

Training for Competition – Part 6

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The previous 5 articles have discussed various exercises and techniques to teach the horse ground manners and to establish the handler's position as "herd leader" in the horse's hierarchy. In the words of Natural Horsemanship Clinician John Lyons, you "ride the horse you lead".

It is now time to "mount up" and work on the horse's behavior from the saddle. It is important to understand that the horse's mind doesn't work "logically" like humans and that complex training should be broken down into small steps. A horse is sometimes confused by a cue given from the saddle that he responds to perfectly on the ground. In addition, the cue itself may be inappropriate from the saddle. The "head down" cues of poll and lead line pressure work well when on the ground. However, if we want to have the horse drop his head from the saddle...at any gait...then this cue doesn't work very well.

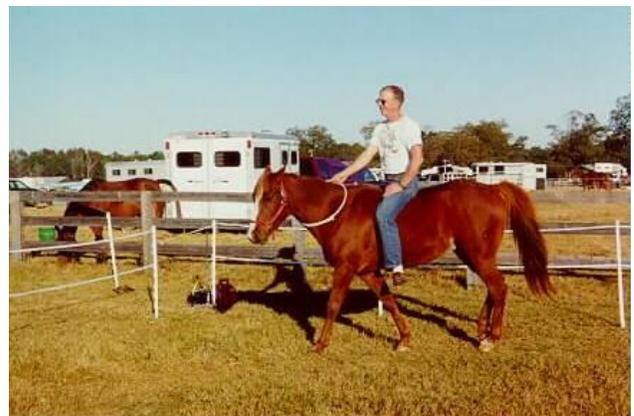
Head Drop Exercises from the Saddle

There are many advantages to being able to cue your horse to drop his head from the saddle:

- It's a "calm down" cue.
- It confirms that your horse is listening to you.
- You can ask him to drop his head to a creek or other water source.
- You can "evolve" it into a "slow down" cue.
- You can "point" him at a hill of grass along the trail that you want him to eat.
- You do not need martingales, tie-downs, or any other restraints to "set" the horse's head.
- When your horse gets excited and you apply rein pressure, instead of his head going up, it will go down, because he has learned to "give" to rein pressure by DROPPING his head, instead of RAISING it, which is what would normally happen. The benefit of this is a rounded back instead of a hollowed back, and his head is not up in your face.

The techniques discussed here are "my method" of training. There are many ways to achieve the results described below. The training may have to be modified to accommodate the disposition of the horse and the capabilities of the trainer. Results are more important than the method used.

I ride in an Arabian S-Hack. I never use a bit...don't own one. Theoretically, you should be able to ride in "nothing", as long as you have the means to communicate with the horse, since you should control him with what is IN his head, not what is ON it. I sometimes ride in a neck rope. Although this is fun to teach, it's just not very practical out on the trail. (Hard to lead, tie, etc.)



To teach "head down" from the saddle, I use a gentle seesaw motion of the reins as the cue. This cue works well because you can use it even when the horse is excited and pulling on you. Practice this in an area where there is no grass. With the horse quietly standing still, grip a rein in each hand, spread your arms apart and drop your hands down until you are holding each rein shoulder width apart just below the pommel right in front of your thighs. Take the slack out of the reins, then seesaw your arms back and forth gently, but don't apply ANY backward pressure at this time. If your horse is wearing a hackamore like an S-Hack, this will result in the nosepiece rolling back and forth across his nose. Be sure the hackamore is



properly adjusted and not too low on his nose. * It doesn't really matter what "action" occurs. We're just trying to tell him we want him to do "something" and get him to figure it out. Continue to seesaw gently until the horse takes some action to alleviate the annoyance. Watch the tips of his ears. You are looking for ANY motion downward. Ignore any other head motion. On any ATTEMPT to drop the head, immediately stop the motion, and let the reins go slack, praise him and stroke his mane. Wait 15-20 seconds, then repeat the exercise. You will have to extend your arms and let the reins slide through your fingers to release as he responds with a lower and lower head drop. Only practice this for 4-5 minutes or so, then quit and come back to it later in the day or the following day. You will find that with each session, the horse will respond more quickly. Initially, he may drop his head, but then pick it right back up. That's OK. Ask him to put it down again. Work on this until you can put his nose a couple of inches off the ground and keep it there. You will soon notice that he begins to "anticipate" the cue and will drop his head immediately when you drop your hands to your thighs and pick up the slack on ONE rein to START the seesaw motion. Make the "rein pickup" as light as you can. You can get it so subtle that you don't see the rein move and it seems that you only "think" you want his head down and he will still read it. Be patient while he figures out what you want. He needs to know when it's OK to bring his head back to a "normal" position. He gets that cue when you relax and bring your hands back to "neutral" with the reins together just in front of the saddle. The objective is to teach the horse that as long as you hold the slack out of the reins with your hands low on your thighs, he is to keep his head where you put it.



