

# Progressions for Collection Without Tack – Part 1

Paul Dufresne

**Most people find it a considerable challenge to collect their horse where they have control of the poll** and the horse is put in a position to use its ring of muscles in the most powerful and efficient way possible. However, I am seeing more people on the right track with collection using a bit or even a halter and lead line. What is even more exciting is the fact that more leaders are ready to try preparing their horses to collect with non-traditional tack or no tack at all. **This article will illustrate how you can get started.** It is also important that all horses have a foundation in the understanding of bending on a circle with lateral flexion and releasing the poll obtaining vertical flexion. (This has been covered in previous articles please contact me if you don't have them.)

To start with I would bridge other more common techniques for controlling the poll with less traditional methods of doing so. Most people have used a lead line and a halter. This article goes under the pretext that people attempting this already have some decent control of their horse's poll with the lead line and halter or bit. Tools that can be used to assist in teaching this are cordeos, whips, plastic bats and even your hand. As I mentioned, what we will do here is bridge between collecting on a lead line and connecting with a whip or cordeo as an example. **This type of training often works best in a series of micro training sessions.** Short three- to seven-minute sessions a few times a day works really well. You can use clicker training or not, but you should always shape the behaviour with a conditioned response and rewarding any try in the right direction. Now this being said I use treats to reward the tries, they are minute which allows more tries per session. I make sure I only give treats when I offer with an open hand otherwise I close the hand. I gently nudge horses away from trying to grab a treat when it wasn't offered yet. When done correctly horses learn to wait for the treat. It is not recommended doing so with horses that are disrespectful and demanding, you must have a horse's respect first!

I find that a verbal cue (I use the word "round") and/or looking at their chest/neck area is the finishing cue that I want, so that is what I start with. Then I would ask my horse to round with slight pressure on a cordeo. The pressure on the cordeo, which is a leather or boat rope strap fitting the horse almost like a breast collar (old breast collar works well). When I raise it slightly it pushes up on the base of the neck. If I use a whip, bat, or hand I would touch the base of the neck with a light upward touch. I would assist by bridging the technique by putting gentle pressure on the lead line and halter release of the poll. As soon as the horse makes an attempt to release



Yearling colt Easy setting poll with whip and halter line bridge

the poll or round, I would say good (or click if using a clicker) and reward with a treat. This would be repeated a few times inviting the horse to round more bringing its muzzle closer to its chest, rounding its neck and topline. I could also touch the muzzle gently and entice to bringing it toward its chest with my hand, which has a treat in it ready to reward a guess in the right direction.



Stallion taking things into his own mouth and rounding, as well as colt offering at the suggestion in impromptu play

**The really cool thing in doing this is that when the horse actually rounds he rewards himself** by releasing its poll and starts to feel better about the whole exercise because it releases endorphins in its body. I would only repeat three to five times on the spot then have the horse move its feet to another spot. Circulation is not only increased but the attentiveness; we will want the horse to "round while moving" as soon as possible shortly. As my horse starts to offer on the verbal cue and often by my just looking at them they get nice and round. I go as far as teaching the horse that "Good" means you are on the right track and only treat when I say "Good boy or girl" where I allow them to stop all activity and give them the small treat in the rounded position. I would repeat this till the horse understands to keep rounding on the cue or in hope of getting rewarded with a treat. **The more horses stay in a relaxed poll position the better they feel and the more they are inclined to want to stay there.** This exercise can be practiced while tacking up, while visiting a group of horses in pasture or paddock. I do this with horses of any age, solo or in groups. I find that some of the younger horses are great at building the desire to round in older horses that may have less food drive or have lost some of their zeal for such a simple game. It doesn't take long before most horses will get very responsive.

In part two we will discuss how to progress with this to riding a collected horse without any tack or at liberty. Have fun and watch your horses enjoy themselves!

**Collection without tack will be displayed in the exhibitions I will perform at the Pemberton Equifest Sept. 6 & 7.**

*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.*



Friesian stallion Ljibbe rounding with cordeo

# Progressions for Collection Without Tack -- Part 2

Paul Dufresne

**In the September issue I discussed how we start to teach a horse to offer roundness and control of the poll.** We started this with a verbal cue, touch of the lead line and halter, whip, bat, cordeo, hand, or a combination of these. To better understand this part you should get familiar with the first installment to get the most out of this approach.

