

CHAPTER 13: THE RIDING AIDS AND GAITS



Natural aids

Your voice, hands, legs and weight can control your horse if your horse is trained to respond to them. Begin using these tools in a very definite manner in the early stages of training. As you progress, your horse will respond to very light applications of these aids.

The following discussion of specific aids for different responses indicates how you can communicate with your horse.

Voice

Your voice is a very important aid when working your horse. Certain words such as *whoa*, *easy* and *back* are readily understood by a horse. Many show horses have learned the words *walk*, *trot*, *lope* and *canter* from hearing them repeatedly during lunging, training and in the showring. Some riders do not use complete words, but instead develop voice sounds (e.g. clicking or kissing) to mean something to their horses. Be consistent and use the same word or cue each time. Repeat it often to teach your horse what you mean. Make your sounds distinct from each other. For example, *whoa* and *go* sound too similar to be effective. Many showring judges do not like to hear voice commands, so use them very softly when showing or avoid using them in the show arena.

Your tone of voice means as much to your horse as actual words. It indicates pleasure or displeasure. Learn to always use a low, soft voice when working around your horse. Screaming and yelling will only frighten the horse.

Hands

Your hands control the forehand (forequarter) of your horse directly by use of the reins. In advanced riding, your actions on the reins have an indirect influence on the hindquarters. Relax your hands and arms, hold your shoulders back and down, and keep your upper arm in a straight line with your body. Your forearm forms a straight line from the elbow to the horse's mouth as you hold the reins. Some movement of the arm is permissible, but excessive movement will be penalized by a judge.

Good hands are steady, light, soft and firm in their actions. You can achieve this only if your body is in balance and rhythm with your horse.

As you begin reining and rein cues, remember the importance of relaxing your arms, elbows, wrists, hands and fingers. Allow a small amount of slack in the reins to relieve pressure on the bit but hold the reins firmly enough to maintain light contact with the horse's mouth. When riding a young horse (4 years or younger), you are allowed to hold the reins with both hands when using a snaffle (non-leverage) bit or a bosal.



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Learn to signal or cue with your reins (a give and take action) by slightly flexing your hands. Simply opening and closing your fingers is cue enough for a trained horse if you have the correct degree of contact with your horse's mouth. It is especially important to learn to use both hands on the reins when schooling or polishing the performance of your horse. The proper use of two hands to guide and set the horse until it learns to respond to cues is the mark of a good equestrian. As your horse responds, you may gradually switch to the use of a single hand on the reins when riding Western. But remember, that at any time outside the show ring when your horse isn't handling as smoothly as you desire, it is wise to use two hands.

If you plan to show your horse, study the rules on how to hold the reins and use the rein that allows you to have the softest hand on your horse's mouth. When using all of the aids provide release when the horse responds to pressure.

Legs

Your legs control the forward motion of your horse and its shoulders, barrel and hindquarters. When you squeeze your legs, your horse should learn that this is a signal to shift its weight to its hindquarters, lighten its weight on its forequarters and get ready to move out. Getting a response to this cue is very important; you will need it every time you move your horse, ask for collection or a change of gait, or correct misbehavior.

Pressure from your calves and heels controls the horse's shoulders, barrel and hindquarters. As you press with one leg or the other, your horse responds by moving away from the pressure or by moving against the pressure (see maneuvers in all figures in this chapter). When your horse responds to leg cues, less cueing is required by your reins. Balance pressure on the horse by using contact in the seat of your saddle and your thighs. Maintain only light contact with your knees so your lower legs can be used for cueing.

Seat/Weight

Although horses are trained to move away from pressure, they move under weight. Your body weight becomes a cue when you shift position in the saddle. This does not mean that you throw your weight by leaning excessively, you can give a weight cue by placing more pressure on one stirrup than the other by shifting to press more firmly on one seat bone. As you train your horse, you will find responses come from very slight weight shifts. Learning to be a good equestrian involves learning the effects of the aids, combining them to make your horse perform and using them in training and showing. The art is in developing a feel for when to apply the aids and when to release them.

