

Hip-Shoulder-Shoulder, Part 2: Stop Your Horse

by Josh Lyons & Keith Hosman

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We'll break this exercise down into several steps. Practice this first at a walk, then progress to a trot when you're ready. Here's the first step: Walk forward and pick up one rein. Add whatever pressure (or angle) that it takes to make the shoulder (or foot) on the same side stop moving – but cause the hind legs to take at least two steps sideways (around the front, as if his front feet are nailed down – not like a propeller). Release, walk forward and do the same thing on the other side. Alternate sides often at this stage of the exercise. Later, when you begin backing your horse, keep to the same side till your horse backs willingly.

Here's a specific example of what you'll do: Pick up the left rein, pull the horse's head off to the left side (sort of like you're steer wrestling), searching for the angle and amount of pressure it takes to get the left shoulder to stop. Simultaneously apply the leg pressure (both legs evenly) it takes to keep the horse moving. By blocking his shoulder – but still saying "move" – your horse will have little choice but to move his back legs off a step or two to the right. Think of it this way: If you're squeezing or kicking and saying "move horse" – yet you're blocking him from going forward with your rein, he'll eventually find a release by taking that step to the side with his rear end. So the two keys at this stage are: 1) stop the shoulder; 2) get him to move his rear a step to the side. Always, always, always end the sequence by relaxing your reins and walking forward. And do it immediately, without hesitation. You want the horse thinking "forward" and "What's next?" not "park and snooze."

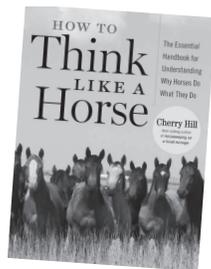
What you're doing is "disengaging" the left hind foot and "engaging" the right hind foot. While one "goes to work," the other "gets dragged." (That's an important concept that later plays out when you're trying to stop shoulders from leaking out of a turn or caving into a turn.)

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Get Your Back Up

by Josh Lyons & John Lyons Certified Trainer Keith Hosman

When you're teaching your horse to back up, remember that the farther you back up, the worse your back up gets. Think of it this way: If you want your horse to quiet down at a lope, you lope him, right? The longer you lope, the quieter the horse gets. And, yes, if you do this a lot, they'll get stronger and be able to go longer – but they will have learned to relax as long as you leave them alone as you ride. As long as you leave them alone and don't give them a reason to get more nervous, they'll relax. Just sit up there and relax, maybe sing a song.

If I were to back up long enough, the horse would relax – and get lazy – in their back up. If I wanted to make his back up or spin faster, then what I have to do is quit while they're speeding up, not when they're slowing down. So when I'm working on backing up, I may not care about the proper frame, I may just be concentrating on the energy, on backing quickly. I'll get the impulsion quick – and then quit. Maybe the horse was in the correct frame, maybe it wasn't. The bottom line is that if I quit when the horse is showing the energy, he'll get faster and faster. But if I quit otherwise, he'll get lazier and lazier. He may be quieter and calmer, but I'll lose his performance in the movement.

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This is a "single rein" exercise. Use the same rein on the same side to bring your horse's head around, to stop his shoulders and to disengage his hindquarters as described. Later, you'll use that same rein to get him to back up. Don't cheat and use two hands to pull. Using two hands will cause your horse to resist the pressure and get heavy (read: drag and pull against you). Using just one hand helps keep the horse's body curved, lighter and just a little off balance. Those are three things we use to our advantage. Your horse can push all day long when his body parts are lined up in a row against your push. Think of his skeletal system as a pile of building blocks stacked one behind the next. It takes no strength to offer great resistance. But, when you put a little curve in his body (that is, move his head or tail a couple of inches off center) suddenly he's got to use his muscles to resist. He'll soon find it's much easier to relax and "go with the flow" than to resist.

Tip: Here are two things to try to get the shoulder to stop and keep the back feet moving: First try swinging your hand way out to the side and then, in one smooth wide arc, bring that

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same hand (as a fist) as close to your opposite shoulder as you can. You'll be outlining the shape of the famous "Nike Swoosh" checkmark logo with your hand. A common mistake at this point is making your hand move at angles and/or with choppy movements. Make your "swoosh" movement wide, smooth and in one graceful arc. (And the odds are pretty good that you need to grab the rein closer to his mouth than you are.) As an alternative, you can also try lowering your hand more to your side and do your best to pull your horse's nose to his rear end. Don't be afraid to try using two hands to pull on the same side when you first begin in order to get your point across. (But remember to keep your balance and sit up straight on your horse.)

Tip: A common question is "How do I know when the front of the horse is stopped?" When you first begin, try picking up a rein and stare at the shoulder on the same side. See it moving forward and backward with each stride? Apply the pressure and angle that it takes with your rein to make it stop moving. It may stop only briefly, maybe half a second. Don't over-think this, just make it happen. When his shoulder is stopped and you feel his back legs take a step LET GO. If the front is stopped – but he's still moving his back feet – then he has to be disengaging. There's nothing else he could be doing.

Another tip: You might forget which way his back legs should move when you pick up a right or left rein, but here's an easy way to remember: If you were simply riding down the trail and picked up the left rein and pulled till your horse turned to the left, which way would his butt go? To the right, right? Keep it that simple and the exercise is easy.

Yet another tip: Don't lock your hand into one place. You'll need to constantly adjust the position of your hand in order to compensate for the movements of the horse.

The most common problem we see: Keeping your horse moving may prove to be your biggest challenge. Sluggish horses that look for any excuse to slow down will stop dead in their tracks when you first pick up a rein and ask for such a sharp maneuver. Be ready for it and really motivate them with your legs (spurs, crop, threats, bolt of lightning, whatever it takes) to keep moving. If your horse begins to freeze up more and more, then simply drop back a step and ask for less of a "sharp turn" (and really kick or squeeze). Then you'll progressively whittle it down, asking your horse to turn more and more "abruptly." More likely than not, you'll need to take your hand/arm waaaaay out to one side or the other because any sort of backward pressure on the reins will cause your horse to stop. If that's the case, take yet another step back in your training: Try simply walking a straight line, picking up a rein and asking your horse to bend it's neck and "gently arc" to the right or left, then release on the turn as he softens, however briefly. Your goal at that point has to be to keep the feet moving, all the while building softness and dissolving resistance. Concentrate on keeping the feet moving, gradually making your turns sharper and sharper. This is called "You gotta start somewhere." Do whatever it takes to keep the horse moving and softening. If you stick with it, he'll soon start relaxing and you'll be able to move ahead. When your horse is relaxed this exercise is actually quite easy.

How we've progressed: You've been moving the hips to get the shoulder – and the front foot – to stop. We can't stop all four feet (yet) but we do have a way to stop one. We've started teaching the horse that "stop" means more than ceasing movement. It means something specific like "stop moving your shoulder to the left and begin moving it to the right."

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"You'll outline the shape of the 'Nike Swoosh' checkmark logo with your hand."