

Lesson 1 - Whoa, Go and speed control

It is important that your horse goes when you say go, whoa's when you say whoa, and lets you control their speed and foot placement.

Start off with whoa and go. While leading your horse on a long lead line, stop moving and teach your horse to copy you. At first you will need to use a stick or dressage whip in front of their chest to let them know to stop moving forward when you stop. If your horse doesn't stop, use enough pressure on the lead rope to stop them and then have them back away from you while you stand still. Then use your whip or stick behind you toward the horses side to tell the horse to come forward with you when you start moving again. Continue like this on their left side until you no longer need the whip to get your horse to go or whoa and they are just copying you. Once you have this down, practice all over again on the right side.

Challenge: Once you have got your horse listening to your body language and stopping and starting add a little speed to the exercise. See if you can walk faster, then slower, maybe try a little jog.

Have Fun.

Don't forget to study the mechanics of the horses walk and trot. We will talk more about this in lesson 2 when we have a riding lesson.

Scroll down for lesson 2 notes

Lesson 2

While warming up make sure your horse respects the whoa and go by halting and walking off. Your horse should move off your leg aids. Once your horse moves off take your leg aid off so they know they got the right answer. When asking for a halt, stop your hip from following the horse while you use your core to sit a little heavier in the saddle. Your horse should stop when you stop following. If you need more of a clear aid, try hugging your inner thigh into the saddle and your elbows into your side. Once your horse is moving off and halting with light aids, add in your speed control. Make sure your horse will speed up and slow down when asked.

While walking and trotting with your horse, pay attention to the mechanics of the walk and trot. Look down at your horse's shoulders and determine where the hind legs are in relation to them. Start to think about how you are following the horse's movement. The more you actively think about the mechanics and try to keep track of your horse's movement the more you will be able to feel where your horse's legs are underneath you. This is a skill that will serve you well when communicating with your horse.

Learning your posting diagonal is one of the first lessons we are given that pays close attention to where your horse's legs are under you. The horse's trot is a two beat diagonal gait where the diagonal pairs of feet hit the ground at the same time. When posting you should follow the outside shoulder forward because when that foot is off the ground so is the horse's inside hind leg. Staying off your horse's inside hind leg is important for balance when turning corners and riding circles.

Challenge: Try watching your horse's outside shoulder while walking. Keep track of that outside shoulder while you ask for trot. Sit the trot for a few steps and see if you can follow that outside shoulder forward so that you come up on the correct posting diagonal. After you get the hang of that you can try feeling for that outside shoulder without looking down. See if you can pick up trot, sit a few steps and try to come up on the correct posting diagonal.

Making a commitment to learning the footfalls of your horse's gaits and trying to feel them will serve you well in your journey to becoming a better rider.

Scroll down for lesson 3

Lesson 3 -Ground work. Following pressure with the head and neck and moving away from pressure on the sides.

Teach your horse to follow the rope down with the head and neck. Start by pulling down on the rope and asking your horse to put their head down. If your horse pulls up against the pressure, keep pulling until you feel them give a little bit downward. Once you feel any response in the correct direction let the pressure go. If your horse is really stubborn you can put your other hand on their poll and press down as well until you feel a little give downward. You want to teach your horse that the pressure will go away once they start to get the right answer which is head down. Once your horse is following downward easily, ask them to keep their head down for a little while so they are relaxed. Head and neck down helps put a horse in a relaxed posture and they will be much happier to learn new things when they are relaxed.

After your horse is responsive to neck down you can teach them a little trick. Press two finger on the base of the neck where the neck and shoulder meet and then pull down on the rope. Once your horse lowers the head take the pressure of your fingers away. It is imperative that the pressure of your fingers comes off as soon as they lower their head. Repeat this until the horse puts their head down without you having to pull on the rope. I like to call this your horse's relax button. It comes in handy when something is upsetting your horse, you can push the relax button and help them calm down.

Your horse should also back up when you pull the lead rope towards their chest. If your horse is stubborn and doesn't want to back from the pressure of the rope you can add a little more pressure by walking towards them or you can add pressure with a whip across the chest. The idea is to teach them to move away from as little pressure as possible so, if you have the stubborn horse that needs extra pressure keep practicing until they know to just move away from the rope going backward towards their chest. Remember, when using pressure you must take it away as soon as your horse starts getting the right answer. At first you may only get little responses. As your horse gets better you can ask for bigger responses. You don't have to get the big response day one. Take your time teaching your horse so they enjoy learning. Never drill any one lesson. Just do enough on day one that you are sure your horse understands what you are asking and then you can revisit the exercise during your next session.

Your horse should also follow pressure from the lead rope from side to side. Try a right and left flexion. Start on the left side and pull the rope towards your horse's neck. You are just looking for a flexion at first. Again if your horse is stubborn, keep pulling on the rope until your horse gives in a little bit. Once you feel even the slightest give in the right direction let go of the pressure. Your horse will start understanding that the pressure goes away when they try to find the right answer, the "Yes" answer. Once your horse is cooperative to the left move on over to the right side and give it a try there. We will talk about bigger stretches in later lessons.