Artificial aids

Spurs, whips, bats and crops

Artificial aids should be used only to reinforce natural aids. First, press the horse with the calves of your legs. If your horse doesn't respond, tap the horse with your heel. Finally, it may become



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necessary to tap the horse with your bat or touch it with a spur. Always tap the horse in the spot where your leg will touch. *Give the lightest cue first.* If your horse doesn't respond, use increasingly stronger cues. In this way, you tell your horse to respond or light discipline will follow. Remember, however, to give the horse time to learn what the cue means before using negative reinforcement.

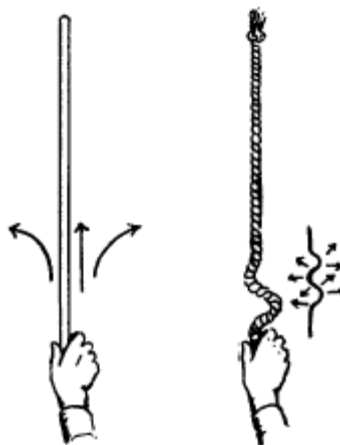


Figure 50. Visualize the thrust of the stick on the left. It demonstrates the forward motion of a horse, while the rope on the right cannot move forward, backward or be turned.

Body position and aids in motion

General pointers

The rider should maintain a natural position during all gaits. Practice proper cueing until your horse moves into any of the gaits lightly and smoothly. This will help keep your balance and avoid punishing your horse's mouth and side(s), which occurs if you lose balance. Get light control of your horse with the reins before cueing it with your legs so the horse does not rush out and has to be pulled back.

The horse's head should always be carried at an angle that is natural and suitable to the horse's conformation and breed at all gaits.

Forward motion

Before your horse can make any kind of move, there must be *forward motion*. Think of forward motion as the thrust of the horse's hind legs with all of their power going through the horse's spine, moving the body straight from the point of impulsion. Study figure 50. The stick can be moved forward, backward or turned, but the rope cannot. Keep your horse moving straight and true from the impulsion of its hindquarters. If you don't, it will be like trying to guide a rope.

Walk

The walk is a four-beat gait in which your horse should stride out freely and willingly. It is a natural, flatfooted, forward working gait. Encourage your horse to walk out by using your seat and legs to drive the horse forward. (See Figure 51).

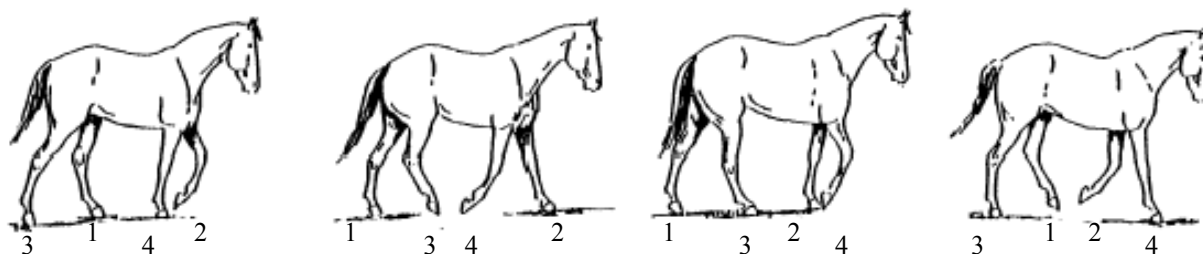


Figure 51. The walk is a four-beat gait.



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The jog or trot is a smooth, ground-covering, two-beat, diagonal gait. The horse works from one pair of diagonals (left front and right hind) to the other (right front and left hind). The jog or trot should be square and relaxed with a straight, forward movement of the feet. Horses that walk with back feet and trot with the front are not performing the required gait. When asked to extend the jog, the horse moves out lengthening the stride with the same smooth action.

