

Training & Riding Perspectives on Collection /Bridling Up:

Many folks believe to get their horses to “bridle up” aka “get behind the bit” aka “collect” they need to coax or demand by kicking them in the belly, squeezing too hard with leg cues or misusing spurs in order to push them into the bit. This poor style communication is something that I consistently advise riders to avoid. It is counter productive and generally causes horses to become, to varying degrees, angry and begin acting in what is generally termed as “mechanical” in their movement. As many of us realize, horses do much better when using their large muscles to drive from behind.

To efficiently accomplish this we ask for what we simply term as “collection”. Collection means that the horse must shift its weight onto its back end, tuck its hindquarters, round its back, lift its withers, arch its neck, lower its nose, tip its chin and free up its shoulders and front feet. That is a lot of complex thought that can cause any rider to become overwhelmed by attempting to control /co-ordinate all those moving parts. Even more to the point is that it can also become much too complicated for the horse in its efforts of trying to listen to rider cues. It is far more constructive to keep training /cues as “simple” as possible for the sake of both rider and animal.

One simple cue to train into horses and riders is very soft rein requests in a alternating lateral /rocking movements (using the ring fingers only) as rider simultaneously applies gradually increasing (not to any great power degree) backward pressure with the arms whilst keeping our heels in firm (not heavy) contact to help the horse better recognize that a “stop” is not being asked for. When the horse drops its nose (flattens its face to vertical) a release is gained and rider should stop any pressure increases whilst maintaining gentle contact with the bit rings.

When riding casually - it pays dividends to allow a bit of extra time for horses to think when we ask - if they miss a cue. Being consistent with our patience and simplicity in training and/or casual riding will prove more successful when we need to do serious work such as competition and the like. This “simplicity” applies just as well to lead changes, lead departures, side passes, half passes (forward and backward), turns on fore and rear/hock, roll backs, stops (abrupt or otherwise) and transitions.

Of course without a riders weight on their back, horses naturally execute all of the movements that we wish to instruct them to do when riding. It is always beautiful to sit and watch horses play and run in fields where they make all that we labor to accomplish look so very easy and graceful. The fact that they allow us to sit on their backs should make us understand that it is our responsibility to learn how to clearly and consistently communicate our requests to them when they are carrying our weight. Especially as they cannot see us whilst we are on their backs.

I cringe when I see riders reprimand a horse for perceived mistakes all too often autocratically/tyrannically. This is harder to bare when in fact it was often likely the rider who was at fault for (1) not clearly communicating, (2) not being consistent with cues, (3) failing to recognize that the horse has not previously been correctly nor clearly trained (via non-confrontive methods) to our cues or (4) being impatient and autocratic /tyrannical; with requests.

Working on horse – rider partnership, becoming more confident riders and developing firm benevolent leadership skills are important factors and should be ongoing aspirations / objectives. Treating horses with compassion both as riders and as trainers, redirecting their energy rather than fighting with them, can and does convince our horses that we are intelligent, confident, benevolent and firm leaders. Brains over brawn. As such leaders, we can and should be using gradual increases and releases of pressure in asking without autocratically /tyrannically demanding of our horses. When asking for movement, we are much more likely to be able to generate better co-operation with horses and they will become much more willing to work toward our desires, rather in opposition to them. Consistency on our part as well as firm, benevolence will also help convince them to trust us for their personal protection.

Kicking is much less effective and certainly not good, unimpeded communication. Keeping not overly firm contact with our legs and/or heels can be much more effective. Using our heels, as if wearing / using spurs, we can generate a scratching or rubbing motion whilst remaining in constant contact in order that we can impart very gentle soft cues all the way up to very insistent and persistent cues if required. Avoiding the kick also does not cause a lurch in the body. We can be patient or impatient, both without any pain or fright imparted to the horse.

Closing reminders:

(1) Please remember as it is Winter - a freezing cold bit is anything but comfortable to your horse so taking a little time to warm it (without making it too hot via use of hot water etc) is very important to a horse's comfort and recognizing we have their welfare in our heart or at least they won't tend to feel that we have no concern or compassion at all for their comfort.

(2) Comfort is a major factor in horse's lives whether training or riding.

(3) The best way to gain co-operation via a bit is to allow it to be held on the folds of the horse's tongue and keeping only sufficient rein contact to maintain communication between rider & horse. Slobber straps are a good way to assure this for some.

(4) Moments of confusion are part of a horse's learning curve, Recognizing it and giving the horse time to absorb new lessons is a big key.

(5) Every contentious rider needs to become, to varying degree, a patient trainer.

Ya'll ride safely and with firm benevolent leadership.

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