Now we need to teach our horse to move away from pressure on their sides. Start on your horses left side again, take the lead rope the length of the horses neck and put it up against the base of their neck (where their relax button is). Once the horses neck is soft and they are looking at you put your right hand on their side where your leg would be if you were riding and press until they move their hind leg away from you. If you horse is stubborn and doesn't move away from the pressure you could try moving your hand back a little closer to the hind leg or touch the hind leg with a dressage whip. Use as much pressure as you need to get the left hind leg to move and cross over the right hind leg. Your horse shouldn't move backwards or shuffle.

We are looking for that nice cross over. Once your horse gets it, take that pressure away and let them know they got it right. Do this until your horse is easily moving away from just the pressure of your hand and you can get at least three cross over steps. You should also be feeling your horse's neck staying bent and relaxed. Some horses will try to straighten their neck in and attempt to get out of the work. If this is happening just keep the pressure of the rope and your hand on until you feel that soft neck and see those hind legs crossing. Once it feels good on the left move on over to the right. Your horse will know the exercise and should be more agreeable on the second side.

Challenge - Take your time mastering the skills above. You don't have to master them in one day. Once you feel like your horse is easily following pressure and moving away from pressure you can try combining the exercises and see if you can go from one side to the other fluidly without your horse's feet stopping. Ask your horse to back up, then move to their side, flex the head and cross the hind leg. Then you are going to walk backwards and have your horse come forward towards you for a few steps, then back up and go to the other side for a head flexion and leg cross over. This will test your coordination as well. You want your horse to be easy to move around. If you need to, watch the video again and study my body language as well as the horses. Good luck and have fun!

Scroll down for lesson 4

Lesson 4 Try exercises from lesson 3 with your horses tack on.

Before mounting try all of the exercises from lesson 3 with your horses tack on. You will have an easier time with the flexions with a bit in your horses mouth and your horse will now learn to follow the pressure of the rein with a bit in their mouth.

Once you feel like you and your horse are doing well on the ground go ahead and mount and try the exercises while you are in the saddle. Now you will use your leg on your horses side to ask the hind leg to cross over. While you flex your horse's head toward the hind leg you want to cross under, turn your body toward that leg as well. Your weight will help guide your horse in the correct direction and it is a great time to look for that inside hind leg coming up off the ground. You can test your knowledge of the walk by timing your leg aid or even using a push of the dressage whip when that hind leg is off the ground and feel that you are giving it a push under and over the outside hind. I know you have been studying the mechanics of the walk so now is your opportunity for some practice. Make sure you work both sides of your horse evenly.

Challenge: Put your horse out on a circle about 20 meters in size. While you are walking your horse around try over bending their neck from right to left (slowly, allowing several steps for each side) without allowing their feet to leave the circle. This will require you to use your leg aids as well your reins and of course your knowledge of the walk to time your aids. Your inside leg should press the horses side when that inside hind leg is off the ground. Take your time to coordinate your aids until you can get the over bend without the feet leaving the circle. Once you feel you've got it, try it at the trot. Make sure to change directions and pay attention to how long you go each way so you don't over work one side. We all want our horses to work evenly on both sides. If things are going well you should notice your horse starting to relax and stretch their neck longer. If you are feeling good and the horse is stretching, stop the over bending and just allow them to move around the circle with a their body taking shape of the circle and see if you can stretch them down. If the horse pops their head up, try one or two more steps of the bigger bend and try again. Remember to keep your horse moving nicely forward as that is the key factor as well as a relaxed horse to a good stretch.

Good luck and have a great ride.

Scroll down for lesson 5

Lesson 5 Ground work with a focus on Core Strength

The ground work exercises we have been practice up until this point are great ways to help build your horses core strength but here are a few more things you can do to make sure your horse is healthy and strong enough to be a good riding horse.

Carrot stretches. I show some basic stretches in the video that you can practice with your horse. There is a ton of information available about this if you want to take this lesson even further and do more stretching with your horse over time. Try using a treat to get your horse to bend their neck toward their shoulder, belly and haunches. Once they have completed all the stretches on both sides give them the treat. While you are doing the stretches try to notice that your horse is engaging their abdominal muscles to help keep their balance while doing the stretch. Carrot stretches are a great way to spend some time with your horse if you don't have a lot of time.

Tail pull. Be sure to make sure your horse knows you are behind them and they are okay with it before you try this. You may want to try this on the cross ties or in the stall. Or, you could have someone hold your horse for you like I did in the video to keep Tattoo from turning around and looking for more treats. When you are ready, take a hold of your horse tail just below the tail bone and wrap it around your hand. Slowly lean your body weight backward while holding onto the tail. If you can, look and you can see your horses abdominal muscles engaging to counter your weight. You can hold like that for about 10 seconds and repeat a few times. You can increase time and repetitions once you are both used to it.

Rocking Pull - In this exercise you are going to lean back and pull yourself forward while holding on to your horse's tail. This should cause your horse to rock back and forth. Someone watching should notice your horse's abs and chest muscles engaging. This will also give you a bit of a workout. (We are going to talk about building your core strength in your next riding lesson.)