This technique was started in a stationary position. I first voice the verbal cue "Round" then touch the horse on the base of the neck with whatever teaching aid I am using. When the horse offers I say, "Good" (meaning they are on the right track), then if I want the horse to stop to be rewarded I say, "Good boy" and treat him/her in a rounded position. As soon as a horse starts to offer quite willingly I get them to take it to the next stage as soon as possible – into movement.

**We progress by asking the horse to move forward and cue for the roundness again.** If they are unsure or stop before they offer it, I would reward this as they are guessing. Later I would only reward rounding while moving when I asked for it. If the horse gets confused at any time I will back track and reinforce rounding at a stand.

It is also important that when the horse first moves forward, it must do so on a circle so that they also learn to have a bit of lateral bend as well as rounding; facilitating the correct posture. It is important to teach for a more finished version of what we want right from the start otherwise the horse may only offer a forced version of roundness without the natural relaxation necessary for a quality collected movement. The more collected the movement the more stable the position becomes.

I also find it useful to teach the horse to round by touching on the lower part of the ribcage – where my leg would naturally hang when I ride with a good seat. This would be approximately where your girth or cinch would run. By cueing from here with a touch similar to the touch on the base of the neck we might combine or do one following the other until the horse links the behavior to the different cue. Most of you probably see the benefit of this if you are planning on riding your horse and wish to get roundness without pressure on the head or mouth. This will also improve vertical flexion when using a bridle. It is important to point out that the cue on the ribcage is not a constant pressure. Vary the pressure until the horse responds, then release. If the roundness is lost, ask again immediately.

Keep practicing the collection on a circle at a walk until the horse is freely offering roundness in a relaxed, collected walk. Then progress to a jog, working trot, extended trot, then possibly other movements such as canter, passage and piaffe.

The slower gaits and simpler movements are always the best place to start or to come back to if quality of roundness begins to deteriorate. You cannot over prepare this part from the ground.

Most people by this time are starting to get a strong desire to experiment riding. If so, you should make sure your horse responds very well to the yields in all directions with a light touch. I teach my horses to neck-rein and direct rein with the whips or cordeo from the ground. Using a lead line and halter as a back-up would be a very good step for those with limited experience.



*walk round in whip/cordeo*



*stallion transfer cue rib and base of neck*

## Progressions for Collection, cont'd

The area you are training in should be smaller with soft footing. To err on the safe side, you should practice dismounts at a walk and trot. If your horse becomes anxious you should have a relaxation cue such as doubling, or stopping and then regroup. Any time a horse gets confused or anxious, back track to a level they know and build it up again so they gain confidence. Repetition only helps if they occur without anxiousness.

When a horse does this reasonably well and you have some good riding prep, you could climb on their back and do the exercise starting first at a standstill, then a slow walk. Mounting, dismounting and turning your attention away from the horse will break up the lesson into a series of smaller lessons. There needs to be times where we expect nothing of the horse, allowing ourselves to relax so the horse can follow our lead and do so as well.

### **Guidelines for success:**

- Smaller training area: a round pen, or paddock.
- Teach in microsessions three to seven minutes long.
- Progress from a stand to moving forward, from slower gaits to faster, from simple gaits to complex.
- If the horse is getting confused, step back to an easier level or start over.
- Start with the cue that your horse responds the most quickly to, then pair that cue with your finished cue.
- If the horse has good control of the poll with a lead line and halter, this is a good back-up to reinforce the other cues.
- Use small treats, offered when the horse is patiently waiting and not being demanding, close hand/open hand nicely.
- Enjoy yourselves, watch the freedom of expression your horse will offer.

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*ride trot whip*



# Progressions For Collection Without Tack

Part 3 by Paul Dufresne

Photos by Laurie Munsell

**In the September issue I discussed how we begin to teach a horse to offer roundness and control of the poll.** We started this with a verbal cue, touch of the lead line and halter, whip, bat, cordeo, hand, or a combination of these. To better understand this you should get familiar with the first installment to get the most out of this approach.

