

Training for Courage by Paul Dufresne

AFFECTING THE TENSION AT THE POLL

One of the most difficult skills to master as a leader is the softening at the poll. This article will offer a new spin on an old Classical Dressage technique that used to be called “breaking the resistance at the poll.” I personally hate the choice of words. Anything to do with “breaking” anything with a horse involves a negative mind set.



Elevated poll de-contraction with Tyke (this has increased by 40 degrees in 2 weeks)



Endotapping for relaxation after de-contraction or just before doing anything



Lateral sweep from ribcage to hindquarters

I much prefer exerting a positive effect on the horse's shape which leads them to relief and softness of the body and emotions. Many horses will exhibit signs of a tight poll through distorted breathing, behavioural anomalies, general stiffness of movement or being heavy on the aids.

The classical exercise is to cause a horse to soften all that tension at the poll, from worry or past ineffective techniques, by having the horse move in various lateral and backward movements and often a combination of the two. The new spin on this is to utilize endotapping.

First, tap a horse with its head down and do slight manipulations of the bit or halter when the head is hanging down on

a plumb to see that it is hanging loosely. Tapping on the neck and closer to the ears, gently and without tickling, is a great way to encourage a horse to let go of the tension and relax by releasing endorphins. Try to do small movements of the head from side to side, forward/back, and very small rotations.

This exercise is beneficial, but likely not enough on its own for the many horses that have carried tension at the poll for a long time. The muscles have often been in a constant contraction and have forgotten how to stretch. It's like our own back when we have a strain. It gets tight and we have a lot of difficulty getting rid of the spasm to regain softness and relief.

This next technique should only be tried with horses that are not rude. It works best if you can stand on a box or something high and stable. It can be done on the ground as well, but is more difficult with a heavier, tight horse. Hold the halter noseband from the side of the horse's face or hold the bit rings. You

then elevate the horse's head slowly until you feel the resistance to the movement. Hold for 10-30 seconds before asking the horse to bring its head down slowly. Tap the neck so the horse now can lengthen those muscles that were just put into a super contracted position. This should be done slowly and repeated. A disrespectful horse that does not see you as the leader may object to this, so be sure that you have their respect with other basic yields first.

The next step is to have your horse go on a circle with forward momentum at a walk while asking the horse to bend just slightly to the inside. Now flex the head vertically while asking the horse

Training for Courage, cont'd



Although difficult to see in the photo, this is a forward movement gone sideways and back



Standing on opposite side so you can see flexion away from me going backwards and softening



Riding from ground with a long rein so you can see the self-carriage on Tyke after flexions on a loose rein



Doc offering a loose poll with float on the rein after doing a series of sweeps (kids stuff)

to step slightly back while it is going forward. If the horse tightens up with the change of forward to back with flexion, ask the horse to move over into a leg yield movement so they cannot brace against the vertical flexion. The best way to show this is with photos. If you tap prior to this exercise and then after the lateral steps and backward steps, the horse will soften shortly thereafter. A horse will often tighten up initially, but when you ask them to step back and sideways a bit more each time they will soften in your hand. If you add the sweep to this mix, I have never seen a horse that will stay stiff. They have to relax and become more pliable.

The sweep is started with a slight lateral flexion. You then raise the head to cause a lateral forward movement of the hind and later the forelegs as well. I call it a sweep because if the horse gets stuck, I help with a sweeping movement of my arm or whip, from the rib cage to the hindquarters. It facilitates the movement

by moving them away from the pressure but also makes it very difficult for them to resist. This sweep causes a stretch in the horse's entire topline which then translates from the body to relaxation at the poll. It softens the physical shape of the horse as well as the emotions. Through multiple repetitions, the horse will become lighter and lighter on the rein and aids.

By combining these sweeps with lateral flexions, a small backup of the feet and leg yield, the horse has no other option but to soften. This sounds quite simple but takes practice to do really well. When done right it causes incredible results in the horse's tension. It allows them to feel good and become much more responsive to your communication, and to find a calm state of mind that allows them to be much more courageous. This is best done on the ground, but the very same techniques can also be applied while riding. Take your time and repeat. When

the horse tries to stretch down after any repetition, allow the rein to loosen and know that you are causing a positive effect that you can keep building on until you get the DANGLE! Happy DANGLING for you and your horse.

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, but 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.