

Training For Courage by Paul Dufresne

GAIT DEVELOPMENT: WALK, PART 3

It's funny how easily certain instructions can be misinterpreted. I realized that I can be more precise with details so there is less confusion for the leader and the horse. In parts 1 and 2 in Gait Development at the Walk, there was discussion of how to achieve a proper roll-over or quartering movement.

I will review a few details here then clarify the theory behind the practical applications.

In the roll-over, we put the horse in a bend under 90 degrees to start, and then as the horse softens, the bend is closer to 90. At this point, we bring the hand from an outside lateral position to above the neck, closer to the middle of the neck, to slowly elevate and to ask the horse to offer a vertical flexion. This upward motion of the hand in a soft manner is timed with the heel pressing behind the girth area on the same side as that of the rein.

This is a position that allows the horse to release its topline and to cross over with very little resistance with the hind legs. It is important to note that this is a flexibility and relaxation exercise. This is not a way of moving in more developed performance movements. One of the common errors I see people committing when trying to lead in this technique is to go from the outside hand causing lateral bend and then bringing the rein toward their navel. Rather, the hand should be out in front of them with the elbow slightly forward of the body and the hand more over the middle of the horse's neck before lifting it for the flexion. Bringing the hand inward to the navel causes twisting of the head and not a proper rolling of the jaw. It may be helpful to riders when they press with the heel to think of their energy connecting to their heel, pushing the hip over and across.

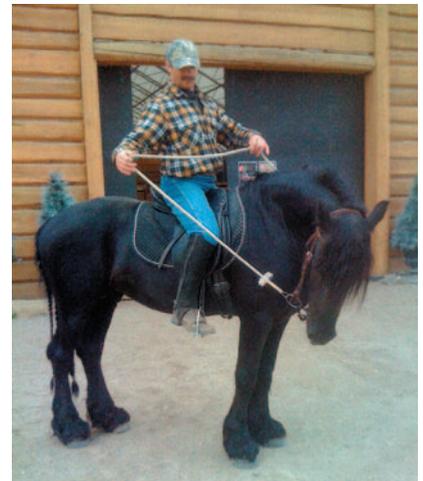
This is not a Baucher-type movement where the horse keeps learning to move in an over-bent position. What we are trying to do is effect a flexion with as little resistance as possible; when the horse becomes supple, we ask the horse to engage itself in a forward movement without negative tension of the topline. This forward movement is enhanced by the fact that when we remove tension, the horse will be better connected to our energy, unencumbered by the restraint of a tight rein. The rein, in the relaxation phase, must have float - not contact. After a flexion, the horse will release the muscle tension at the poll more effectively if we allow it to put those muscles into a relaxed position without pressure. When the horse is crossing under with a relaxed poll, it will naturally start to move forward in a more correct and collected position whereby it raises itself as it pushes forward. We do not raise it in the driving action.

As a fitness consultant, if I asked a person to do a stretch of the calf muscle by leaning on a wall, then to take one foot back while pressing the heel down, I would have a relaxation phase after the first stretch before I asked for another. If you keep asking a muscle to stretch further without a relaxation phase it will surely get to the point where it will begin to tighten to prevent over stretching, because of the discomfort and protective mechanism. Asking for a vertical flexion with steady pressure (trying to hold a horse in that position) and trying to drive the rear never allows the horse to relax in that position. This further tightens the whole topline, negating positive engagement,

and thus shortening the stride and tightening the body. It becomes more of an isometric contraction of muscle against muscle rather than a coordinated movement of relaxed shape.

Any time a horse has an inclination to tighten the topline, it is better to review and repeat a bend and then a flexion with engagement of the hip to maintain a better starting point. We should not persist in movements that keep a horse progressively getting tighter. When done correctly, any lateral movement will cause a relaxed flexion and freedom of movement in the walk in the relaxation phase. If the horse does not soften its body a bit more after every try, this means quite simply we have done it wrong. Go back to the start of a serpentine and then when you have a softer horse see if you can then carry this feel into the shoulder-in or leg yield. When we train horses we always have to be willing to re-group and evaluate the results of the reaction of a horse with anything we have asked them to do. If a lateral movement causes tension rather than relaxation it is because of our timing or a problem when we began to initiate a movement.

Where our energy is focused often limits the effect of an aid. Energy and the aids should be co-ordinated in the effort, when it comes to direction, otherwise the horse will be confused. When you



Hand sliding down rein moving toward my hip for the reach of the front right shoulder.



Hand position at near 90 degree bend and then drawing slightly upward to create vertical flexion above horse's neck.

Training For Courage, cont'd

want the horse to move in a particular direction your core and gaze should be unified in that direction. Too often the energy drops down on the horse's front end if you try to watch the flexion or focus on your hand position. It is ok to look at what you are doing with a momentary glance, but if you stay focused on that, you will tend to lean on the front end and not be in a balanced position. This will cause a negative effect when it comes to a flexion or engagement of the hindquarter.

Proper execution of these softening exercises ALWAYS causes horses to be in a better emotional state to lead!

Paul Dufresne is a writer, performer, trainer and clinician in Pritchard, BC, who educates in Natural Horsemanship, Classical Arts, Liberty and Circensic Dressage. He teaches people to understand horses and, more importantly, how to tap into their relaxation reflexes in ways seldom seen in North America. In doing so, he is able to guide people in creative experiences where the human learns to be an effective, safe leader. The horse learns to be more emotionally secure and will respectfully follow while developing athleticism in a mutually courageous manner by having a deeper understanding of how they affect each other. Visit his website at www.trainingforcourage.com.