

Horse Problems: Pulling Back

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With some horses, pulling back can become a bad habit; with others, a seemingly seasoned horse can still brace and pull back. Perhaps they had a fright or were tied up too early. Either way, **we need to change their thought to soften to the pressure. And that comes down to their education and understanding.**



This horse only knew 1 speed at leading and that was a slow walk. Once I chose to walk a bit faster, it was like dragging an anvil. This is very common with horses – they lead at your speed but as soon as you go to do something different they resist.

Many years ago a friend of mine, a horse dentist and horseman, quoted a saying “the best way to teach your horse to tie up is **don’t tie it up**”. This saying may seem contradictory to some, but the way to look at it is this: if you don’t tie your horse up, but teach it to understand pressure and release, then by the time you do tie it up, it will be ready to cope with it.

I have been sent many young horses and foals over the years whose first lessons from their owners have been having their feet picked up and tying up. But with all the young horses that I train, and especially the ones that have never had any handling, I may not tie them up until their third week of education, and that’s after a couple of weeks of riding out.

When I am training people at clinics or in lessons, the one thing I try to make clear is that lessons from my hand through the lead are designed to create **softness** and **focus**. I like to show people how to handle lead ropes and reins to create soft habits and I work through a number of exercises which show how to develop better head carriage and responsiveness in horses. We need to be very observant in how our horses respond to lead rope pressure, whether it is how they are leading behind us or how they are responding out on the lunge. Watch for their response – check they understand. If you want your horse to lead well, to tie up without pulling back, to respond easily to reins, then they need to understand lead pressure.

Does your horse brace on the lead?

Bracing on the lead could lead to pulling when tied up. If they don’t brace, it doesn’t guarantee they won’t pull at some point, but if they brace, pay note. Test them: stand in front of them, pay close attention to their face, poll and jaw and just walk off with the lead on a 90° angle. Lead them off, and see if they follow the lead with their focus, soften in the poll and bend in the jaw or neck. Watch if their head turns where their lead goes, followed by their body. Or do they stiffen in the poll and jaw or shuffle their feet across/ move their hind quarter out before following you? The first scenario is what you want – the lead rope pressure on the horse’s face led to the horse physically

and mentally softening; where as with the second scenario, the horse's first thought was to brace in the head and neck to the lead rope pressure, so to compensate, it shifted its body to follow. This basic brace could be amplified under pressure. The most common problem in our horse-human relationship is horses resisting pressure.

Here's how to eliminate it:

Lateral Flexion

Get your horse to do some lateral flexion, pay close attention from the poll to the throat latch and make sure you get a nice soft bend in that area first. Start with small increments and work up to your horse being able to hold where you ask.

Relax to Poll Pressure

Once your horse has no problem holding any lateral positions calmly and comfortably, practise getting them to drop and lower in the poll to pressure until they can drop easily and are obviously relaxed with it.



All the softening that you do on the ground will transfer easily to when you are riding. Your horse will feel more calm and will feel less trapped to pressure whether leading or riding.

Forward focus with a rope

When your horse softens easily whilst standing to flex on poll positioning, you can teach them to walk forwards softly off poll pressure. First of all, give your horse space: stand to the side and with a reasonably short lead (but not right under the chin) apply direct pressure through the lead asking them to lead forward past your shoulder. You can use a click (or similar) and a lunge or dressage stick and gently bump them on their shoulder to encourage forward energy. Keep repeating this until your horse gently leans forward and responds with a forward focus to only the lead rope. Practise this on both sides.

Speed up the lead with no braces

Once your horse gets the idea of coming forward to the lead don't keep using the stick because we want the horse to look forward not back at what is going to chase it. Just use squeezes to soften little blocks. Now that your horse is coming forward off the lead, you can practise walking out in front and slightly to the side of your horse and test them on the lead when you speed up. Keep working on this until you don't feel any brace or resistance through the lead.

Lunging

This first leading lesson is basically a sending lesson. So now you should be able to send your horse out in a circle around you – a lunging lesson. Every time you lunge your horse, practise applying a little bit of pressure on the lead so that your horse softens and looks into the circle whilst in motion. Do this at a walk before you go faster.



Before you commit to trotting and cantering a horse on a lunge, it is really good to walk them teaching them to soften into the circle through lead pressure.

Lead with Purpose

Every time you pick up your lead and go somewhere you should always lead with purpose. Change your speed and direction and keep your horse calmly responsive to this.

Test their Response to Lead Pressure

If you think your horse is giving you 100% when you pick up the lead, you can test tying up. A lesson I use for horses that were habitual pullers is to ask them to walk up to a rail with me walking in another/ opposite direction. The horse has to respond to lead pressure alone without needing to follow me. (Try this within a closed space, like a safe round yard so that there is a limit to how far they can pull back.) Use a long rope. Start with your horse in the middle of the yard and if they pull back, keep only very gentle pressure on the halter and walk back towards the fence, allowing room for your horse to pull back. Stand until the brace disappears and then ask them from where they are to walk back towards the rope and fence. This lesson can be repeated many times until they decide not to pull back. Don't apply too much pressure and always have the option of letting go.

These tips should help get your horse prepared for tying up. They work on the principle that once the rope exerts pressure, your horse has learnt to think towards the pressure, rather than panicking and going back. Just remember, that for habitual pullers, you are building a new habit to replace a bad habit. So pay close attention to how your horse responds to your lead at all times – don't let them continue the habit even when you are just leading them down to their paddock.