

Small Steps to Collection

By Gerrie Barnes

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Question: My horse sticks his nose out when I ride him. What should I do?

The training steps in getting a horse not to stick his nose out begins with the rider off the horse. The rider needs to understand why it is important to have the whole horse rounded . . . without the nose sticking out.

When a horse sticks his nose out, he is not "collected" or rounded. His back is flat or hollow, which means that he is not using his stomach and back muscles to support himself along with the weight of the rider. As you'd guess, he is likely to have back and other structural problems sooner than a horse who carries himself and his rider with a rounded back - engaging his muscles. Some riders think that collection is for show horses and that "real people" don't ride their horses in collection most of the time. The rider needs to really commit to actively riding his or her horse in collection every time that horse is ridden - because it's the right thing to do for the health and serviceability of the horse.

Still off the horse, the rider needs to consider the horse's conformation. Is the horse built to be able to carry a low-head set? Your veterinarian can assess the neck size, type, and where it is tied into the chest of the horse. Some horses' necks are so thick or the neck is tied in so high that the horse is not physically able to keep a low neck and head at a 45 degree angle. Your veterinarian will advise you about the best-case head carriage for your horse's conformation - which does not include sticking his nose out and hollowing his back.

Still off the horse, have his teeth checked. He might have hooks and cheek lacerations causing pain and head tossing. Check the saddle fit. If a part of the saddle is poking him in the back, it might cause him to hollow his back and lift his head.

Once the commitment is made, the process is similar to any other type of training - incremental and consistent. At the slow walk, the rider finds what I call "neutral" with the bit in the horse's mouth. "Neutral" means that the rider is not pulling back on the bit, nor is the rider letting the horse walk off with no contact. The rider should be able to feel the end of the bit through both reins. Once the rider feels what "neutral" is, the rider needs to hold the bit in neutral and walk the horse forward using his or her legs and balance. This is the start of what trainers call "driving the horse into the bit".

An accompanying visual is taking a piece of wire and holding one end while pushing the other end toward the opposite end. The wire rounds itself with the compression. Thus, holding the bit in neutral in your horse's mouth and pushing the horse forward with your legs and balance causes the horse's spine to lift and round. Stomach and back muscles accomplish the lift. The rider needs to be mindful of not over-exercising those muscles and soring the horse at first. Several steps and then release. The muscles need to be conditioned to strengthen them so the horse is capable of rounding his back for an

extended period of time. Since the horse's head is part of the rounding exercise, without any additional training the horse will not stick his nose out, but will lower it as the back is lifting.

At first "neutral" will probably not be a 45 degree perpendicular head angle to the ground. It will be wherever the horse's head is at the time you pick up your reins. The key is allowing the horse to feel the bit as a gentle barrier and accept the bit and barrier. When the horse's neck softens, release and let the horse walk forward several steps. Continue working with the horse's mind until he accepts the gentle barrier with a soft neck. Then, increase the pressure slightly – maybe 1 oz. more pressure. . . whatever that is. The horse will brace again and the rider will hold the reins firmly until the horse gives to that pressure. When the horse accepts the "new" gentle pressure with a soft neck, the rider will slightly increase the pressure again. Assuming there are no physical problems, no teeth issues, and the saddle fit is comfortable for the horse, the rider continues this technique until the head and neck are down to the angle that the veterinarian has recommended is comfortable for the conformation of that particular horse.

Rounding the back at the walk is the first step and takes the longest because conditioning, consistent practice, and repetitions are needed. Shorter sessions are recommended to keep the frustration level for both the rider and the horse to a minimum. Don't start with trying to crank the horse's head and neck to a 45 degree perpendicular angle and holding it there. That is what artificial aids like tie-downs and martingales do. Generally, as soon as the horse is released from the aid, the horse's head pops up and no permanent changes have been made. The horse's mind needs to be trained along with stomach and back muscles and soft head/neck carriage.

Once the horse understands and accepts the technique - and the stomach and back muscles are strong enough to support longer sessions - the next step is doing the exact same technique at a jog/trot then at a lope/canter.

The last piece of collection is self-carriage within a gait and transitions between gaits which are higher level skills.

If the rider invests the time in the technique consistently. . . meaning every time the rider rides the horse. . . performance injuries to the horse will be minimized. Your horse will stay serviceable longer along with the bonus of smoother gaits.

It is probably wise to stop any speed or performance events while you are re-training your horse. Although we all have good intentions, when the event clock starts we get caught up in the adrenalin and fun and set our "collection" training back by miles. Ask me why I know this (grin :) This is all worth the effort for both the rider and the horse. Good luck. . . Gerrie Barnes

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