

## TRY HALF HALTS FOR YOUR GAITED HORSE

© Lee Ziegler, revised Feb. 2002

One of the most useful tools for controlling the speed and body position ("frame") of a horse is the checking motion called a half halt. This is a quick tightening and release of the fingers of both hands on the reins, accompanied by a slight deepening or shift to the rear of the rider's seat and specific leg aids. In dressage riding this tool is used to collect, balance and prepare a horse for further aids. For gaited horses this works for all these things and to modify gait as well. It is not the same thing as the old "pull on the reins to slow him down" action many of us were told to use when we first started riding, and it is a useful skill for all levels of riding, not just in the show ring or the dressage manege.

### BEFORE YOU START:

To be successful in using a half halt on your horse you will need to have a straight, steady seat in the saddle. (See the article on [Equitation for Gaited Horses](#) for the correct seat). You may use an English or Western saddle that allows you to sit in this position, and you will need to be riding "English style" with one rein in each hand. You should also have relaxed elbows and "soft" giving wrists, hanging from "open" (not hunched forward) shoulders, with your hands carried low so that they form a straight line from the elbow, through the wrist, to the mouth of the horse. ( Again, see the article on [Equitation](#) and the one on [Taking Contact](#)) You should have enough physical stability in the saddle to allow you to take even, light contact with the horse's mouth through the reins, and you should be able to maintain this contact at any speed or gait. The half halt will not work for you if you lean forward, bounce in the saddle, carry your hands in a high "saddle seat" position or periodically jerk on the reins for no reason. Although you can perform half halts with a curb bit, or with the top rein of a Pelham, to begin the exercise, it is best to use a snaffle bit, if at all possible.

### HOW TO DO IT:

To apply a half halt, first prepare your horse for a coming rein cue by taking a deeper seat. You can do this by just slightly tipping your pelvis, tucking your buttocks under you, keeping your upper body straight, shoulders over hips, hips over heels. Momentarily adopt the slightly "braced back" position as you begin the half halt motion. Follow this adjustment of your seat with a slight tightening of you thighs against the horse, then squeeze your fingers closed around the reins, increasing contact momentarily, then relaxing the squeeze. If you are holding your hands properly, thumbs to the top, wrists relaxed and in a straight line with your forearms, the squeezing motion will cause the heels of your hands to retract very slightly towards your body, then return to the original position as you release the tension in your fingers. Remember the order of the half halt - adjust the *seat*, squeeze with the *legs*,

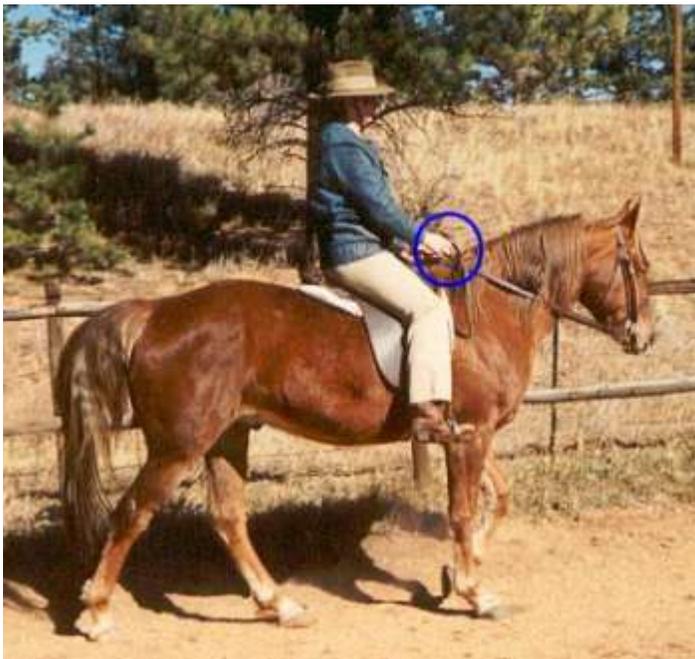
squeeze with the *fingers*, **release** all three aids.

