

David Norbury

Lead Changes

Part 1

Lead changes are not as scary as one might think. A lot of riders don't want to start changing leads on their horse because they are afraid their horse might lift its head or increase its speed during the change. People tend to stay too long in their comfort zone while training their horses and therefore never develop more advanced riding and training skills. These skills help compliment other events the rider chooses to compete in. I am a firm believer in advancing all of my horses into other events, I find by doing this I am not creating a horse that goes to work thinking he knows what is in store for him therefore keeping his interest alive. I also need some release from any monotonous work that I might be doing with my horse. How many people go to work each day and do the same thing day in and day out - I'll bet they want something different to do.

Lead changes are one of the many ways I release my horse and myself from any kind of boredom, however there is a lot of work to do before we ask for our first change. There are many thoughts on how to lead change a horse and they range from loping at right angles to a fence on the left lead and just before you hit that fence take him off to the right. Another way is to run a circle to the left and when you hit the centre of the circle pull your horse's shoulders off to the right. The problem with these two methods is that you are asking the horse to change by pulling his shoulders in one direction and leaving the hip behind therefore you will get a change up front and not behind. Lead changes are performed correctly when the hip moves over before the front end. If we were changing from the left lead to the right lead we would want the hip to move to the right, this will allow the left hind leg to move to the right - this is the first stage of the change. The second stage is the right hind leg and the left front leg would move as one, this is the second beat of the three beat stride and the third and final stage of the change will be the right front leg.

I think my favourite way of teaching a horse to change incorrectly or not at all is to lope on the left lead then break back to a jog for several strides, then pick up the right lead, each time trying to lessen the amount of jog strides in between the lope. After time you will be able to get your horse to change from one lead to another with one jog stride in between, however you will find the real challenge comes when you try to get rid of that last jog stride. After many weeks of training your horse this way don't be surprised to find that you have created the best 'simple lead change' horse in the country.

The best lead changing horses are the ones that have great movement, in other words they are athletic. Most horses are average movers, a small percentage that are great and there is also a small percentage that is terrible movers. A great mover is a horse that has plenty of 'air time'.

What I mean by this is if a horse is on the right lead and about to finish his three beat stride the last leg to touch the ground will be his right front leg. This leg has plenty of time to stretch completely before his foot hits the ground and each stride after this is replicated in the same fashion, giving the rider a smooth ride. This is what we call a slow-legged horse. Because these horses have the elevation required we then have plenty of time in the air to go from one lead to the other, it just makes things a lot easier. Unfortunately most of us are going to have to train our average moving horses to change leads, so it is essential we have a solid foundation in place, that being our Western Pleasure or any horse for that matter that has had all resistance trained out of him. The final item needed to perform the lead change is the one thing that prevents a lot of horses from reaching their full potential - the rider's ability to understand the theory of the manoeuvre being taught.

I show a lot of horses in the 'Western Riding' event. The Western Pleasure Horse fits right into this event because all he has to do is go around a few cones jump a pole and change a few leads, sounds so easy doesn't it? I have shown a number of Reining Horses at major shows in this event and been successful. I like my Reining Horse to be able to Pleasure and Trail as well for the same reasons I explained earlier, regarding boredom. The one thing all my horses have in common, regardless what event they perform, is the ability to have their collection, head position and speed corrected by squeezing with my lower leg and spur combination. Without this vital tool I would have to haul on their face when I got into trouble.

Gaining control of your horse through using your legs is like using any of the different training methods that are in use today, they all require the technique of pull and release at the appropriate time. This is the one thing all the various training methods have in common. To begin the building blocks for gaining control of my horse I will put him in a jog and once there I shall squeeze with my lower leg. The first reaction from my horse will be to increase his speed, as he does this I will pull back on the reins, which in turn will put pressure on my hands. Now the waiting game begins, who will be the first to release the pressure on my hands, my horse by giving his face or me by releasing? I am going to let him be the first to get off my hands and he will do this without me even releasing the pressure. Before he gives to me I will find he will go searching for a release in the pressure. The places he will search for release will be by throwing his head in the air, after realising there is no relief there he will look for another place and that will be off to the side and again there will be no release, he then will place his head in a downward position in which case there will be a small amount of release. The horse will remember where that release in pressure occurred and he will go searching for it again and this time when he finds it he will not only put his head down but also bring his chin in. When this occurs I will not physically release the rein as a reward, due to the fact that when he brought his chin in he released the pressure himself.