The rider should sit when the horse is jogging and not post. Generally the western rider sits in the saddle when the horse is moving at the extended jog. However, posting is a very useful training tool and it is good for the Western rider to be able to post properly. Apply more leg pressure, gently pull the horse and allow the horse to move forward.

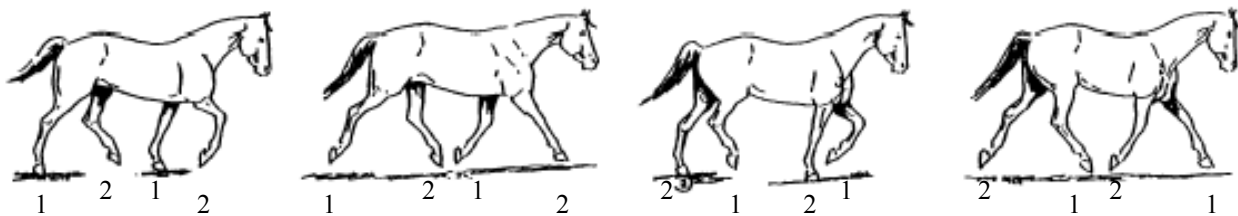


Figure 52. Trot - a two beat diagonal gait.

Posting or rising trot

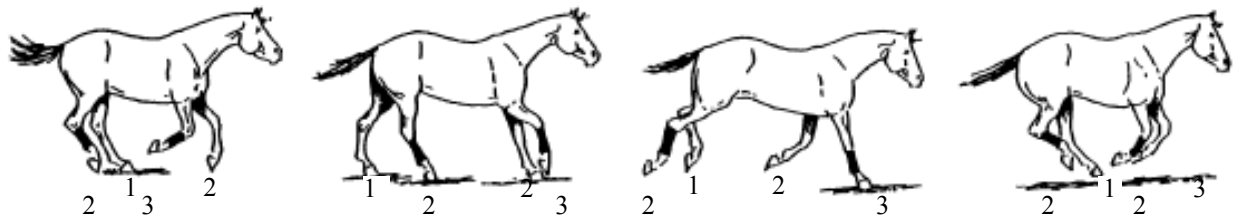
English riders will use posting diagonals at the trot. In the rising trot, your upper body is inclined slightly forward from the hips so you remain in balance with the horse's movements. Your body rises by the movement of the horse and your seat returns to the saddle without any loss of balance. The rule for correct diagonal is to post with the outside diagonal pair. This means that the rider rises out of the saddle when the horse's outside front leg (in relation to the rail) and inside hind leg reach forward (off the ground) and sits when these legs touch the ground. For example, if riding on the right rein (clockwise), the rider will rise and sit with the left foreleg and right hind leg. Conversely, when riding on the left rein (counterclockwise), the rider rises and sits with the right foreleg and left hind leg. To change the diagonal, the rider sits for one extra beat of the two-beat trot. (See Figure 52).

Lope or canter

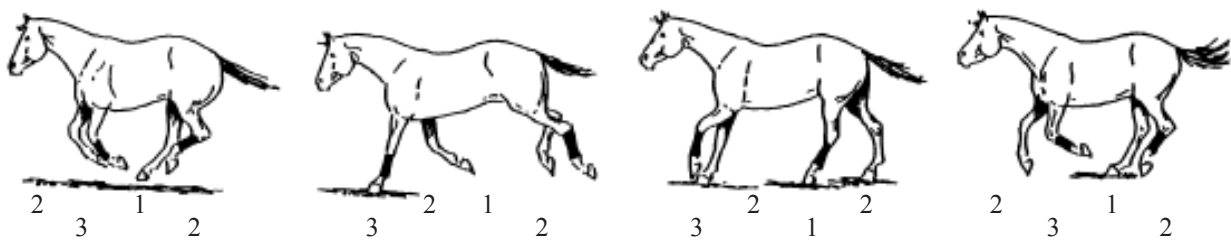
The lope, or canter, is an easy, rhythmical three-beat gait. The footfall pattern for the lope is as follows: beat 1 — outside hind; leg beat 2 — inside hind leg and outside fore leg together followed by beat 3 — inside fore leg. Horses traveling at a four-beat gait are not performing the gait properly. The horse should canter with a natural stride that appears relaxed and smooth. (See Figure 53).

