situation, you must understand that if a horse allows you to direct him with the rein, he is quite literally putting his life in your hands. Therefore it is that much more important to establish a new meaning for the rein.

Whatever is causing the horse's resistance; you need to look at the long-term

picture. If you choose to fight with your horse, you might "win" today and maybe even tomorrow, but you're not making yourself any clearer and you're not building a lasting relationship that will save you when the chips are down. What you therefore need to do is pose questions that ask the horse whether or not he is comfortable with the idea of following your thoughts, then work with his responses in a way that encourages him to see you as a good leader he wants to follow, rather than as a dictator he must obey. For example, if you use your right rein to ask a horse to go right and the

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horse responds by flipping his head, overflexing, rooting downwards or pulling left, you need to realize that a) the turn is not the issue, and b) you need to change your agenda to address what's going on. You would begin by looking for your horse to soften just a little bit to the question you have asked. You would probably get smaller with your pressure rather than bigger if the horse is really having difficulty. As the horse begins to understand that he can succeed in finding the answers to these small questions, he won't feel the need to resist against you to the same degree and he will begin to soften and think more *with* you.

What you're ultimately aiming for, in all of this, is for the horse to soften or yield to the degree and direction of the feel you put into the rein. So how, exactly, do you go about posing the question to ask the horse to soften? Well, if you've worked with your horse in a halter and taught him to follow

the feel of the lead rope before the slack ever comes out of it, this is usually an easy and natural progression – as long as you handle it the same way. With your lead, you made sure the horse had plenty of slack at the start to give him time to fall into step with you before the slack was gone, and that's exactly what you're going to do with your rein. Then, you're going to use one rein and treat it much like the lead rope. What you would like to see is the horse yielding to your pressure before the slack goes out of the rein, subtly softening his whole spine in a "C" shape from poll to tail in the direction of your rein, and lifting the base of his neck as he rounds his back upwards. A horse that has softened in this manner is ready to move out correctly and willingly in any direction. Ideally, you could ask for this softening and get it without the horse even taking a step, though if you used your rein to then ask for a step, it would happen in a smooth flow.

This softening to a rein might not come right away, but don't be stuck in the thought that the only response to resistance in the horse is to increase the pressure from yourself. There are many times when a horse gets into a really tough spot that I will not increase the pressure at all, but just wait a little. There are also times when I will decrease the pressure to make it easier for the horse to come through with the answer. Try to feel what it is the horse needs at that moment, and be patient. Be patient with yourself, too, as it may take some time for you to give up old habits and redefine the meaning of the rein in *your own* mind, let alone in the horse's! However, once you have made this change, you will find that both you and your horse will enjoy your time together much more.

To find out more about Josh Nichol or to see his clinic schedule, visit www.eagleswingranch.ca.