



How to Encourage Soft Head Carriage on your horse

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How your horse carries its head; or how it responds & softens to pressure in its head, pole and jowl area; I think is quite important to how your horse can respond and soften elsewhere. I have found that wherever there is push and brace or whilst ever a horse is locking up in these areas, the stiffness tends to transfer through the neck into other parts of the body. **Getting the jowl and pole soft is something that we have to make a habit of, from all the little things that we do on the ground to when we get on their back. A true bend will only come though with a connection and a change of your horses focus/ thought.**

Working with horses on the ground

When I pick up the lead rope to do something with my horse, I like my horse to soften in the head and throat latch, not brace. So I don't do too many exercises that encourage stiffness in this area.

All the simple things that we do on the ground, whether it just be backing the horse up or sending it around us in a circle, can encourage nice soft head carriage. Encourage your horse to do a *complete* back up (through dropping the pole, giving softly in the nose, softening in the jowl and then by creating some energy to get the feet moving); and when they complete the back up, finish by standing, but still softly giving in the head; then reward with a rest. Making a habit of backing up softly and completely on the ground will help your horse to back up properly under saddle. A horse that can back up confidently will better place its hind legs, round out well and have a better head carriage. This isn't about the horse being pushed back, it's about the horse knowing how to soften and prepare itself: techniques which you will encourage when you are preparing for forward motion.

I often watch horses getting sent in circles, asked to face up and then sent away in the opposite direction. But through the circle and change of direction I can see that they are quite rigid in the pole and throat latch, despite the owner being pleased that the horse is feeling soft by not pulling against the lead. I want to be able to apply a tiny bit of pressure on the rope and see the horse tip its nose in, not face me or disengage their hindquarter. Try this on your horse and see what reaction you get. Your horse may feel soft and be tracking nice but if you pick up a lead to tip the nose in, do they fall in with the shoulder or face up? If however your horse is able to tip its nose in whilst maintaining the circle, they show independent control over their pole and throat latch; a principle we need to establish to get the right carriage.

It's also easy to get caught up in footfall direction changes or how snappy your horse responds and overlook the stiffness in your horse's head and neck. We can easily compound this stiffness by disengaging the hind quarter to face up. Instead, teach your

horse to have a nice soft arc in the jowl and neck and to hold that arc softly when the hindquarter is asked to disengage.

If your horse is very stiff, try some simple standing flexing exercises. Encourage your horse to flex laterally at the throat latch, keeping its neck still. Once your horse can hold various positions softly, then you can encourage some arc in the neck. You can work this then until they are fully flexed. If your flexion is a routine each day, don't get into the habit of just getting the horse to bend to where you are standing at the shoulder; rather try different positions - small amounts/ on the reverse side - break it up. Always make sure your horse only gives as far as you ask it to give and that it can hold there without being held. Once the lateral exercises become easy, try dropping your horse at its pole vertically, then dropping and tipping its nose in with the same principles as before - let them only give as much as you ask and ensure that they hold themselves.

If you are doing any lateral flexion – it is very important to do something with that flexion. An example would be if you are using a direct rein to bend and get your horse to focus left, then turn that focus and bend into movement where the shoulders can step across to you. If you vertically bend your horse, once they can soften and connect, then ask them to back up. We don't want to get a horse very bendy in its head and neck whilst its feet are still because there becomes no purpose to the bend and it is also very easy to disconnect the reins from the other parts of its body. **Rein positions and connecting the reins to the feet are very important.** Over-bending can jeopardise this.

Want to know more? All of these exercises and more are explained in my clinics. I believe that if you can get your horse's head soft and listening, the rest of its body will come more easily. I'll show you how *and* explain why.