To signal a canter, collect your horse, shift your weight back to the horse's outside hind leg and applying sufficient pressure with your outside leg to instruct the horse to strike out in the proper lead. The horse should be bent in the intended direction of travel. Train your horse to assume a lope from a standstill, walk or trot. You will learn the proper cueing under the sections on leads.

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Lope, right lead



Lope, left lead

Figure 53. The lope or canter is an easy, rhythmical three-beat gait.

Hand gallop or extended lope

The hand gallop is similar to the lope, but with a lengthened stride.

Leads

The correct lead

When your horse lope or hand-gallops, its body is bent in the direction it is traveling because one pair of legs, one foreleg and one hind leg, on the same side of the horse's body lead, or reach farther ahead than, the pair on the other side of its body. The horse is on the correct lead when it is leading with the inside pair. Leading with the opposite fore and hindleg is known as cross-firing, which is an uncomfortable gait because the horse is unbalanced.

The correct lead (canter/lope) is very important when your horse circles or makes tight turns. A horse will naturally take the proper lead or change leads when it runs free, but it may not do this when it carries a saddle and rider. Show ring rules place a great deal of emphasis on proper leads. A well-trained horse will change leads at the will of the rider. You should learn which lead your horse is on from the feel of its motion. Your inside leg should feel slightly further forward than the outside leg. Do not get into a habit of looking at the horse's shoulders or leaning forward to see the horse's legs.

Training your horse to depart on the lead you want requires patience and practice. Most horses favor one lead over the other. Work on getting the horse comfortable with either lead, but spend a little more time on the weaker lead by loping in a circle that requires that lead. Keep the canter slow and easy when training the horse so you can cue it properly.



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Your horse should be trained to assume the correct lead at the lope/canter directly from the stop, walk and trot. At any time the horse does not lead correctly, slow it to a walk or trot and try again.

The following paragraphs describe the aids for using either lead. Study and learn these aids and use them until they become habit. Have control of your horse's head and be sure it is listening before cueing it with your leg otherwise your horse will move too quickly, throw you off balance and disrupt your cues. Train your horse to move smoothly into a lope. This will make it easier to apply your cues with proper timing.

Aids

To ask for the lead, bend your horse in the direction of travel, tipping the nose using the rein. With your weight to the outside, squeeze with the outside leg behind the girth and, with the inside leg, at the girth. For example, for the left lead, tip the nose to the left, shift your weight slightly to the right and squeeze with the right leg, using the left leg to ask for the bend. For the right lead, tip the nose to the right, shift your weight slightly to the left and squeeze with the left leg, using the right leg to ask for the bend.

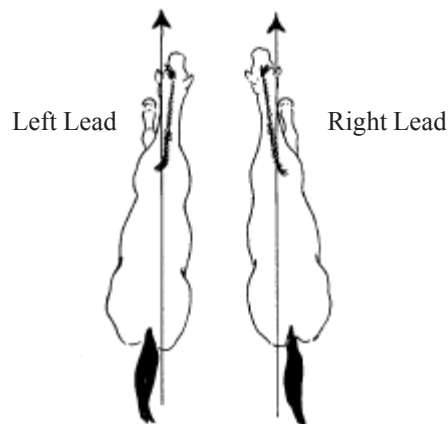


Figure 54. Note foreleg and hind leg on the same side reach farther ahead.

When your cues and timing are correct and your horse is working willingly, you will feel a slight lifting of your horse's body on the lead side as it takes off. This is the result of the horse shifting its weight back to the rear leg, ready to lightly spring forward and reach out with the leading hind leg. This gives a smooth, gliding sensation and you are loping with the correct lead.