This method of training has to be repeated over and over and as you progress your horse will find the release point in a much shorter time frame. The rider must be methodical in his approach to the technique. The steps are as follows: -

1. Jog your horse;
2. Squeeze with the lower leg;
3. Pull when the horse increases his speed;
4. Release the pressure when he gives to you; and
5. Repeat 1 - 4 thousands of times to achieve consistency in your horse.

Step five is no exaggeration. When we ourselves learn something new we have to either read something many times or physically do the same

before we retain whatever we are trying to learn, it is all about repetition. After a while your horse's anticipation will start to come to the forefront, as you squeeze with your legs he may speed up a little and then realise he had better slow down or else he will be physically slowed down by the rider pulling on his face.

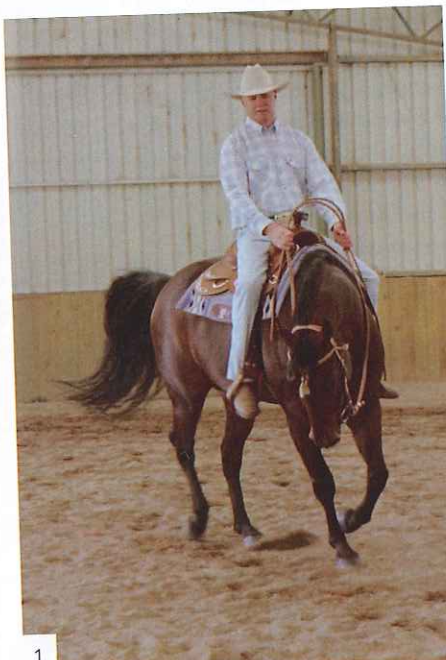
I use this technique on all my horses, and as I said earlier it gives me the added insurance that when something goes wrong in the show ring I can discretely correct my horse without the judge being aware of what I am doing. A lot of riders get nervous competing in their various events and if you have no backup systems in place to correct any problems, then they have good reason to be nervous.

When it comes to exercises I use the same technique, being any time I pull a horse vertically or laterally I will drive him up into the bridle until he gives to me. The most important part of my training is that I will not get into a 'bumping on the mouth or kicking in the sides' match with the horse. An example of this is to stand in front of someone and place your hand on their face and continually bump with your hand on their face until they move, then just place your hand on their face increasing

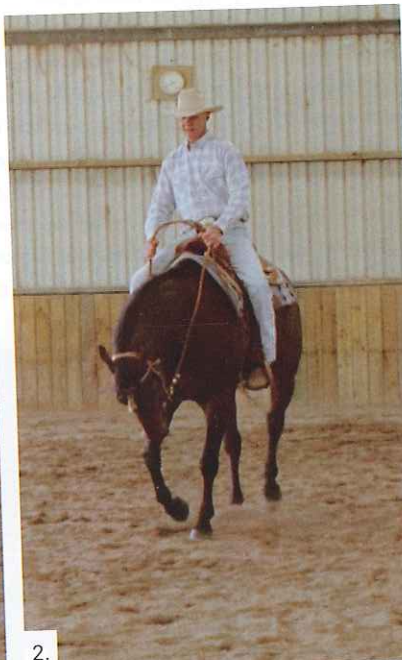
pressure once again until they move. Ask that person what pressure they preferred, keeping in mind using both techniques resulted in the same outcome with the person moving away from the pressure.

Exercises are what gives your horse the ability to perform different manoeuvres. I twist and turn my horses in every conceivable way I can think of. If I could turn a horse inside out I would. I use the reverse arc, direct arc, side pass, half pass, backing, backing and half passing at the same time, circling with the hip in and then out of the circle, rotating the backend around the front end and vice versa and lastly the counter canter.

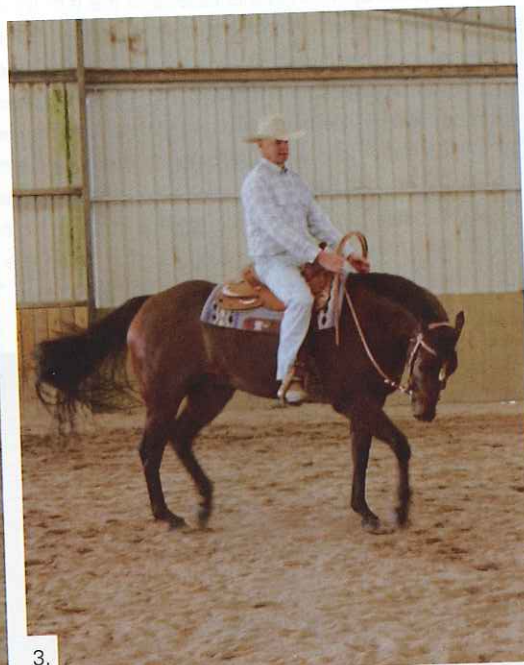
All of these exercises I look at as if they were seedlings. With a seedling you nurture it by firstly planting it, then providing water and nutrients and of course sunshine. After time you begin to see results with your seedling, firstly it is the shoot that pushes through the soil then the stem starts to grow and eventually a bud begins to form. Then eventually, because you have helped the seedling develop, you end up with the bud eventually blossoming. This is not unlike your exercises, as you develop them you begin to extract all the resistance within your horse's body and this happens over time. To give you an example of this, let's look at the lope