*Applying the half halt.*

Notice that the rider's fingers are closed on the reins, the upper legs active against the horse. Although the jacket hides her lower back, her pelvis is tipped a bit so that her tailbone is closer to the saddle than in the normal riding position.



This action momentarily increases your contact with the bit, and (in the best of all possible worlds) reduces the horse's forward momentum, shifting his balance to the rear. If the horse does not respond by a slight hesitation in speed, repeat, with a little stronger squeeze from your fingers. Still no response? Use a series of three half halts, each with progressively stronger squeezes on the reins. Repeat until the horse responds by shifting his weight to the rear and reducing speed. Then release all aids.



Here the half halt has been released -- notice the longer step of the hind legs, the relaxed, more open fingers on the reins, and the release of leg pressure. This part of the exercise is just as important as the active application of the half halt.

This release is important, as it is his reward for obeying the cues you have

given him. Without it, he will have no incentive to respond, and you may find yourself constantly hauling on the reins and bracing your back as you try to slow him down - **not** a good thing, and not a correct way to use the half halt.

#### WHEN TO DO IT:

Obviously, a series of half halts will work to slow a horse that is rushing or going too fast. (Although there are harsher methods for dealing with rank runaways, try a series of half halts first even in those conditions.) A single half halt will also work if the horse is starting to get a bit strung out in the flat walk and you want to return him to form. Be prepared to use a quick squeeze/release of leg pressure to keep the horse from slowing down too much if you are using a half halt to change the quality of a gait, or you may find yourself slowed down more than you bargained for, into an ordinary walk with no energy. Half halts will also work to check a horse down from a rack into a slower easy gait. Again, be prepared to use your legs so that the horse doesn't end up moping along in a slow walk.

Besides slowing a horse down, half halts also can work as a "wake up call". Use a half halt before you ask your horse to change gait, so that he will be warned that there are leg aids coming. Each time you transition from a slower to a faster gait, or from a faster to a slower, prepare the horse for the coming change of speed with a light half halt. This will help him improve his balance, make smoother transitions, and prevent him stringing out into a fast gait, or "plopping" down into a slower one. Use a half halt before you ask for the canter, not to slow the horse, but to rebalance him to the rear. For a horse that has a pacing tendency, use a half halt to remind him to keep his back somewhat raised, preventing him from sagging into the undesirable gait. When you use a half halt for these things, you will need to use your legs twice during the exercise. Continue to use your thighs in conjunction with your seat as you check the horse, but then follow up by squeezing and releasing with your entire leg just a split second after the squeeze of your fingers, so that you are never "riding with the brakes on" but are "catching" the checking action of the reins, legs and seat, and pushing the horse forward before he slows too much.

#### LATERAL HALF HALTS:

In addition to the regular half halt in which your fingers squeeze both reins, another useful tool is the lateral half halt, in which you squeeze/release one rein alone, while maintaining consistent contact with the other. Lateral half halts are very useful on horses that have a tendency to shy and, again, on horses that string out into a stepping pace. To prevent a shy, apply a lateral half halt by squeezing and releasing repeatedly on the rein on the opposite side from the object the horse is likely to shy at. This keeps the horse straight, parallel to the "spook", and when reinforced with leg action from the leg on the same side as the rein giving the half halt signal, will prevent the

horse from dodging sideways.

To use a lateral half halt to discourage the pace, as the horse is moving along in the flat walk and you feel him begin to swing his body from side to side, *instantly* apply the lateral half halt to straighten his head and neck to prevent the swing. It is usually more effective to give a lateral half halt with the rein on the "stiff" side of the horse, the side he easily bends away from. (For example, if your horse turns easily to the left, but has trouble to the right, use the right rein.) You may find that an ongoing "conversation" with one rein, checking from time to time, is helpful in keeping the horse from slipping into the swing of a stepping pace even if he appears to flat walk easily.

If you practice them every time you change speed or gait, half halts will soon become second nature to you, the same way easing on or off the gas became when you learned to drive a car. They will help you to smoother transitions and more even gaits. Try them!