In early training, apply cues more firmly. But as your horse learns, it will respond to lighter cues. When cued properly, a horse will improve in riding circles, figure eights, serpentines, quadrilles or just plain turning.

Changing leads

Changing leads is required when changing the direction of travel. The *simple change* is executed at the walk or trot and the *flying change* is executed through the lope. The change must occur during the moment of suspension, as illustrated in the footfalls.

Aids

When executing a change of leads, the rider will straighten the horse from its direction of travel and cue it into the new direction of travel. This will require changing the bend of the horse's body and moving your weight to the outside while changing leg pressure from the

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outside leg of the initial direction to the outside leg of the new direction. It is common for a horse to change in the front and not in the rear (i.e. cross-firing). Should this occur, exaggerate the change of your weight and leg pressure to move the horse's hips into the new lead (see footfalls for the timing of this maneuver).

Counter canter

The counter canter is when the horse leads opposite of its direction of travel.

Aids

The aids for the counter-canter are the same as cueing for a lead. However, upon departure into the counter-canter, it is essential that the rider's weight remain centered and balanced to ensure that the horse does not change leads out of the counter-canter.

Backing

Grip the horse with your thighs. Squeeze with your legs to collect the horse while you maintain light rein pressure to prevent the horse from moving forward. When your horse is collected, use the word *back*. Flex your reins gently, continue to squeeze with your legs, apply pressure and provide release with each step. You are asking for forward motion but in reverse. Control the direction of backing by varying the degree of pressure of one leg or the other.

Backing is unnatural and hard for a horse. Be patient and ask for a step at a time. Gradually increase the number of steps that your horse will back and reward your horse by stepping it forward and releasing pressure. Proper backing is smooth and performed easily without excessive jawing or resistance by the horse (for footfall patterns of backing, see figure 51).

Stops

A good stop is not necessarily a sliding stop. A good stop is balanced and smoothly executed. The horse's hindquarters are well under its body to balance its weight. The forequarters, neck and head are kept light. The horse is balanced and ready to do what is required next.

Timing is important when you ask for a stop, especially from a lope. You should use some preliminary cue to alert your horse that a stop is coming which will allow it time to adjust its balance in preparation.

To cue for a stop, sit deep in the saddle, say *whoa* and then reinforce it by asking with the reins. Do not get into the bad habit of thrusting your feet forward, throwing your weight back and yanking on the reins.



Figure 55. The horse in this figure is stopping too hard. A proper stop includes the voice command *whoa*, a light flex of your reins, a squeeze of your legs and increased pressure or rider's seat to cause the horse to halt and stand square and quiet.



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School your horse to stop easily on the cues at a walk, then a trot, and finally, at a slow lope. This will allow you time to perfect your cueing and give your horse time to learn what the cues mean. You will work more softly on the horse's mouth by going slowly at first. When stopping at slower gaits, always make your horse stop completely and stand, preferably with a slacked rein. Do not let the horse walk. It is wise to vary the time of standing so your horse will not anticipate a short stop and begin to move.

Don't rush your training. You are making progress when you feel the horse's hindquarters sink under you slightly when you stop. Keep working for a light response and don't overdo the number of times you ask for stops. As you work, be sure to vary the places where you ask your horse to stop so it will not begin to anticipate stops at certain points. It is good to allow a horse to stop and then *catch his air* as a reward after an extended time of cantering or trotting. This teaches the horse that stopping is a pleasant thing.

Turn on the forehand

Your horse should be taught to move or hold its hindquarters in response to pressure from your heel or the calf of your leg behind the front cinch or girth. This control is very important in backing, side-passing, twotracking, holding the hindquarters on pivots and roll-backs, and for correct leads. Turning on the forehand is not a forward movement. The horse pivots on the inside foreleg while the hips move away from pressure in the opposite direction of the nose.

Aids

Bend the horse in the direction of the turn (e.g. to the right, horse bent to the right).

Apply inside leg on the barrel or girth until

hips move away from pressure (e.g. right leg behind girth and left leg balances at the girth).

