

# Hip-Shoulder-Shoulder Part 3, Back Easily

by Josh Lyons & Keith Hosman

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Here's the last phase of Hip-Shoulder-Shoulder: Once you can pick up a rein, get the shoulder to stop on the same side and keep the hindquarters moving (at least two steps, smoothly and without hesitation), you're ready to move on. The next step is to get the horse to back up.

The foot we've been stopping is the one connected to the inside shoulder, correct? (It's the first rein you pick up and when he curves it's on the "inside" of that curve.) When I walk forward, pick up the left rein, and the horse moves his hindquarters to the right, then what I've done is to stop his left front foot – even if for just a brief moment. When I get that sequence smoothly and consistently, then I'm going to move my hand and start asking that shoulder to back. While you should have been alternating sides frequently up to this point, you will now begin working on just one side of the horse until he backs evenly, then begin working on the other side.

When you began this exercise, you pulled the horse's head off to one side in order to get the hip to move. It worked because the more pressure you apply to the horse's head as you bend it off the side, the more pressure you put on the horse's hip. (Ever see steer wrestling? They first turn the steer's head – but within a millisecond his rear end flips over, right?) But now, in order to get a smooth backup, (and to not look silly) you have to get the horse's head back in front, in more of a natural position.

Pick up a rein and ask the horse stop his shoulder and disengage his hindquarters as you've been doing. Now, instead of letting go and simply walking off as you've been doing (or should have been doing), keep even pressure on the rein and move your hand to directly above the "point of the shoulder" there on the same side. You'll see the point of your horse's shoulder by simply looking down: It's there towards the front of his body, a bony "protuberance" covered in muscle. (Here's a web page with a diagram of the horse's body if you're not sure about this specific body part: <http://www.gaitedhorses.net/Conformation/BodyParts.htm>).

Moving your hand to above the point of the shoulder will push your horse's head back in front of his body and allow him to back up. In fact, if you're lucky, it'll actually cause him to back up. If he doesn't simply start backing, then you're going to hold the pressure, toy with the angle, squeeze with your legs... whatever it takes to give your horse the idea that something else is expected. You want him to back up. When he makes any sort of backward movement you'll release the rein and immediately move forward. "Any sort of backward movement" includes anything from a full step to the tiniest lean backwards. Get whatever "backwards thought" you can out of your horse at first and build on that. You'll build on that by being very quick to release your rein and thus tell your horse "Yes, that's what I want." Remember, if you block the forward and sideways movement of your horse, but keep applying "go" pressure, eventually he'll try going backwards. Just stick with it and start small.

If your horse insists on carrying his head off to the side, then reach forward with the rein and bring it against the horse's neck to "push" it back to the center. For instance, if you picked up the left rein and his head swings to the left (and won't seem to go back forward), then lean forward slightly, grab the rein closer to the horse's mouth and bring your hand above and across the horse's neck to your right. Your hand will probably be about two feet directly in front of your body and about 8-10 inches above his neck at this point; like you're pointing, but with a fist.) Apply the pressure it takes to motivate your horse to bring his head back forward. This very position will often cause the horse to begin moving backward on his own – so it's something you want to master. And use common sense: Don't put yourself off balance.

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When you first begin backing, back your horse at an angle (or “crooked”). Don’t ask him to back up straight because you’d be pulling evenly on both of the horse’s shoulders; he’ll be resisting and you’ll lose “lightness.” He’ll push into your reins like a plow horse into his harness. Instead, back up crooked. It makes the horse raise his knees higher and stay lighter on his front end than he would otherwise. (Because his left front foot will step towards his right front foot or vice versa, as opposed to directly backwards. That causes him to bend his knees more. The more the knee bends, the more elevation he keeps in his front end which means more energy in your backup.) Do this by simply toying with the angle at which you hold the rein. Remember, you’re only supposed to be using one.

If you cheat and use two reins, your horse won’t stay elevated and light on the front end, rather he’ll drop down and you’ll find yourself dragging him backwards.

If you’ve begun backing straight and your horse begins dragging his feet, then go back to backing at an angle (or more of an angle). Change the direction of your rein and say “Hey, don’t get lazy on me. Pick up your front end, bend your knees and get moving.” When you can do this on both sides (of your horse), you’ll be able to keep the front end elevated and the back end will stay more forward (that is, closer to the front end).