Challenge — Moving the horse's shoulder back and over. First review backing up with your horse. Then, you are going to stand facing your horse and a little off to their left side. (Their left side, not yours) Take the rope in your left hand and place it under their chin and pointing to their right. This exercise is a continuously backing and turning exercise. Start by walking toward your horse and asking them to back up. When the left front leg (again their left not yours) is back turn the horse to their right and keep going for a couple of steps. Your horse's left front leg should cross under the right front. Your horse will most likely try to lean on the forehand and cross the left leg in front of the right. This is not what we want. We want the backing up motion to take the weight off the horses forehand and transfer it to the hind legs in the spirit of building better abs and back muscles for balance and posture which will keep them healthy as a riding horse. Once you are able to coordinate the backing and turning without your horse crossing over the front leg you can try the other side. Make sure when you are both learning this that you only ask for a few correct steps and then let your horse have a quick break. Once they know the exercise you can have them turn full circles in later sessions. If you are having trouble, check in with yourself. Are you going with your horse or are you holding them back? Make sure your movement is walking towards your horse and in the direction you want your horse to turn. You should also be sure to push your horse's head in the direction you want them to turn which should be away from you. Watch the video again so you can study the horses movement in this

exercise as well as mine. This is a challenging movement but very effective in your horses physical development and your understanding of moving a horses weight from the front to back. Don't give up on this one. Keep trying and let me know on White Spruce Farms FaceBook page how you are doing. If you are not getting it feel free to have someone take a quick video and post it to FaceBook and I can trouble shoot for you.

Good Luck!

Scroll down for lesson 6

Lesson 6 - Riding lesson with a focus on Core strength and sitting trot (These exercises are good for riders bringing along a young horse that needs fitness training for sitting trot as well as riders just learning to sit the trot.)

First let's review your riding position. You should have a vertical line from your head to your shoulder, hip and heel. Your posture should be straight so you can keep your pelvis straight and your sit bones directly on the saddle. If your shoulders are too far forward or backwards you won't feel those sit bones straight down on the saddle. Think of the front of you and the back of you being the same length. If you slouch your back will be longer than your front. If you hollow your back your front will be longer than your back. Use your core strength to sit up straight so your back and front are the same. Keep in mind that your core includes your abdominal muscles for balance and back muscles for posture. Even your inner thighs are part of the outskirts of your core. When you are moving along on your horse, engage your core just enough to keep a tall posture. You should be relaxed enough in your hips to allow your body to follow the motion of the horse but without losing the posture described above. Keep your inner thigh relaxed when you want your horse to move. You should not use your arms or legs for holding on to the horse. Your abdominal strength holds your balance over the horse. Your back muscles hold your posture. Your legs should be soft and draping down around the horse and gravity pulling weight into your stirrups. Your arms should be relaxed and hanging with a bend in your elbow making a nice straight line from your elbow to your horse's mouth. Try keeping your elbows a little away from your side so space can be seen in-between. When you want to slow down or stop your horse you will tighten your core muscles by pushing outward with your abdominals and back muscles to bear down on your saddle and stop your body from moving forward with the horse. Your horse will feel you stopping and should stop as well. If you need a little more whoa than that, try hugging your inner thigh on the saddle or even closing those elbows into your side. If your horse still doesn't stop, you might need a shorter rein and could try closing your fingers tighter around the rein.

Let's talk about sitting trot. Sitting trot is a great way to help you improve your core strength and is an important skill to have before you move on to cantering. When developing your sitting trot it is best to just try a few steps of sitting trot from the walk. Go back and forth from walk to sitting trot and build your endurance up by trying to do more and more steps of trot as you start feeling like you can keep your body tall but relaxed enough to follow the two beats of the trot. Don't try to hold yourself down. Allow your hips to absorb the motion of the horse so you follow the up down without your seat leaving the saddle. If you make yourself rigid you will bang on your horse's back and keep them from nicely moving forward at trot. You want to remember that you are supposed to bounce gently along with your horse not hold yourself down which will just result in the banging. If you are having trouble following the rhythm try going to rising trot and practice changing your posting diagonal. Notice when you change your posting diagonal you have a beautiful sitting trot for that moment. Keep changing your posting diagonal and really pay attention to how your body feels while you are doing it. Then try again to go back to the above exercise and see if you feel better. Take as much time as you need with this exercise until you feel like you are getting fitter and fitter. This does not happen in one day. Listen to your body as well as your horse's body and don't over do it.

Once you have built up your endurance at sitting trot, try going from rising trot to sitting trot. While you are rising focus on how your body nicely follows the rhythm and then try a few steps sitting with that same follow, just stop posting. I mentioned earlier to try practicing changing

your posting diagonal. Try that again but see if you can sit three steps and then post again. Once you feel good with 3 steps try 5, then 7, then 9 until you are fit enough to go back and forth from rising a half circle to sitting a half circle. (I chose an odd number to sit so if you start on the correct diagonal you will rise back up on the correct diagonal.) Your goal should be that your horse's trot tempo does not change when you go from rising to sitting and vice versa. If you tire of circles you can try using the entire area and sit your short sides and rise your long sides. Of course you want to remember to keep changing direction and work your horse evenly on both sides.