Now let's add rein pressure to the "head down" cue. The goal is get the horse to drop his head and take a step backward. Again use the gentle seesaw motion to get the head drop, but this time, continue to seesaw and apply gentle rein pressure during the cue to get a step backward. Immediately release. Once the horse understands what you want, work on both variations. That is, don't always



* It's a good idea to cover the nosepiece of an S-Hack with slit surgical tubing and tape it with Vetwrap and/or duct tape. With a bit, this cue will tug on alternate corners of his mouth. A full cheek snaffle works best to teach this if you ride in a bit. This cue may not work as well with unusual headgear such as bitless bridles or bosals.

ask for a step back. We want him to distinguish between “head down” and “head down with rein pressure”. Don’t move on to the next exercise until he does this perfectly with light rein pressure.

KEEP THE LESSONS SHORT! ONLY 5-10 MINUTE SESSIONS, A COUPLE OF TIMES PER DAY.

Now move on to walking the horse down a dirt or gravel road where there is no grass. Use the same cue as before, but let the horse to continue to walk.

Don’t forget to move your hands to low on your thighs when you use the cue. Practice in short sessions until the horse will walk along with his nose almost on the ground. (Be careful... Magic does this so well, he once got a “road rash” on his nose!) Again, you want the head to go down on the lightest possible cue. Continue to work on “head down” at a walk until he does it perfectly. Now add rein pressure to the cue. At a walk, push your heels down, lean back slightly, use the “head drop” cue, but this time add rein pressure until the horse stops and backs up one step with his head down. Go back to a centered posture moving your hands to neutral as he stops.



You are teaching the horse in small increments to do a controlled stop, with his head down and to recognize a weight change from centered toward the rear as a “pre-cue” to mean, “here comes a stop”. We are also teaching him that rein pressure ALWAYS means, “head down”, because we always precede rein pressure with the “head down” cue, and that “picking up a rein” means “pay attention, here comes a cue”. You never want the head to go UP on rein pressure. The reason most people use “tie downs” and martingales is because they haven’t taught their horse this simple principle. Work on each of these exercises until they are a consistent part of your routine every time you ride. As you ride along, every few minutes ask for one of the exercises. You will find that your horse is paying more attention to you and less to his surroundings because he is constantly anticipating a “cue” from you. (Ears flicking back and forth like radar!) When he starts to spook at a strange object, use the exercises to return his attention to you. Remember there are FOUR exercises:

- “Head Down” standing still.
- “Head Down” standing still with one step back on rein pressure.
- “Head Down” at a walk.
- “Head Down” at a walk with a stop and one step back on rein pressure.

These exercises provide an important benefit to the rider. Keeping your hands low with a rein in both hands will keep you better balanced with a lower center of gravity. You begin to automatically drop your hands when you apply rein pressure. Raising your hands when you apply rein pressure encourages the horse to RAISE his head to relieve the pressure, resulting in a hollowed back. Try to ride “feeling the weight” of the bridal snaps equally in each hand but with no pressure as you walk along.

Move up to a slow trot and teach the cue, then at a canter. Initially, a flat road or wide, level trail is best to work on this, since hills change your balance and the footing may distract the horse. Usually by this time, he knows the cue so well that he will do it instantly at any gait. Although it will be harder to get his nose low to the ground at a trot or canter, he CAN do that. However, for the purposes of this training, it may not be worth the effort to take it that far. The objective is an immediate head drop at least until the neck is level or just below level at a trot and canter. If you have taught the exercises above thoroughly, you will probably notice that if you drop your heels, lean back and apply rein pressure with the “head down” cue at a trot or canter, the horse will slow, anticipating the “stop and backup” exercise that you taught him at a walk. You have now “evolved” the “head down” cue into a “calm down”/“slow down” cue, depending on how you use it. It’s much easier on the horse and the rider when you can cue your horse to trot at a specific speed on a loose rein. Once you start teaching the cue at a trot, work on using it to slow down instead of stopping.