Your inside hand asks for the bend while your outside hand balances and prevents forward motion.

Turn on the hindquarters

With the turn on the hindquarter, the inside hind foot remains stationary. The forehand moves around the pivot foot with the front legs crossing over with each step. The turn on the hindquarters is the basic movement for controlled, smooth, fast turns in pivots, roll-backs, pole-bending, barrel racing and working cattle. The horse learns to roll back over its hocks.

Aids

The inside hand leads the horse into a bend into forward motion, while the outside hand controls the bend. Bend the horse's nose slightly in the direction of the turn. Apply outside

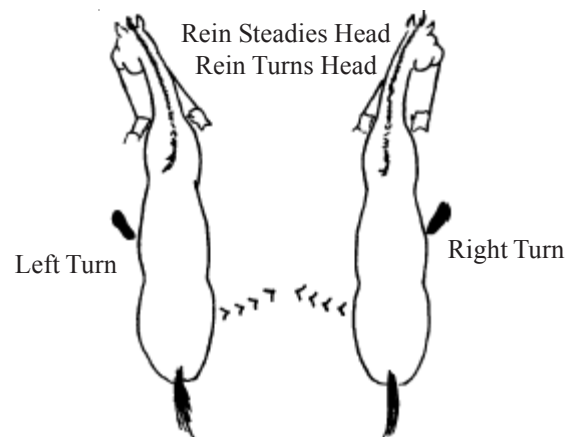


Figure 56. Note the position of the reins and the foot used to cue for turn on the forehand.



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leg pressure at the girth or just in front of the girth and inside leg pressure at the girth. The rider's weight should be focused on the horse's hips and the outside seat bone used to encourage the horse's hips to remain stationary (do not tip or lean your body).

This movement requires time and patience to execute exactly. Do not expect a 360 degree turn immediately but work one step at a time, applying pressure and release with each step. It is also important that your horse maintain impulsion, which is accomplished by driving the horse's motion with your seat and legs.

You should be able to stop the swing of the hindquarters by pressing with your outside leg. This leg cue may not be enough to stop some horses. If this happens, you will need to add another cue. When you feel the horse beginning to shift its hindquarters, apply pressure with your outside leg. You must learn to feel the movements of your horse through your seat to know what is happening and how to correct any problems. When your horse is willing to execute this movement slowly, then you can progress to more advanced movements such as a roll back.

Side-pass

The side-pass is a sideways lateral movement of your horse by stepping to the right or left with both the forequarters and hindquarters moving evenly together. The horse's legs should cross in front of the opposite supporting legs.

Side-passing is necessary for the smooth opening and closing of gates and is an excellent training tool. Figure 58 shows the cues used to side-pass. To side-pass to the right, use the left rein to turn your horse's head slightly to the left. Hold light contact with the right rein to make the horse move to the right. At the same time, shift your body weight to the left, away from the direction of the sidepass, and use your left leg and heel to move the horse's shoulders, barrel and hindquarters to the right.

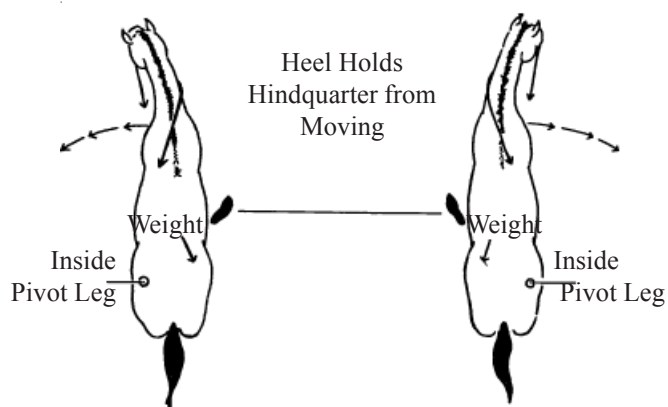


Figure 57. Note the position of the reins and the foot used to cue for turn on the hindquarters.

