

It's all in the Backstretch

Stretches To Improve Your Horse's Gait

By Lee Ziegler

How well your horse does his gait is directly related to his level of physical fitness.

Just like human athletes, horses move better when they have good muscle tone, good flexibility, and stamina. And, just as human athletes benefit from cross training outside their specialties, gaited horses can improve their ability to work in their easy gaits through conditioning their entire bodies in exercises that do not directly involve working in an easy gait.

Many benefits

PERHAPS THE MOST VALUABLE EXERCISE any horse can learn is the “neck stretch.” Sometimes called “riding long and low” or “showing the horse the way to the ground,” this exercise works to stretch and streng then the muscles and ligaments of the horse’s neck and back. **This conditioning in turn helps to maintain healthy spacing between the vertebrae in the horse’s spine, and to improve his ability to carry the weight of a rider on his back.**

In addition to these physical benefits, the exercise also works to relax mental tension and to teach a horse to accept and seek contact with the bit. And, as an added bonus for gaited horses, work in this exercise is the first step to eliminating the unwanted pace or stepping pace. The point of this exercise is not just to get the horse to lower his head!

The benefit of working long

and low does not come from merely getting the horse to go with a low head, but in doing it in a way that helps develop the horse’s body and mind in a specific way. There are no short cuts for this exercise that will do those things for the horse, although some other methods using tie downs, martingales, or draw reins that may also get his head down.

Preliminary Groundwork

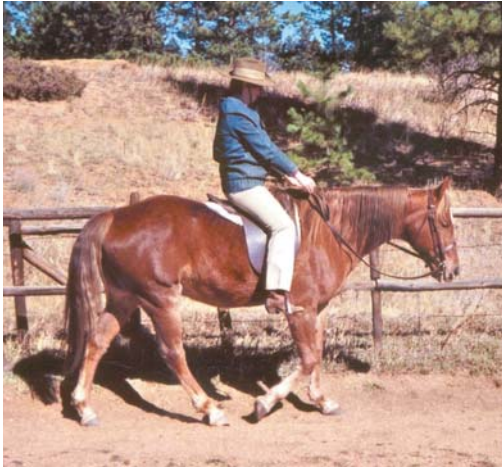
START THE NECK STRETCH EXERCISE on the ground, standing next to your horse’s head. Gently massage the top of his neck, about 6 inches behind the poll, feeling the tension or elasticity in his muscles and ligaments. He may relax and lower his head as an instinctive response to your hand on the top of his neck. If so, you may go on to teaching the exercise from the saddle without much groundwork. However, if his neck is very tight and he throws his head up higher when he feels your hand on his neck, continue working from the ground to loosen the tension in his neck and help him physically to lower his head.

Lightly knead the top of his neck until you feel his muscles begin to loosen up. Then ask him to lower his head while keeping one hand on the top of his neck, pressing gently downward with a massaging motion, reinforcing this with light tugs downward on his lead rope from your other hand, using an elastic give and take as his head lowers. You may also have some success lowering the head of

a very stiff-necked horse by gently alternating downward pressure on first one side, then the other, of his halter. If all else fails, use a treat to bribe him to lower his head. Use the treat to get him to “unlock” his upper neck, but continue to massage his neck to release physical tension in his muscles and ligaments as he reaches for it. Practice this ground exercise frequently, until your horse will easily lower his head and neck with his poll well below his withers, when you touch the “magic place” just behind his poll. Until he can do this from the ground, there is no point in teaching him the neck stretch exercise from the saddle.

Headgear for the neck stretch exercise

YOU WILL HAVE THE BEST RESULTS teaching this exercise in a snaffle (non-leverage) bit. It is almost impossible to teach it in a gag or curb bit, neither of which is designed to help a horse stretch down and forward. If your horse is uncontrollable without a curb, try a mild Kimberwicke for the exercise, avoiding as much leverage as possible. Using bitless headgear will work only to a point. You can certainly teach head-lowering without a bit, but the major benefits of this exercise are developing elasticity through a horse’s entire ligament system from poll to tail, and teaching him to relax his jaw and develop confidence in the contact of a bit. With no bit, all you get is a low head.



Beginning the neck stretch. Here contact has just been increased slightly on the left rein, while the right is hanging slack, encouraging the horse to relax and reach forward.

Phase one, stretching and relaxing

START THE EXERCISE BY RIDING YOUR horse forward in either a straight line or a large circle at a relatively slow ordinary walk. It is important to keep your horse moving while you teach him this exercise so that his entire back and body can stretch as he does it. Sit straight in the saddle, holding one rein in each hand, while maintaining light, even contact with your horse's mouth through the reins. This contact will vary from horse to horse, but for most, about the weight of a medium sized plum in each hand is about right. Don't pull back on the reins to try to set your horse's head, and don't let them hang totally slack. As you ride forward, relax and open your elbows to lower your hands so that they are below the swells on a Western saddle, or below the buttons on an English one.

Begin to ask your horse to lower his head and reach forward with his nose out. Separate your hands so that they are about two feet apart. Gently squeeze and release your fingers on one rein, pulling lightly down and to the side, hesitate a second, then

squeeze/release with the fingers of the other hand, again pulling down and to the side. At first your horse may be confused and throw his head up higher or start to pull on the bit. Ignore these responses, continue to use the light squeeze/releases from your separated hands, and eventually he will start to lower his head and neck very slightly. As he does, instantly release contact and begin to feed out some rein through your fingers.