Challenge: A great way to build core strength is to get up in a half seat or two point and see if you can ride transitions without falling back into the saddle. Try walk to halt back to walk. Walk to trot back to trot. If you are already cantering try a canter transition from trot and back to trot again.

I hope that you will have a little fun building your own core strength. It is an important part of being a good partner to your horse. If they have to be fit for our rides it is only fair that you are as well.

Have a great ride and remember to take your time. Fitness doesn't happen in a day.

Scroll down for lesson 7

Lesson 7 Lunging

If you are new to lunging it is best that you make sure you are feeling really good about the groundwork lessons we have already worked on. At this point you should be feeling like your coordination has improved and that you are easily moving your horse around without too much physical pressure.

It is always good to make sure that you have equipment that will help your horse with their balance such as vienna reins or side reins. In this lesson Esprit is fully tacked up with saddle, bridle and vienna reins. A surcingle with side reins is also a good option. Before you begin make sure your girth is snug so you don't have any saddle or surcingle slippage while your horse moves around the circle. (I forgot to mention this in the video)

Also, make sure to secure your reins by putting them over your horse's neck, twist them up and put the throat latch through to keep the reins from dangling and potentially tangling up with your horse's legs. Be sure to wear your gloves and if you have a sassy horse consider putting on a helmet. Your vienna reins or side reins can either attach to the D rings on your saddle or through the billet straps. If your horse is already heavy into contact the D rings are a better option. If you need more encouragement for your horse to put their head down then the billet straps are a better choice. If you are using side reins or vienna reins you can attach your lunge line directly to the bit. If you have a horse that tends to pull, put the lunge line through the bit on one side and over the head and clip onto the bit on the other side to prevent pulling the bit through the horse's mouth. The best place in the arena to lunge a horse is in a corner so you have two closed sides of either a wall or fencing to help keep your horse from getting too over bent on the circle.

When you are ready to send the horse out onto the lunge circle, try backing them up one or two steps and then ask the horse to cross the hind legs like you have done in your other ground work exercises. Once they are crossing over you can direct them sideways away from you. Be careful not to let your horse move forward and around the back of you. Try to get them out far enough that they are not in kicking range. Always have control of your horse's head so you can keep the hind legs away from you if they get sassy and want to kick out.

Once your horse is out on the circle try to create a triangle where you are the point of the triangle and your lunge line, the horse, and your whip are the sides. Use your whip toward the hind leg to keep encouraging your horse forward. The hand holding the lunge line can lift up toward the horse's eye if they try to come in towards you. If your horse falls in a lot try using your lunge whip close to the ground and make a swinging motion under the lunge line with it from the back of the horse to the front creating a sort of bubble so your horse knows not to come in that space and to stay out on the circle.

After you have established a good circle try a little speed control. Can you get your horse to walk faster and slower at the end of the line? Once you feel good about the walk, try a little walk to trot transitions and progress up to speed control at the trot. Take your time and make sure your horse trots when you say trot, and comes back to walk when you ask. Once you have that discipline you are ready for speeding up and slowing down within the trot. Now we can move into canter. Make sure you get a little speed at the trot before you ask for canter. You want a working trot, not a fast running trot that is out of control or heavy on the forehand. Think

of a nice active trot where the horse is moving along at a speed that you would like to ride. The horse should look happy and comfortable moving along at the trot. Make sure those back legs are engaged and ready to push off the canter. When you do ask for canter try to do it when your horse is approaching the fence to help them stay straight. Using the wall or fence will help you get the correct canter lead. (when tracking left you want the left legs to appear to be leading the canter and vis versa.) At first you should just canter a few strides and ask the horse to come back to trot before they break to trot. Once those transitions from trot to canter are nice and sharp and your horse seems disciplined you can start to ask them to stay in canter for longer periods of time. Don't overdo it. If your horse is being good remember to be generous with the breaks so they want to keep trying for you. Fitness doesn't happen in a day, remember.

Challenge - Once you can keep your horse cantering for a while, study the mechanics of the canter and try to see if you can time the canter transition. Look for that outside hind pushing off into canter.

Canter is a three beat gait. First step comes from the outside hind and push the other three feet off the ground. Second step is the outside front and inside hind hit the ground together. Third step is the inside front hits the ground followed by a moment of suspension. It is important to study and understand the canter so you can have good feel when you ride and good timing with your aids. Understanding the steps of canter will help you know when to ask for canter and when to ask for flying changes in your future.

Good luck, be safe and take your time with this lesson. You do not have to do all of this in one session. Baby steps if you or your horse are new at this.

Scroll down for lesson 8

Lesson 8 Canter under saddle

I hope you have taken the time to complete your challenge from the last lesson which was to study the mechanics of the canter and see if you can time the canter transition.

In the lunge lesson we talked about getting your horse comfortable working in a good working trot. They should be comfortable and balanced at a faster trot. Not a running trot but a good working trot that you would be happy and comfortable riding. Now that you are on your horse you want to make sure they are happy moving at the faster working speed with you in the saddle. If you are new to cantering it is a good idea to practice your speed control at the trot and get comfortable with a little speed in trot before you ask for canter.

