

# What To Do When Your Horse Pulls

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First off, let's be clear on the definition: if there is any pulling going on, it's the rider's responsibility! So even if you are convinced that the horse is the one who is pulling on the reins - either forward and down, or sideways away from a turn - the pulling is happening because you probably don't want to, or can't, let go.

It is a good thing to look at the problem from the perspective that it is you who is pulling. Then, you can do something about it. "Pulling" is something that is absolutely under your control and something you can change if you focus on your aids and timing.

## **Break It Down**

There are usually four reasons for pulling.

### **1) The horse is on the forehand.**

A horse that is moving heavy on the front legs is going to be heavy on the reins. Kinder horses learn to brace in their jaws and necks and work through the increased pressure with little complaint on their parts. Less tolerant horses might slow their legs, alter their rhythm or balk to the pressure. You might notice ear pinning, teeth grinding or tail swishing at times.

Tension appears in both the horse and rider, even if it doesn't look like there is a lot of pressure on the reins. What happens is that the rider feels increased tension on the reins and many bear that weight through their arms, shoulders and backs. The tension becomes evident in tighter, more jarring movement. You might notice your hands "bouncing" or your seat leaving the saddle. Your legs might "sway" back and forth especially in the canter.

## **2) The horse is moving too slow.**

The slow-moving horse is often on the forehand by virtue of lack of hind end engagement. Just because he takes shorter strides, or feels less bouncy because of less movement through the body, doesn't mean that he is moving well. These horses often become dull or "feel like cardboard" especially when it comes to responding to the reins. The back might feel long and flat as does the movement.

## **3) The horse is moving too fast.**

The opposite can be the culprit as well. Charles deKunffy has been saying this for years and reiterated it just a few weeks ago: "Speed is the enemy". In my own words, the horse that is moving too fast is automatically put to the forehand and needs to brace his way to balance (to avoid a trip or fall). Once again, the weight on the reins are increased as the horse is put in the position of having too much weight to the front.

## **4) The rider initiates the pulling.**

This happens to all of us, especially early in our riding career (but later on as well). We might even be unaware that we are doing the pulling ourselves. We are used to doing everything with our hands, so the first thing we do is grab for more pressure. Sometimes we pull back to counter our own falling-forward weight. Sometimes we want to influence the horse using more hands and not enough body. Finally, many of us just feel more confident with more pressure than is necessary - it's just hard to let go and be responsible for our own weight and balance.

Regardless of the reason *why* there is pulling going on, there is a four-step sequence of aids that might help you alleviate pressure on the reins and weight on the forehand. If you feel that your main problem is #4, additional work on developing your seat and core muscles might make a huge difference as well.

Here are the aids:

### **1. Give - only 1 inch.**

Soften your elbows just a tiny bit forward. Don't just open your fingers or let the reins out. Instead, control the rein length and actually advance both your hands forward, keeping the contact even and consistent.

Don't let the give be much more than that initially. It should be just enough to give the horse a feeling of freedom without being "thrown away" or to the forehand.

If you are working on one side of the horse on a turn, you can give only the one elbow. If you are working straight ahead, you can give both elbows.

### **2. Activate with your seat and legs.**

Some horses go with a forward thrust of just the seat bones. Other horses might need one or both legs (depending on the problem) to support the seat. In any case, you might feel a sudden surge in energy. Be ready and go with the movement. Make sure you don't get left behind when the horse

responds with increased impulsion and maybe a larger stride length. This is especially useful for the pokey horses.

### **3. Finish with a half-halt.**

Depending on the riding problem, you might want to use a half-halt or two after the moment of activation. If you allow the horse to lurch ahead with nothing to contain the energy at the end, the horse may fall to the forehand or just speed up. Always use a half-halt to “recycle the energy” and help the horse develop a more uphill balance. This is especially important for the horses that are too fast.

### **4. Take the reins back.**

This last step is key. The idea isn't to just lengthen the rein out a little at a time, because that will only help your horse get longer and flatter and more strung out. So after you give a little, take a little. Keep the rein length essentially the same but do the give and take mainly through your elbows. If you do give rein length, this is the time to shorten the reins again.

End with what you started, only hopefully, this time, there is less pressure because the horse was given some freedom, some “oomph” and then some re-balancing. Remember that we are always working toward consistency - that is, we don't want to lengthen the reins, shorten the reins, move left or right, etc. In our dreams, we want to do as little as possible and look as quiet as possible.