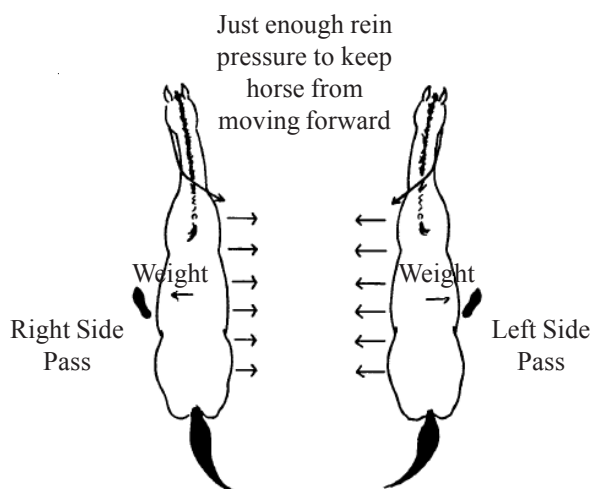


Figure 58. Note the position of the reins and the foot used to cue for left and right side-passes.



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Reverse the cues to side-pass to the left. The right rein tucks the nose to the right slightly. Your weight is shifted to the right. You use your right leg and heel to move the shoulders, barrel and hindquarters to the left.

You will need practice to learn the feel of the correct rein tension and leg pressure necessary to move the horse to the side without backing or moving forward. At first, it may be helpful to face a fence to keep the horse from moving forward. If the horse backs, simply relax tension on the reins and use your legs to move it up into the bit again.

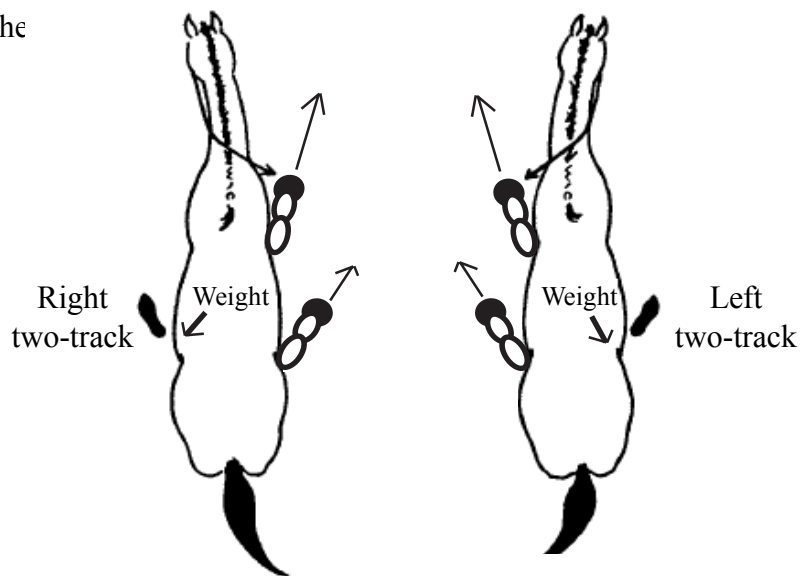


Figure 59. Note the position of the reins and the foot used to cue for left and right two-track.

You may need to begin by moving the horse's shoulders, first then the hips, until your horse begins to learn what you are asking. Side-passing, as with all movements, should be practiced in moderation. After the horse performs a few correct steps, do something else.

Two-tracking or leg yield

Two-tracking or leg yielding is a lateral movement in which your horse moves forward in a diagonal direction. This may be used as a training tool for lead departures or lead changes. Begin at the walk and then go to the sitting trot and lope.

Two-tracking aids

Cueing for the two-track is the same as cueing for a side-pass. However, rein tension must be lighter and you will need more leg contact to move your horse forward. You want your horse to move at an angle so more forward motion is needed. This is accomplished by holding the rein in the same positions but much lighter. Push your horse forward, as well as sideways, with your seat and leg.