Because you have studied the rhythm of the canter you are now ready to try it under saddle. It is good to understand how the horse's body will change within the canter stride and how it will affect your body. When the horse pushes off their outside hind leg into canter it will raise the front of the horse and you will feel yourself tip a little forward. The second beat of the canter is the outside front and inside hind on the ground which will put your horse mostly horizontal and you will mostly be vertical. The third beat of the canter is the inside front on the ground which will put your horse's front end down and you will feel yourself go slightly back. After the third beat you should feel a moment a suspension and then it all starts over again. It will feel a little like a rocking horse and you want to make sure your hip joint is relaxed and following that rocking motion.

Challenge: Trot/Canter/Trot transitions without holding on with your arms. Can you give the rein on the up transition as well as the down? It is important that both you and your horse are comfortable cantering together. In order for your horse to be happy cantering with you, you need to be able to keep your balance without holding on in the transition up, during the canter and when you go back to trot. Sometimes the canter to trot transition can feel a little chaotic. My suggestion to ask the horse to trot from canter is to drop a little weight to your outside stirrup and make your body follow the two beats of the trot so you are already following the up down movement of the trot when the horse trots. Once you feel that trot, can you give your hand a little forward to make sure you are not holding on with your arms? I know you've been working hard on your core strength so trust yourself and give this a try.

Have a great ride!

Scroll down for lesson 9

Lesson 9 - Response training and trick training.

Remember that second groundwork lesson we had where we teach the horse to put their neck down by pushing at the base of the neck? Hopefully you have been working on this with your horse because you will need it for response training. At the very least you will need to have taught your horse to put their neck down when pulling down on the rope. If you haven't done either of these things, go back and watch lesson 3 over and then come back to this one.

The idea of response training is to teach your horse to relax when something upsetting happens. Since I have already taught my horse to put her neck down, I will start by standing near her left side and quietly introduce her to the sound of rocks in a bottle. Once I have a feel for how strongly she reacts to that sound I will make it a little louder. Once I make the sound my horse will most likely put their head up and startle or try to move away. I want my horse's reaction to be to put their head down instead. So, if my horse puts their head up I will continue to make the noise with the rocks and ask her to put her head down at the same time. Once her head goes down, I will stop the sound of the rocks. If you are not coordinated enough to do both things at once, ask a friend to help you. Make sure they understand that the sound goes away the moment the horse puts their head down. Repeat this action several times until the horse puts their head down on their own without being asked. Once you have tried making a disturbing noise you can try using a grocery bag attached to a riding crop or just a dressage whip to try the same method with touch. If your horse is afraid of the whip, gently touch them with the whip on the side of their neck and ask them to put their head down. Once the head goes down take the whip away. Try rubbing a grocery bag on their body and take it away once they drop their head. You can use a flag to create movement around your horse and stop the movement when they put their head down. Always be careful to introduce new things to your horse from the front left hand side and take it slowly enough that you don't cause too big of a reaction that you can't handle. Once your horse gets good at response training on their left side move over to the right and try over there. You might find that your horse is more reactive on that side. Take your time and have patience with yourself and your horse. Once your horse is good at this they will have good coping skills and be able to calm themselves down so they can listen to you and be good partners.

Trick Training is fun and practical. Today we will learn to draw our horse haunches over towards us so we can teach them to present at the mounting block as well as learning to do lateral work in future lessons. Start by putting your horse up against a wall or fence so their right side is closest to the wall or fence. You are going to stand in front of them and hold the rope close under their chin with your left hand. You are going to start walking backward and have your horse follow you. While you walk backwards, slowly lift your whip up and point it at their croup. That is the cue for them to move their haunches over. They won't know that at first so you have to then show them what that means by physically pushing their head towards the wall and stopping the shoulder so their haunches have no where else to go but towards the inside. Even if you get a slight movement of the haunches to the inside let the horse walk forward and go back to where you started and try again until your horse understands what you mean by pointing that whip towards their croup. Once you have that down try doing it away from the wall a little. Once that goes well try asking from a stand still and then stand on something a little bit off the ground. If that all goes well move on over to the mounting block and try it over there. Take your time. Some horses learn this in two sessions but if you need more, keep trying until you get it. You and your horse will be proud of yourselves and it is a very handy trick to know.

Challenge: Find a fun trick to teach your horse. Some fun tricks we like to teach our horses just for the sake of teaching them to learn and have a little fun are, giving a kiss, smiling, lifting legs (which will also be useful in the future) pushing a ball, and taking a bow. Remember the order in which you teach a trick is to decide what cue you will give your horse and do that. They won't know what that means at first but then you are going to physically show them what you want to do. For instance, if you want to teach your horse to give a kiss, lean over and ask for a kiss, then physically pick their head up towards you and have them touch your face. Give a treat for the kiss. Repeat until you don't need to show them physically what the cue means. Pushing a ball, you just lean over and ask them "push the ball" and then bring their head down and push the ball. Give a treat when the ball moves away. Repeat until you don't have to help them push the ball. Choose a trick that you think would be fun to show off. Get someone to record you doing it and share it with us on our White Spruce Farms Facebook page.

Have Fun! It is always important to take some time out to relax and have fun with your horse.

