

Training For Courage by Paul Dufresne

GAIT DEVELOPMENT: TROT, PART 6

Readers not familiar with parts 1-5 should check out the Saddle Up website for the previous issues, as the information will make much horse sense if you are acquainted with the material. In “Gait Development Part 5,” the focus was on attaining balance, coordination, a soft poll, good hindquarters engagement, and energy control by completing serpentines at the trot.



Start of roll-over (as in a serpentine)



Middle to end of the roll-over portion



First unweighted start of step inside fore in reach



Second step of fore crossing in the reach

When done correctly, a horse's softest trot should become obtainable. Again, it is important to remember that if a horse tightens up at the trot doing the serpentine, it is okay to allow him to slow down to a walk. Generally, after a few tries and with a bit of encouragement, a horse will be able to sustain a serpentine by staying in the trot. A horse who is having difficulty with this movement is usually leaning on the inside rein, thus reducing the quality of the poll flexion and the hindquarters engagement in his range of movement. When the horse can sustain the trotting serpentine in a very soft and comfortable gait to ride, then we are ready to add the reach to this combined movement. That is, in a circle, we would have the horse do a roll-over of the hindquarters for the first 180 degrees (a quartering action of serpentine for a couple of cross-over steps), and then on the last 180 degrees, the reach of the forequarters. The reach should be a relaxed crossing over of the forequarters.

We should always review this movement at the walk in our warm-up portion before attempting it at the trot. It is important to note that if a horse attempting this combined move initially has difficulty sustaining the trot, we should allow him to slow down and coordinate his use of the hindquarters and the forequarters at a walk. Later we can encourage him to maintain the trot, but only when he has confidence in his balance and coordination. At this point, we don't want to rush the horse. Rather, we should focus on helping him to complete the movement as smoothly as he can, from one end of his body to the other.

The rider should sit the roll-over balanced and neutral, unless the horse is not sitting himself, in which case he will be too heavy on his forehead to do a good cross-over of the fore and may need the rider to sit deeper to encourage lightness of his forehead. However, if we sit too deep on the roll-over, the horse will be inclined to do a jump turn. The jump turn is a useful maneuver, but should be

done after a horse has learned to cross his front end around. Otherwise the horse will avoid the reach by doing a jump turn which will not loosen his forequarters as effectively. When first playing with the roll-over and reach, it can appear to be a bit tricky to coordinate for the rider and the horse, but it will smooth out with some practice.

When first trying to accomplish a roll-over and reach, I don't ask for the reach unless I have a good roll-over first. When the horse gives a quality roll-over for close to half a turn, then I begin the reach by sliding my inside hand from the flexion position to a more open position, sliding back past my hip while the outside aids take on a supportive role, pushing the horse over into the bend to the inside. I ask for this connection to the forequarters only if the horse is sitting but not leaning on his inside fore, which will be apparent if the inside rein is heavy. If the horse is leaning on his inside fore I will raise my inside hand on the flexion part of the roll-over until the horse goes light in my hand,

Training For Courage, cont'd

and then release. The goal, as the inside hand slides open to begin the reach, is to try to time the inside leg as it starts to get un-weighted. Then I try to draw the horse's forequarters into a bigger step around to the inside as he keeps his weight on his hindquarters. If he starts to get the idea but hangs on the aids we can bump him with our outside leg on the shoulder, encouraging him to make a better step in front. As soon as the horse makes a good try to yield his forequarters into the circle, the rein should relax. When the reach phase is completed, the horse should be encouraged to trot out with no restraint and start to move in self-carriage. This move encourages energetic engagement of the rear, loosens the fore, and then allows the horse to move in a positive engaged shape forward while raising himself in the driving forward action.

The roll-over and reach ("R & R") is a great exercise for teaching horses to use their entire body in a positive, relaxed, and engaged shape. When horses do this exercise well, their stride improves immensely and the result is a calm, relaxed emotional disposition, with a soft poll on a rein with float in it, allowing the horse to carry itself. It is important to add energy to the exercise only once the horse and rider have balance and coordination. Once you understand the feel of it, it is okay to be clear about asking for energy in the drive and the reach of the forequarters by bumping the horse if he doesn't understand it is important to you that he stays energized and light on the aids in the movement. Get the horse responsive to one aid at a time before combining; otherwise the horse may require combinations of aids rather than one simple aid to complete each part. Often the use of too many aids only congests the horse's movement, tightening his body and poll. Try to ask with less and give more when the horse responds positively. Allow downward transitions to the walk on some of the first good completions of the move at a trot so the horse can consolidate the good try in a more relaxed phase. I often tell people to take a picture of what it felt like so you can seek to repeat it, and this picture is not only for you but also for the horse. It is not how many repetitions you do but rather how many you do well. Quality in horse training always supersedes quantity. Movements need to be smooth and effortless. When a rider repeats the R & R correctly, I have never seen a horse remain anxious, and he has always immensely improved his way of moving.

Next issue we will show how his moves help set up all other lateral movements at the trot.



Driving out forward after completion of R & R



Relaxation phase after drive and R & R

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.