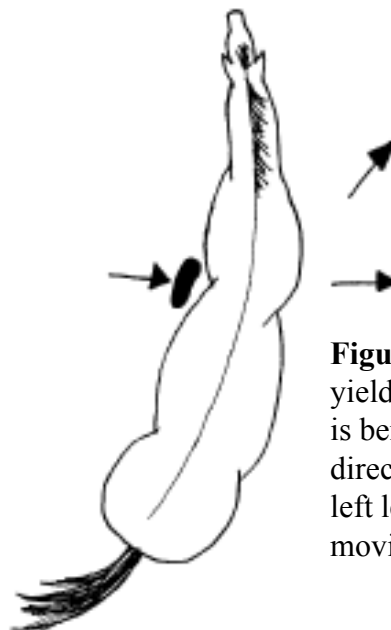


Figure 60. Leg yielding. Note the horse is bent in the opposite direction of travel. The left leg is near the girth, moving the horse over.



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Leg yielding aids

Leg yielding is a forward and sideways movement with the horse is bent in opposite direction of travel (e.g. the horse is bent slightly to the right but moving forward and to the left). The forehand slightly leads the quarters. The aids for leg yield to the right are as follows: the horse is moving forward at the walk or sitting trot. The left leg is near the girth cueing the horse to move over. The right leg keeps the horse moving forward and is behind the girth, controlling the amount of sideways movement. The left hand leads a slight bend to the left. The right hand may be slightly open and leading the horse to the left. The rider must be sitting straight and even.

Shoulder in

The shoulder in is a bending exercise. The horse will move on three tracks (see diagram). The aids for shoulder in to the right are as follows: position the horse's forehand at approximately a 30-degree angle from the rail. The right, or inside leg, is behind the girth to prevent the quarters from swinging out to the left. The right rein, or inside hand, keeps the horse's forehand to the right and maintains the degree of bend. The left, or outside hand, controls the pace and the degree of the bend.

Travers (or haunches in)

The travers is a bending exercise with the forehand on the rail and the haunches moved to the inside. The travers is a four-track movement. The aids for travers to the right are as follows: the right, or inside leg, is at the girth to create the bend. The left, or outside leg, is behind the girth to move the haunches off the track to the inside. The right, or inside rein, creates the bend to the inside while the left, or outside rein, controls the degree of bend to the right.

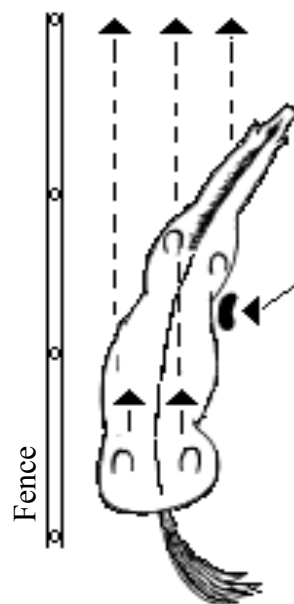


Figure 61. Shoulder in. To the right, note the leg at the girth creates the bend and pushes the horse forward.

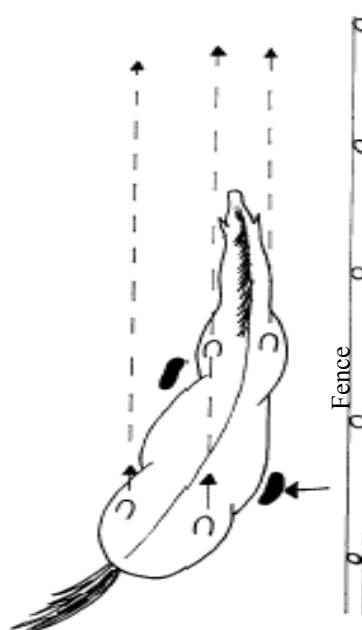


Figure 62. Haunches in. Note the rein pressure and the foot used to cue the haunches in and the left leg bends the horse.