Scroll down for lesson 10

Lesson 10 Contact

After your horse has learned to accept a bit and bridle it is time to teach them to accept a little pressure on the corner of their mouth. One easy and gently way to do this is to put their bridle on with the reins over their head. Carry a dressage whip as an extension of your arm. Start on your horses left side and put your right hand behind their chin with your first finger between the two reins and the rest of your hand gently curled around both reins. Take back on the reins until you feel a gently equal pressure on both sides of the horses mouth. Hold your hand steady there. You are going to face the same direction as your horse and place yourself near their shoulder. Once you are in position, reach your whip behind you and ask your horse to move forward. Let the horse walk into your hand and take you forward with them. Today you are going to let your horse move first and ask them to take you along with a little bit of pressure on the rein. It should feel like the horse is holding your hand and bringing you forward like a child being lead across the street by a caregiver. When you want to stop moving forward, just stop moving your feet, keep your hand soft around the rein, and let the horse run into more pressure and feel that you have stopped going with them. They should also stop. If the horse turns around the front of you, bring your whip around in front of their chest and back them up. Try again until you are going forward and stopping easily without too much pressure. Once it is all good from the left move over to the right side and try again. If you are feeling really good about it, try a little trotting and walking.

Once your horse is used to feeling a little contact you can position yourself behind your horses shoulder and take the outside rein over the top of the horses neck and meet the inside rein at the base of the horses neck. Start at the left side again and bring the right rein over the neck, and take the inside rein back to the base of the neck. Hold both reins in your right hand. Your whip will be back in the left hand so you can get the horse moving. You may have to alternate from using your left hand to get your horse moving and bringing it forward to help with steering and bending. Try to position your reins so you feel equal weight in both hands and ask the horse to move forward. Practice starting and stopping until you feel like your horse is even and responding well. With your horse in your hands like this you can start asking for more bending and a softer/rounder neck. See if you can position your horses head and neck so the poll is the highest point and their nose is pointed vertically towards the ground. Practice this on both sides and when you are feeling good about it you can challenge yourself to a little trot around like that.

Remember contact is important for your horse's balance under saddle. If you are raising a young horse be sure they experience contact before you back them so they don't feel it the first time you ride them and get scared. Take your time, have a little fitness fun with your horse.

Lesson 11 Contact Under Saddle

In order to have good contact under saddle you must also have impulsion. We have talked a lot about rhythm and relaxation so far in this series. Now, we are going to take our relaxed horses and use bending lines to help us engage the hind leg and get our horses to naturally stretch their necks down into contact. In order for this to work the rider must also have acceptance. So lets start off by simply feeling some equal weight in our hands like we did in the last ground work class and let our horses take a hold of us and bring us forward. One easy way to get more weight in your hands is to practice a halt from walk. When you halt you should feel your horse lean into the bridle and put more weight in your hands. When you do, keep that weight and ask your horse to go forward. You are going to keep your hand gently curled around the rein, but you are going to hold onto that contact you got from the halt. You should feel the horse take a hold of your hand and bring your forward like a parent leading a child across the street. Once the walk to halt transition feel good try trot to walk to trot and see if you can keep contact in your up transitions as well as down. You do not have to give your hands forward to go more forward, just keep you hands and arms soft and supple to allow the horse to move forward.

Once you feel like you have a pretty good sense of establishing equal contact in both hands and you want to work on getting your horse to soften and round their neck try putting them on a circle and keep them going at a good working speed at the walk and trot. First ride a 10 meter circle and then move out to a 20 meter circle. Make sure your horse is taking the shape of the circles with their bodies and engaging their inside hind leg. That means you have to keep them moving along as they are turning the circle. If they are moving along at a good working speed and are relaxing their bodies around the line of the circle their back muscles will engage and their necks will naturally come down.

To teach your horse that they don't need to throw their heads up during transitions you can ride the same exercise as above, just add the up and down transitions on the 10 meter circle. If your horse starts to pick their head up during the transition simply try opening your inside rein some more and add a little inside leg to get a little more bend as if you are going to make the circle smaller and then send them forward into the transition.

Challenge: Once you feel like you and your horse have got the hand of contact and staying in the contact trying changing direction without losing the contact. Ride a 20 figure eight and practice changing the bend to the new direction without losing the contact or nice round posture. Again, if you feel your horses head coming up on the change of direction, open that new inside rein a little more as if you are going to ride a small circle and add inside leg. Remember, the engagement from the inside hind leg helps bend the body into a relaxed state which will engage the back muscle and in turn lower the neck. Once those changes of direction are under control, try transitions as you are changing direction. Piece of cake! Good luck and have a great ride!

Lesson 12 Leg Yielding in hand

You can do your leg yielding exercising with or without tack. If this is new to you, try with your rope halter first and progress into doing it with tack.

Before you begin, remind your horse that they should follow your rope with their head. For leg yielding you want just a little flexion from the throat latch. There should be no bend in the neck. Just a bit of flexion is necessary for leg yielding. The first exercise I will show you is however a good exercise to work on more bend and flexibility but you should keep in mind that a show quality leg yield does not have any bend.