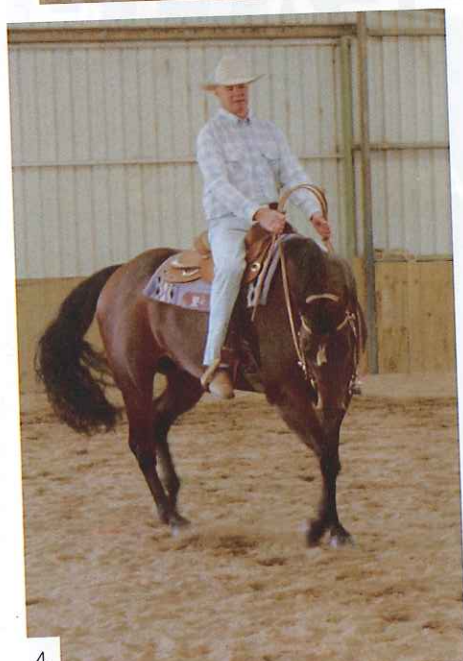
1.



2.



3.



4.

1. This demonstrates how I want a horse to flex. Not how the horse not only breaks through the poll, but also through the wither. He has totally submitted to all pressure that was applied.
2. David and daughter Courtney both demonstrate the counter arc. We can clearly see how both horses have no resistance at all while flexing through both the poll and the wither.
3. Here Courtney demonstrates how not to half pass a horse. In this picture you will see how the shoulders are in front of the hip. Half passing in this position encourages the horse to change in front first instead of the correct way of hind end first, followed by the rear.
4. Here David demonstrates the correct position for the half pass. We can clearly see the hip in front of the shoulders. This position greatens our chance of performing a correct lead change.

training

departure. The departure is performed by having direct arc through your horse's neck and also positioning the horse rear end in the same direction as the neck. We then give the horse the verbal command to lope. Have we not achieved the lope departure through using our exercises? We have also used the technique to drive our horse up into the bridle until we create zero resistance - this is not only an exercise, but also the grounding we need for Western Pleasure. Because we have nurtured our exercises we have helped to develop our first event, Western Pleasure. Through using our body control we have created another event, Trail. This event requires all the body movements needed to negotiate all the obstacles in this event. I remember recently we were even asked to perform a lead change in a Trail event at one of our major shows.