For example, you are trotting down a hill and he starts getting faster. Give the “head down” cue, but when he drops his head, continue to seesaw and add rein pressure gradually until he slows, then immediately release. If he speeds back up, again repeat the exercise. As you continue to practice this, he will begin to do it with ONE rein just as he did with the initial “head down” cue and tend to hold that speed instead of speeding up again. That is, pick up a rein, the head starts to drop but with light pressure he will slow down, which gets him an immediate release. Again, you can make it lighter and lighter until it’s like “power brakes” on a car. Patience, patience! Practice, practice! This is harder to teach than the exercises while standing still and at a walk. Remember that the horse doesn’t “logically” associate one action with a similar one. It’s almost like teaching the cue all over again. If the horse gets confused, go back to the last exercise he does well and start over. Don’t ask for too much too soon.

It is not uncommon for a horse to turn into a “creature you don’t recognize” at the start of an Endurance Ride. Here is how you can use these techniques to help you control your horse when he’s excited and wanting to go catch all those horses that just went by. Solicit the help of a friend with a horse to practice this at first. Then work on it in a larger group of horses.

Walk your horse along behind your friend’s horse, about a horse length back. Have your friend trot for 20 or 30 feet, then drop back to a walk. As soon as the horse in front trots, your horse will also want to trot. When he starts to trot, apply the “head down” cue with enough rein pressure to keep him at a walk until you catch up. Continue to work on this until your horse will continue to walk on his own when the other horse trots further and further away, but not out of sight. The objective is to teach the horse to hold his current speed and gait unless he is ASKED to trot. Be sure he will do this without getting excited before moving on to the next exercise.

Have your friend trot away from you just out of sight and wait. If your horse gets excited, use the “head down” cue with increasing pressure on the reins, keeping your hands as low as possible. Since his head is going DOWN on pressure, the horse will tuck his nose into his chest and slow down, although he may still be excited. You may have to pull pretty hard, but the horse will eventually stop, his neck arched, and his nose between his front legs, although he may still have “happy feet”. Continue to apply the seesaw with pressure until he stops and backs up a couple of steps, then release. He will be familiar with this since you taught this sequence in an earlier exercise. Allow him to WALK off on down the trail until you catch up with your friend. If he tries to trot,



repeat the “head down, back up” exercise until you reach your friend. Repeat this exercise periodically, but give him a chance to relax and walk along with the other horse for a few minutes after each one. The objective is to get him excited under controlled conditions, then ask him to calm down until he learns to deal with the fear of being left. With repetition, he will become less and less excited and eventually accept having the other horse out of sight for a few minutes and continue to walk on his own. This is difficult for the horse and against his nature. How long it takes until he “gets it” depends on the disposition of the horse, how well you have taught these exercises, and how strongly the horse accepts you as “herd leader”. Teaching him to manage his excitement can take many months and much practice, but a calm, well-mannered horse, even in stressful situations means greater safety for both of you. (And other riders) Be patient, consistent, stay calm, don’t get angry and pay attention to his body language. How well your horse adjusts to this depends on how herd bound he is, your skill, and how well you have trained him to “respect” you. In some cases, it may be better to get off, THEN let your friend trot out of sight. When your horse gets upset, “move his feet” with the respect and ground manners techniques described in previous articles (take your little dressage whip along) until he calms down and lets you LEAD him quietly up to the other horse. When he will do this reliably, then do it while mounted. Do not pursue this if there is danger of you

or the horse being injured. The objective is to make it easy for him to do the right thing and uncomfortable to do the wrong thing, but don't push him into a panic situation.

Keep in mind that you must be consistent EVERY time you ride under ALL conditions. You can't let him trot "whenever he wants to trot" sometimes and "wait for a cue" at other times. You must respond to a given behavior the same way every time. After a lot of practice, you will find that when the other horse trots off, your horse will "ask" you with his ears and by "lifting" his frame if it's OK to trot, but just picking up a rein says, "No". Conversely, leaning forward slightly with no rein pickup says, "Yes". This is the ultimate goal of all training, which is to have the horse "defer" to you before taking action. Never put your horse in a situation you don't think he (or you) can handle. Remember that you are ALWAYS training your horse when you interact with him, whether you think so or not. Don't ask him to do something unless you are pretty sure he can and will do it. Consistency and tiny steps is the key.