When beginning your first exercise move over to the wall and position your horse on an angle with their head and shoulder facing the wall and leading down the track. As usual you will start on your horse's left side. Hold the rope under the chin with your left hand and hold your whip in your right hand. Get your horse's feet moving, shoulders first, and use your whip to guide the horse's hind leg under them to keep up with the shoulders. Get about three good steps of cross over from the hind leg and let your horse stop. Once the horse is moving easily down the wall like that without too much evasion then you can start asking for more steps. Remember to take more than one session to teach your horse something new so as not to drill the exercise. Once your horse is good going from left to right try changing the direction. Remember that ground work is a great time to improve your understanding of where your horse's legs are and also improve the timing of your aids. Practice guiding your horse's hind leg down the wall as it lifts off the ground. You will do the same thing with your leg when you ride.

Some Common Problems: When you start teaching your horse the nose to wall leg yield your horse might try leaning on the forehead in an effort to not cross those hind legs. If you find your horse heavy in your hand and moving forward into the wall try bringing your whip in front of the chest and taking a few steps backward and then right back to asking for the leg yield. This correction works best if you can keep the horse moving and they don't get the chance to stop their feet and take a break. Hopefully you are feeling quick enough and coordinated enough to make that correction. Keep trying! Another common problem is that the horse sometimes tries to cheat a little by leading with the hind leg. Remember that the shoulders should lead the way and the hind leg keeps up. So if your horse is leading behind or turning around make sure you are not pulling on the reins and forgetting to go with your horse down the wall. Be a good dance partner to your horse. Ask them to go and make sure you go with them. If they are truly the problem and not you, just keep repositioning them until they go with their shoulder first. This might be where you want to end your session and continue on with the rest of the lesson another day.

Drawing the haunches for a leg yield: Once you are good at pushing the horse down the wall now you are going to draw the haunches down the wall. You will need to have taught and practiced your drawing the haunches from the Trick training lesson for this one. Stand in front of the horse on the track. Hold the rope with your left hand and the whip in the right. Start to walk backwards and lift your whip towards the horse's croup so that as they move down the wall they bring those haunches to the inside. You will want your horse's head to turn slightly away from you for this exercise. You will be focusing on the horse's outside hind leg and try to time your whip aid with that leg coming off the ground. Tap the croup as the hind leg comes off the ground for greater cross over. Once your horse is good going this way try turning around and try going to the right. You may find that this takes a little bit of time and patience for them to get it.

Remember to slow things down if necessary because it is hard for all of us, horse or human, to be ambidextrous.

Challenge: Once you are leg yielding away, pushing and pulling, try performing a leg yield zig zag. This will require your horse to be comfortable moving away from the wall so start off by pushing your horse away from the wall, take a few steps straight and then push them back to the wall. This means you will have to coordinate your switching your rope and whip while you are taking a few steps forward and straight. Once your horse is comfortable with that, see if you can draw your horse away from the wall, switch your rope and whip, and draw them back to the wall.

Good luck and have fun!

Scroll down for lesson 13

Lesson 13 Riding lesson - Leg yielding under saddle

Working with a young or green horse under saddle. Leg yield aids help you develop the correct aids to create balance and straightness and balance.

To start off, track left and head over to the wall and try the nose to wall leg yield at the walk. Position your horse the same way you did in the ground work lesson with their shoulder leading and a little flexion the opposite direction of travel. Use your right leg to get your horses legs moving and try to time your leg aid with the right hind leg coming off the ground so you can really push that leg under your horse and get good cross over. Once you feel good tracking left you can turn around and try to the right. (Notice in the video that Esprit gets distracted and I handled it by trying to just keep her feet moving and then try to go on with the lesson. She eventually pays attention and gets busy with our lesson.)

Once you have the leg yield down at the walk try the nose to the wall leg yield at the trot. You can figure out where your horses legs are by your posting diagonal. When you do nose to the wall leg yield change your posting diagonal to the wrong one. For instance if you are tracking left, cut the corner to set your horse up so their shoulder is leading, change your posting diagonal so you are following the left shoulder and press your right leg on every time you rise to get the right hind leg to cross under and move down the wall. You do not need to go for a lot of angle here, just get the idea of crossing that hind leg under. Once you've got is tracking left, you got it, try turning around and doing it to the right.

Now that your horse has the idea of crossing those hind legs under them you can start trying a more traditional leg yield by turning early down your quarter line and then asking them to yield over to the wall. Horses often want to be over on the track so it is easiest to start away from the wall and push them over to the wall. Prepare your horse for the leg yield by getting some good forward movement as you turn onto the quarter line, make sure you are on the correct posting diagonal, finish turning onto the quarter line and make sure all four feet are on the line and then use your inside leg to press the hind leg over and under you as you rise. If you have trouble using your leg on the up you can try posting on the wrong posting diagonal and use your leg on the down. Careful not to let the shoulders get too far ahead and leave the haunches behind. If you find the haunches are trailing you can slow the shoulders down at the same time that you quicken the hind legs. You should feel pretty coordinated with your aids at this point if you have been practicing all of the exercises in this series. Once you are doing well with your leg yields from the quarter line try the steepness of a leg yield from the centerline. Of course, you will do this in both directions.