Give him "permission" to lower his head by dropping all feel of his mouth. Let the reins hang in a loop, with the weight hanging down to encourage him to keep his head and neck low. If he starts to raise his head, instantly separate your hands a little more and return to the alternating squeeze/releases on the reins to remind him to lower his neck. Eventually he should be willing to go along with his poll well below his withers, on a slack rein. It may take a number of lessons for your horse to learn to do this, especially if he has been trained with the use of a biting rig or other head-setting device. The purpose of this first phase of the exercise is not only to lower your horse's head and neck but also to relax him and stretch his body.

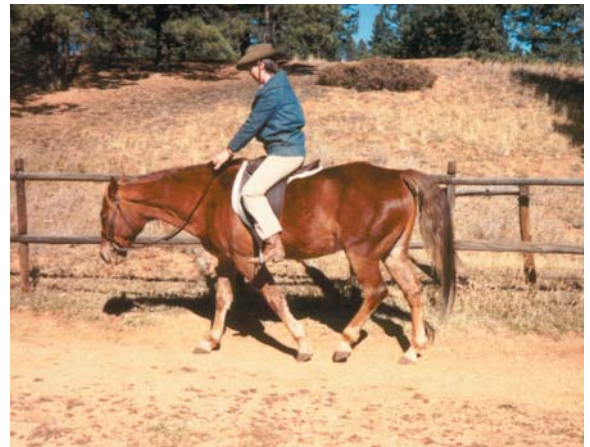
Phase two, reaching down for contact with the bit

WHEN YOUR HORSE RESPONDS TO light alternating vibrations by lowering his head and stretching out his neck on slack reins, you can start with the second phase of the exercise. Again, ride your horse in a straight line or large circle, with even contact on the bit through the

reins. Ride him at a walk in his "normal" head position.

Lower your hands by relaxing and straightening your elbows, still maintaining contact with the bit as you reach forward and down. Begin to squeeze/release on the reins with alternating hands, and very gradually allow the reins to slip between your fingers as your horse lowers his head, but instead of allowing the reins to go slack, maintain light contact through the reins as your horse lowers his head.

Let him "chew" his way to the ground, giving a tiny bit when he takes, until he is traveling with his head and neck lowered but you are maintaining medium plum weight contact with his mouth. Keep him moving forward in an energetic but not fast ordinary walk as you prac-



Here the horse is traveling relaxed, on loose reins, with a low head. His neck is stretched forward, but there is no real drive through his body from his hindquarters. This phase of the exercise relaxes the horse, but it is only a first step in the process of developing his back and neck muscles.

tice this part of the exercise. Don't pull back on the reins or push him for too much speed -- keep his energy flowing through his body, from his hindquarters, until you "catch" it through the reins in your fingers. Ride your horse stretched down into contact for several steps, then release contact by letting the reins slip through your fingers and allow him to go on slack reins for relaxation.

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Stretching down and forward into contact. Here the horse is reaching forward with a low head, with light contact on the bit. This produces more energetic stretching of his neck and back muscles and ligaments.

Phase three, coming back up with contact and stretch in the back and neck

THE FINAL PART OF THE NECK stretch exercise allows the horse to return to a higher head position, while maintaining the same degree of contact through the bit that he reached for when he lowered his neck in the second phase. Practice alternating the second phase of the exercise with this last part of it to help your horse develop greater elasticity and strength in his back muscles and in the ligaments that support his spine.

Start with your horse moving in an energetic ordinary walk with his head and neck lowered into light contact with the bit. Gradually bring your hands closer together, until they are about 10 inches apart, maintaining the same contact you had when they were separated. You will probably need to take up the reins just a little as you do this. Let your hands rise until they are even with his withers as your horse's head begins to come up from the stretched position. Don't try to pull his head up with higher hands -- keep your hands low so that

there is a straight line from your elbow, through your wrists to his mouth.

Maintain light contact, no heavier than that medium plum weight in your fingers. Use light vibrations from your fingers, alternating on the reins, to ask your horse to relax his jaw and bring his forehead slightly toward vertical.

Alternate these vibrations with squeeze/ releases from your calves to keep him moving forward with energy in his walk, returning to the steady plum-weight contact when he complies. Maintain this higher head position for several steps, then again lower your hands and ask your horse to reach down and forward while maintaining this same plum-weight contact. Alternate several steps of the stretched and higher position until your horse can easily transition



Here the horse begins to raise his head, maintaining the same level of contact he reached into with a lower neck. His back and neck muscles and ligaments retain some of the stretch they had when his head was lowered.

from one to the other without changing the degree of contact on the bit as you change the position of your hands.

When to practice?

THE NECK STRETCH IS SUCH A VALUABLE exercise that you can practice all three phases every time you ride

for at least a few steps. Use it as part of your warm-up for arena work, or out on the trail to relax your horse and stretch his body after a long period of work in his gait. Particularly if your horse is pacey, practice this exercise for a good part of every riding session, to help him remold his body into a stronger, less hollow resting position and to channel his energy through his back more effectively.

Over time, if your horse works consistently in this exercise, you will notice his topline begin to fill out. You will have helped him develop a more athletic body, and a more beautiful one as well.

About the Author:

Lee Ziegler is an internationally recognized clinician, trainer and judge of gaited horses, based in Colorado Springs, Colorado. She is a regular contributor to The Gaited Horse.



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