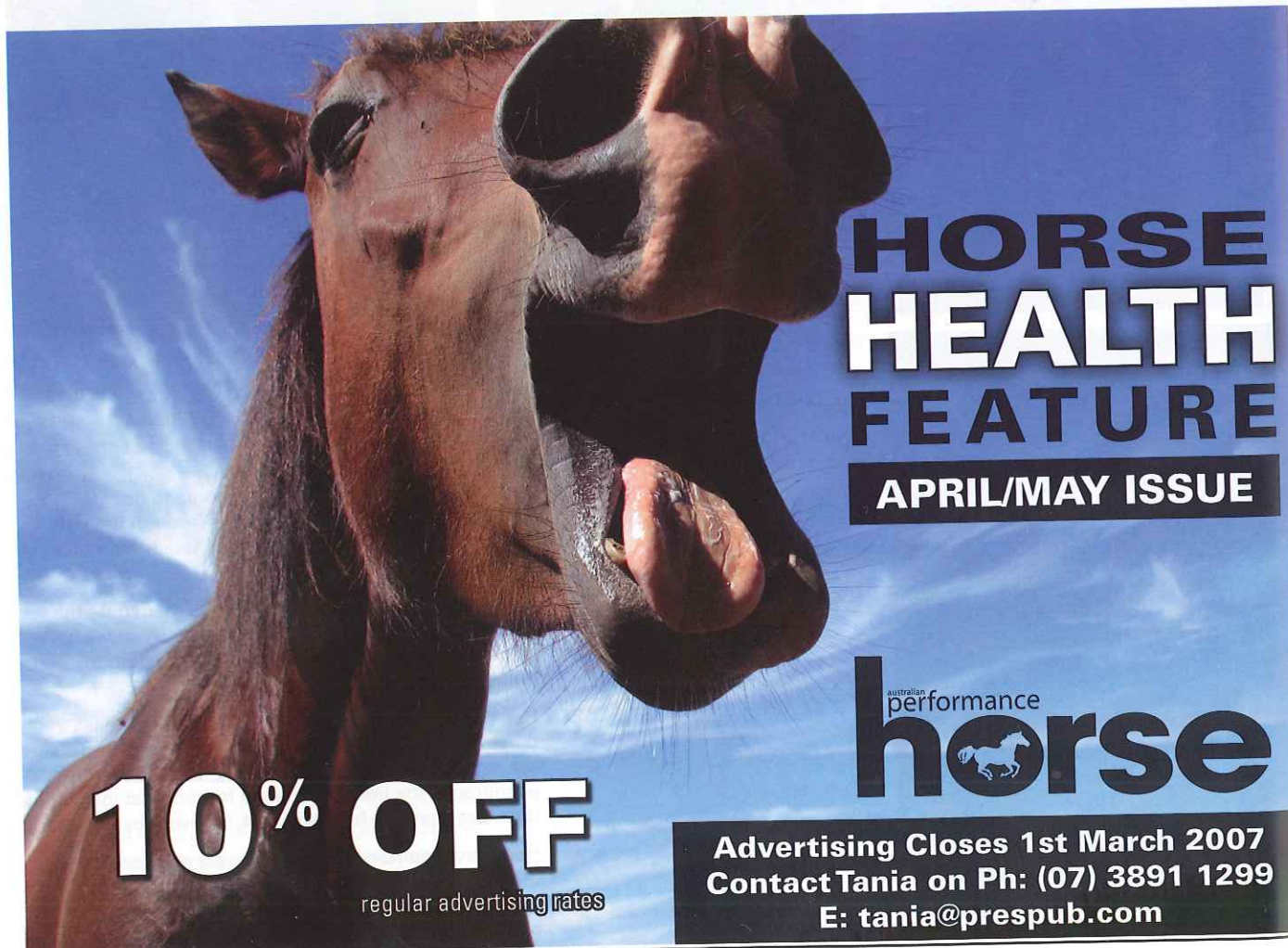
I hope you can understand what I am trying to get across here - exercises are the most 'powerful tool' you will ever use in horse training, as opposed to other tools such as tie downs, draw reins or over biting your horse. We now come to the part of the lead change where we have to examine how a lead change works. I like to compare the lead change to a lope departure because they are both about picking up a new lead. In the lope departure to the left we need to rotate the hip in the direction of the departure, which in this case is to the left. By doing this we are encouraging the right hind leg to move laterally to the left, as well as stepping under the horse. When it comes time to lope he will use this hind leg to propel himself forward. This stride will then be followed by the other two strides that make up the three beat stride of the lope. The first stride is the right hind push of leg followed by the nearside hind and the offside fore leg moving as one. The final stride of the three beat lope is the near side fore - this is the leg that completes the stride. To sum up the departure we have to recognise that when the right hind leg is rotated to the left we are going to pick up the left lead. The lead change

relies on the same approach as we use for the lope departure and the training is identical.

Now we will look at the training of the lope departure and the lead change and try and see where the similarity lies. Through our exercises we have developed the ability to place our horse wherever we want without resistance. Prior to asking for the departure I will ask my horse to move into a jog, during this gate I shall ask the horse to half pass, which quite simply is a side pass with forward motion. As he moves to the left I need to do a checklist before I lope;

1. Have the hip leading to the left and rotated further than the shoulder, in other words have the right hind leg in line with the left fore leg.
2. Have the horse's nose looking slightly to the left in a horizontal position; and
3. Maintain forward motion. It is better to have too much forward motion than not enough otherwise you will find your horse will draw back when he lopes off, therefore raising his head.

Once we have checked off these requirements we are then ready to smooch our horse up into the lope. Now that we have moved up into the lope we need to start with our half passing again. If our horse is on the left lead we need to half pass to the left and vice versa to the right keeping our checklist in mind. If you fail on any one of these items you will not achieve the lead change. Another important feature of the half pass that needs to be achieved is depth within the manoeuvre. The depth our horse achieves in his forward stride needs to be duplicated within his lateral stride and always keeping in mind it is absolutely vital the hip remains in front of the shoulders. After we have spent the time working on this exercise and have achieved lateral movement without resistance, we are ready for our first lead change and this will be covered in the next issue. 🐾



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