If you are feeling good about your leg yielding try some at the canter. You will never be asked to leg yield at the canter in a dressage test but if you can get your horse to yield away from your leg at the canter you can certainly use those aids to help develop better balance and straightness at the canter. Start working your horse on the circle exercise so you can revisit your horse keeping their head down in the trot and canter transition. Once you have a nice canter try turning a little early and then yield them over to the wall so your horse gets used to you moving their shoulder while they are cantering. This is difficult for a young horse or a green horse so take your time. As always, you don't have to achieve all of this in one lesson. This takes a lot of time and it is different for each horse and rider. Once you feel like you can move those shoulders over you will start noticing a straighter and more balanced canter.

Challenge: Baby Zig Zag leg yields. Start by turning down your quarter line, make sure your horse is straight and then leg yield over to the wall, try to get over there at the half way mark. Once you get to the wall take a step or two straight to change the flexion and then leg yield back to the quarter line. Once you get that down you can try going from the wall to the quarter line and back to the wall. When approaching that zig zag, start to counter flex your horse as you are turning the corner and use your outside leg to send the horse over to the quarter line, once your are there, straighten out and change the flexion so you can yield back to the wall.

Remember your posting diagonal. When leg yielding right follow the right front leg. When leg yielding left you follow the left front leg. Paying attention to the posting diagonal will help get the correct timing with your legs. Have fun with your challenge.

Scroll down for lesson 14

Lesson 14 - Teaching your horse lateral work on the ground.

We are going to cover shoulder-in, haunches-in, half pass and turn on the haunches.

Shoulder - in Start with your horse by the wall or fence. Stand on their left side with your left hand holding the rope under their chin. Your right hand will hold the whip. The shoulder-in is the very first step of a 10 meter circle. Try walking your horse around a 10 meter circle first and see if you can get them nicely taking the shape of the circle with their body. You want to position your horse's shoulder slightly in as if they are starting to turn onto a circle and then you will use your whip to guide their inside hind leg down the track. Try to time your whip aid when the inside hind leg is coming off the ground and push the leg under towards the horses outside front leg. This will require your horse to stay light on their shoulder and keep the hind legs active so they don't actually turn onto the circle. In order to get the correct amount of angle you want to keep the inside hind leg on the same track as the outside front. You are looking for 3 tracks. The horses inside front is on the inside track, the inside hind and outside front are on the same track, and the outside hind is on the third track. This is a good opportunity to test out your timing. Make sure you are pushing the inside hind when it is coming off the ground. Remember the correct shoulder -in has the bend of a 10 meter circle and three tracks.

Haunches - In You will want to have practiced drawing the haunches before you move on to this movement. Make sure you have watched the trick training video and leg yielding video on the ground first.

The Haunches-In is the last step of a 10 meter circle. You can again bring your horse around a 10 meter circle and try to stop them before they finish the circle so that their body is still bent on the 10 meter curve. Their head, neck and shoulders should be positioned straight down the track and the haunches should be to the inside track. Again, you are looking for 3 tracks. This time the inside hind leg is on one track to the inside, the inside front and outside hind should be on the same track, and the outside front is on the third track. You want to be able to draw a straight line from the outside hind to the inside front.

Start by reviewing the leg yield by drawing the haunches toward you so that you notice the head move toward the wall and the shoulder moves in. Next you are going to place your hand on the outside of your horses head so you can hold it straight down the track as you ask for the haunches to come in. If you have trouble and the horse tries to move their head toward the wall and the shoulders in try to quickly ask your horse's neck to relax and push the shoulders back towards to wall. This might take some horses longer than other to understand. What you are looking for is to see a bend through the rib cage. The horse should bend the direction of travel. Just try getting your horse to take the position from a stand still first and once they understand where you want their body you can try walking it down the track.

The Half-Pass - The Half Pass is basically your haunches in but on a diagonal line instead of down the straight line of the track. You do want to be sure that the horses shoulders are leading the way down the diagonal line but you do want the hind legs active enough to keep up with the front. I like to start at the wall. Turn you horses shoulders onto the diagonal line from the track to the center line of the arena. Get the horse moving along the diagonal line and then ask the haunches to come towards you. Your position should be the same as when you practiced the haunches in but now you are traveling along a diagonal line towards the center line. Keep an eye on the horses outside hind leg so you can tap them on the croup when that leg comes off

the ground so they really cross it over and under. Remember to keep the bend the direction of travel so your half pass doesn't turn into a leg yield. You can also try this from the center line toward the wall. Imagine a diagonal line drawn from the center line to the track. I like to think of turning onto the center line with the shoulders over turning the line a little bit and then draw the haunches toward the track. Keep the bend the direction of travel and make sure the hind legs keep going until they make it all the way to the track.

Challenge: Turn on the haunches. This is like half passing in place while turning. Make sure you position yourself the same as the haunches in and half pass. Position your horse's shoulders in towards you and as you ask your horse's shoulders to turn toward you, use your whip to ask the outside hind leg to move over and under towards you. You can start with just a couple of steps first and progress to a half turn and even a full turn on the haunches. Make sure your timing is go so you keep the hind legs marching. Don't let the inside hind leg stick and pivot, the back legs should keep marching in time with the walk. The outside hind should come under and over the direction you are traveling and should not step out.

