



Trainer's Tip: Neck reining the right way

by Brent Winston, equine trainer

With summer officially behind us, I hope everyone enjoyed the nice weather and long days with their horses as much as I did. Just because we have entered a different time of year doesn't mean we can't still enjoy our horses. We might just need to enjoy them in a different way. I like to look back at the summer and see what kinds of things I can work on and improve with my horse. For example, if I have been riding a horse two-handed, I like to teach neck reining or "one-handed steering." These training sessions can be short if you are running out of daylight, and it will make your riding experience in the future much easier and more fun.

Here at Harmony, we like to get started with neck-rein cues right away so that when our horses are ready to be adopted, they at least have an idea of how to do it. A lot of people have told me how they teach this—and I have seen a lot of them in action—and it is a commonly misunderstood process. Many times a rider will pull on the inside rein and cross the outside rein over the horse's neck to try to teach the horse to come off the rein pressure. This is the right idea; however, when a rider crosses his or her hands over the horse's neck, they often apply pressure on the outside of the bit. This is actually the opposite of what we are looking for; you are actually pulling on both sides of the bit and creating a confusing cue for the horse. Instead, what we like to do at Harmony is teach the cue as a four-step process.

In previous articles I have mentioned the "hint, ask, tell, demand" sequence to teaching your horse, the idea being that they learn to respond from the "hint." The first thing we do when teaching our horses to neck rein is actually lay the rein on the horse's neck—that is the hint. We lay it on the neck—we don't cross over or pull on it—simply just place it on the horse's neck so he can feel it. Obviously, a horse that doesn't know what this means won't respond. The "ask" phase will be to lift the inside rein to get the horse's nose to tip toward the direction you want to go. The horse should immediately follow with his shoulders. If he doesn't, then right away bump him with your outside leg in front of the cinch. Bump lightly at first, then harder until you get the response; this is the "tell and demand" phase. Once you get the response, relax everything! Drop the rein off the neck, lower your inside hand and make sure your leg is off the horse. If you don't take away the pressures, then your horse will grow accustomed to them and just assume they mean nothing. Repeat this process several times, but make sure you give the horse a chance with the first cue of laying the rein on his neck. Be prepared for your horse to respond better one way than the other—this is completely normal—and continue doing both sides.



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In closing, be ready for this to be a process. It won't happen overnight, but if you stick with this method, before you know it you will be able to lightly ride around one-handed. Make sure your horse is prepared and ready for this step of training so you aren't still trying to fight bucking or running-off issues.

So go out and have some fun teaching your horse new things. Until next time, ride with a smile and keep your eyes on the horizon.