

Trainer's Tip: Whoa, baby

by Brent Winston, head trainer, Harmony Equine Center, Denver Dumb Friends League

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Over the years, I've had numerous conversations with folks telling me they have trouble stopping their horses. I often hear, "I've tried this bit, I've tried that bridle, and nothing seems to get my horse to stop." If you have this problem, you're certainly not alone—but in order to correct it, you must be prepared to work at it. There is no one thing you can buy or do that will correct the problem overnight.

When I encounter a horse that won't stop, the first thing I do is check to see how soft and responsive he is to lateral pressure on the reins. I take up some slack on one side or the other and add light pressure (this works best in a snaffle bit). I'm looking for the horse to give me an ear tip or nose tip in that direction, and if I get any response at all, I give back by taking the pressure away. I work at this until I'm able to get the horse to bend his head around toward my knee. I will then ask the horse to hold his head in that position with no tension on the rein before I let him straighten it.

In most cases, a horse that is hard to stop will not be responsive to lateral rein pressure. In that case, you may need to take a firmer hold on the reins before you get a response. However, always start lightly and always give when the horse gives to you, with the goal being that he can hold his head bent until you give it back. After I have started developing softness in my horse's head laterally, I start asking him to disengage his hind quarters. This means moving the back end of the horse away from his head, with the goal being for him to step the inside leg through the outside. I start this process by bending his head one direction or the other, waiting for him to get soft, and then placing my leg from that same side back toward his last ribs. I start lightly at first and then become more assertive until I'm able to feel the horse try to move away from that pressure. I continue to hold his head bent in order to keep the horse soft throughout the process. Ultimately, the goal is to be able to gain control of your horse's back legs with a minimal amount of pressure.

After I have the horse soft laterally and am able to gain control of his back legs, I start riding forward, trying always to be in rhythm with the movement of the horse. As I walk forward, I increase my rhythm and bring the horse up with me. Once I'm able to swing my horse up into a trot, I trot for five or 10 minutes, then slow my rhythm of riding and wait for the horse to slow back down to a walk. If this doesn't happen, I take my inside rein and ask the horse to bend his head and at the same time ask him to disengage his hind quarters. I allow this to happen and wait on the horse to become soft again. I walk off and start working toward swinging him up to a trot, and when we get to the trot, I trot for a while and then try again. If you slow your riding every time before you take up a rein, your horse will learn that he should be looking to slow down when he feels a change in your riding. When you get a pretty good try, walk for a while to show your horse that being responsive means a lot less work.

If your horse tries to bolt or trots off hurriedly, bend his head and disengage his hind quarters to regain control and go right back at it, this time going left, then going right, then left again. By doing this, you are giving your horse something to think about other than running off or being hurried. When you feel like your horse is relaxing or paying attention to you, then you can start the process of getting him to respond to your body. Once he is pretty good at going from a walk to a trot and back down to a walk, then you can try to go from a trot to a stop by completely quitting your rhythm.

By this point, your horse should understand that something is supposed to happen, and you should get some kind of response. Give him a chance to figure it out (it may take a few steps), then bend his head and disengage—but this time, stop and give your horse a long break. It won't take long for most horses to look forward to getting a break!

Sometimes this is a good place to stop for the day. As you progress and get better at the trot-to-walk transition, you can then work your way up to a lope, back to the trot, back to the lope, then trot, then walk. If you are able to achieve all these steps with your horse, eventually you will be able to ride across an arena or pasture, and stop your horse by simply stopping the rhythm in the saddle.

Good luck, stay safe out there and until next time, keep ridin' centered.