

# Keys to a Good Whoaaaaa! By Paul Dufresne

Photos by Laurie Munsell

Two things that people find difficult to do with horses is to get "GO" when they want it and to get the "WHOA" when they need it. The purpose of this article is to give you a synopsis on how to develop a good stop with your horse any time you desire and maintain the well-being of your partner.

Horses are prey animals that generally tend to have an on switch but getting the off switch can be trickier if the horse is emotionally challenged.

The safest place to work on a stop is from the ground with a good lead line and halter. The first thing we want to be able to do is to disengage the horse's forward motion and to get some control over the energy level. We want to be able to send a horse out on a small circle so it is bent on the circle around us from head to tail (this was discussed in previous article Bending and Releasing the Poll). On a good bend, the horse will be inclined to be in a better emotional state and in a shape that is less inclined to brace against us.

Begin at a walk. Once the horse has done a few circles it is easiest to stop the horse by giving your cue word "whoa" then elevating the lead line while stopping your motion which helps transfer the horse's weight to its haunches.

By raising the horse's head and resisting the forward motion the horse's head will turn towards you and the forward momentum of the movement will cause the haunches to move away, disengaging the power train. If you can couple this with the turning your energy off, the horse will connect to the decrease in energy which will be useful later when riding. This should be repeated until the horse stops calmly with a very light touch. You can then increase the challenge by going to a trot, then a canter.

Teaching your horse to double from the ground is great preparation for riding (this was covered in a past article, consists of bending the horse's head to the ribcage where your leg would be when riding

with the horse remaining balanced and relaxed). Once your horse has a good stop in-hand and setting up for doubling you can move on to riding.

When you start your ride, walk a few steps and ask your horse to double to a stop. You want to test your horse's willingness to follow your lead before it might get excited. If the horse can do so and calm down, stopping its forward energy in a bent and balanced position, then you can go forward on the other rein for several steps and double to that side.

Remember to breathe, taking your energy up in the forward phase and down when you ask the horse to stop in the doubled position. Practice at the walk until you can stop in two or three steps on one light rein before progressing to the trot, and finally, the canter. This is all practiced on a circle. A smaller circle facilitates the bending to a stop. This exercise will only work if you practice this long enough for the horse to really understand it and turn into a cue.

Once the horse can disengage and double on a single rein you can then progress and ask your horse to stop on a circle with two reins. The inside rein should ask for a bit more bend, then support with the outside rein – now ask the horse



Genil stopping on a bend walk

to stop with your seat with a pelvic tilt (similar to a crunch) and say whoa (if the horse understands this cue word it will facilitate the transfer). The supporting rein will prevent the horse from over bending. Now as we do all of this we need to take the energy out of our body so that we don't keep energizing the horse (if we practiced the doubling enough the horse will start to respond to that as they will recognize the pattern and similarity).

If the horse is confused and too forward all we have to do is bend it a bit more so it can't brace, but it will slow down as there is nowhere to go.

This method is very effective in improving the stop on two reins as it is difficult for the horse to brace on the bend



Genil stopping on a bend trot

## Keys to a Good Whoaaaaa!, cont'd

if its shape is already in a positive position before we ask it to stop. The pressure differential in the reins (of bend inside then support outside) when combined with your verbal cue and seat makes it quite easy for the horse to understand.

Once the horse does well on a circle in all gaits, without leaning on the reins, you can practice on the rail with both reins even. If the horse resists, then once again, bend them inside or to the rail to remind them. The key is to engage the horse in the stop without bracing.

You can go further and separate your belly button from your sternum which will raise your arms slightly (in a classical seat stock/dressage) facilitating the horse understanding the engaging of the hindquarters when stopping.

If your horse is a bit reluctant to sit-stop you can use the preparation for a rollback to encourage the horse to get under itself. Ride a few feet away from the rail at a walk and bend the horse to the rail and ask it to stop. The engagement from the hindquarters will be much stronger in a trot.

If the horse can't do it well at a trot I would not recommend the canter. If the horse is somewhat reluctant to reach under with the hind, asking it to back up will help the horse to get off the hands and set its body up in the right shape – especially if we keep a bit of bend so they can't brace against the hands.

We have to remember to practice the stop until the horse is responsive and light on the front end without being heavy in your hands.

When the horse makes a good try, leave it alone for a bit sending a clear message you appreciate a good try. Good stops come with clarity, consistency in applying the right technique, going from ground to riding, slower to faster, and from light to soft.



Genil doubling in-hand

*Paul Dufresne is a writer, performer, trainer and clinician in Kelowna, 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.*



Genil stopping on slight bend at a walk riding