Another way to put some energy into your back up is this: If your horse just kind of drags and pulls, turn to the hindquarters. While we first used the hindquarters to teach the maneuver, now we use them as motivator or enforcer. Just drive with your legs and disengage his hindquarters. That will have the effect of putting energy back into your horse and the back up.

Each time you release the rein (after finishing the movement described), be quick to push your horse out. Don’t let him stall out and sit there; make him move out and forward with gusto. If you allow the horse to stand there, he’ll start leaning back and think “coffee break” instead of “what can we do next?”

Warning: Make sure that you keep pressure on the rein during the entire exercise. Do not ask the horse to disengage, let go of the rein, then ask the horse to back up. Keep even pressure as if it’s a dance. You may want to experiment with letting up a little bit on the pressure after each section (after the disengagement, when he begins to back, each time he softens or drops his head, etc.) in order to tell the horse he’s done something correctly – but keep enough pressure on that rein throughout to let him know without a doubt that “Hey, horse, we ain’t done.” Keep your pressure till the hips move AND the horse backs up.

After you’ve got the horse understanding that he’s to back up following the disengagement, then start keeping the pressure on the rein and keep him backing till you’ll feel him relax his neck and “stop pulling” on your hand. So, when you first ask the horse to back, release on just about any backward movement till he gets the idea. But when he learns that backing up always follows disengagement, (because he backs up right away instead of kind of wandering around) then you need to keep the pressure on till

**“Backing crooked makes the horse raise his knees and stay lighter on his front end.”**

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the horse relaxes as he backs (his nose goes down, he quits pulling on the rein). Keep an image of your horse moving forward comfortably and in a collected manner in your head – then imagine him carrying himself in that same posture as he walks backwards. That's what your aiming for: A horse that walks backwards relaxed and in the same posture as when walking forward.

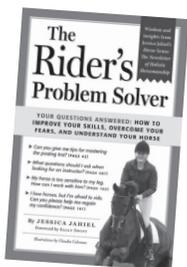
If your horse locks up and won't move, do your best to get him moving immediately by squeezing or kicking with both legs. If that doesn't work, immediately disengage his hindquarters to get him moving again then start over. Don't let the horse learn to lock up – that's a common trap. By contrast, if your horse "gets too light" and you feel that he might rear, you should react the same way: squeeze (as in "forward") with your legs and disengage

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the hind end. If this is the case, bring your hand way out to the side and to your opposite shoulder, rather than pulling backwards (which simply makes things worse). See our reference to the Nike Swoosh earlier in this article for guidance.

Keep pressure on the rein, keep the horse backing up till you get the head tucked and the horse backs with energy – then release and move forward with absolutely zero hesitation.

Final phase: To this point the back up has always been preceded by a disengagement of the hindquarters. Your horse has been learning this pattern and will start to anticipate the back up. Why? Because now your release comes during the back up, not when he's moving his hips. He's looking for that release, so you'll start to feel him want to skip the disengagement part and go directly to backing up. That's been our goal all along, to get the horse to back up straight. The final step then is really just a matter of allowing the horse to skip an earlier step.

Why begin with the disengagement if we're going to skip it entirely later? Two big reasons: First, it puts your horse into position to more easily do a back up. Disengaging the hindquarters will get the feet moving, naturally bring the back feet more forward and have the effect of raising the shoulders. Secondly, these same movements teach the horse that it's easier to back up when he carries himself in a more collected manner. Rather than you dragging him through the back up, he can easily move backwards when his back feet are closer to the front, his head is head down and relaxed and his shoulders raised. The best part is that he'll learn that it's easier to do forward movements like stopping and turning when he carries himself this way.

The really cool part of this exercise is that once you've nailed it your horse will stop his shoulder (read: stop moving forward) and immediately assume a more collected posture the instant you pick up a rein: He'll stop on a dime and his back feet will come forward while his shoulders, back and abdomen raise. Congratulations! You've taken a big step toward collection (or "natural carriage") and you'll need that to perfect the back up, the spin, simple turns, rollbacks, etc.

After you've got this at a walk, move to a trot. When you can trot your horse off, pick up a rein and it instantly stops and backs, then you're ready to switch to work on your horse's other side.

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