**In the October issue we reviewed how we start from a stationary position to a moving position and finally, to riding.** Let's review the guidelines for success:

- Smaller training area.
- Teach in microsessions three to seven minutes long.
- Progressions in hand from a stand to movement, then to riding.
- If the horse is getting confused, step back to a point where they were responding well.
- If using multiple finishing cues such as a word, or a touch at the base of neck or girth, start with the one they respond to best, then transfer to the cue you want to finish with.
- If the horse has good control of the poll with a lead line and halter, this is a good back-up to reinforce the other cues.
- Use small treats, offer when the horse is patiently waiting, not being demanding, close hand/open hand nicely.

Teaching the horse to round without traditional tack allows and facilitates proper posture to start all kinds of collected movements.

In the Stand on a Dime exercises (which is a progressive posture exercise where I teach the horse to reduce its base of support without developing negative tension in the topline), I have been able to round the horse in this position then drive out of it, progressing to a powerful catlike Gateado movement. When teaching the horse to do a Pesade or Levade, this technique allows me to raise the horse from the base of the neck and maintaining that roundness as it tries to sit on its hind legs. This rounding, combined with the Dime, and playing with a trot on a circle can allow us to move the horse's forward energy from forward to upward in either a Piaffe or Passage. Combining the Dime with the rounding tends to facilitate the horse holding itself softly in collection rather than stiffening the horse which is so often seen in more typical Dressage. By stalling forward movement while raising the upward energy with a whip, in a gentle but energetic upward sweep, we change forward energy into upward suspension.

**Also mentioned in the last article is the need to practice lateral movements** such as a shoulder-in and leg yields which are best stolen by moving the horse in a circle and then using the cordeo to gently press-push the neck (like a neck rein or an indirect rein) while maintaining the bend we had in the circle. This is then easily moved into a leg yield by adding more pressure on the ribcage with a whip or hand and walking through the horse's ribcage. Again don't get greedy. Steal a few steps then continue on the circle, then steal a few more. Most people get stuck on these lateral movements because they stay on them too long and the horse loses its posture and then tightens -- reducing the fluidity of the stride.

A more difficult lateral move is the half-pass. Begin by setting up the horse for a turn on the haunches in a rounded frame. This is very much like the position of a roll-back. As the horse is rounded and bent away from us now push the horse gently with a neck aid to move away but then also push the horse slightly back with the cordeo to put its weight on the hindquarter. As the horse begins to

move its front limbs crossing over, pick up the hindquarter with your whip and get the horse to make a step under and across.

If the horse attempts a try, stop and reward. If you keep repeating this and add one step or a partial step with the horse, then before you know it you will have a good start to a half-pass. The half-pass is fundamental to improving the canter leads. Once you can start a horse into a half-pass from a stand still, now it is better to steal it out of figure 8 at a walk. As we come to the intersection of the circles while maintaining the roundness, we use our second hand to push the horse's head gently away from us, changing the bend in the other direction. As the horse changes the bend we then pick up the hindquarters with a whip and steal a step or two of half-pass. Sounds pretty easy but requires some finesse and repetition to get it right.

**In the last issue, we had progressed to the start of riding and now we are back on the ground.** The reason for this is that we should mix it up. Get the horse to accept basics in very short sessions with you on its back, then get off and practice some of the more advanced progressions from the ground. Stop and take short breaks, making sure you have taken all the pressure away from your horse -- relax and breathe.

As we become more focused on the task we tend to let negative tension or energy creep up in our bodies and our posture tends to get the horse more anxious. Every time the horse makes a try for us we have to think of relaxing and taking pressure off otherwise the horse will find it difficult to understand it has made a good guess.

Playing with your horse in a less restrictive manner like this tends to allow the horse to give you a freer expression of all its movements. Yes it is more challenging but it is so worth it. Tread slowly and enjoy the journey. Playing with your horse and developing your lead is never boring.

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*Ljibbe rounding in Dime*



*Ljibbe setting up for Piaffe*

## Progressions For Collection, cont'd

*courageous manner by having a deeper understanding of how they affect each other.*



*Ljibbe in Pesade*



*Ljibbe starting to round in canter*