

Master of the Slow Down

Have you ever had a run in the show pen when your horse wouldn't slow down? He started off well but then started to race and get faster and faster? By the end of the class you feel like you had participated in the Melbourne Cup – you definitely deserved to win if speed was the requirement.

If you've ever felt out of control in the arena you will know that rides like these are never fun for the competitor. There could be any number of reasons why a horse may be becoming a speed demon. It could be that the horse is scared, has its own agenda or the horse and rider aren't communicating properly.

Victorian Trainer David Norbury talks us through his experiences in working with a speed demon and ways to get around it.

“The reason a horse increases his or her speed has to do with collection or lack of. When a horse loses collection they will do one of two things, they will either break gait or increase speed, they cannot do both,” said David.

He explained that at the end of the day having collection is crucial to maintaining a slow and controlled gait.

“A lot of riders don't realise how important collection is to their horse's performance. As a horse loses collection they will often lift their head which in turn hollows their backs, as this happens the rider then loses control of the horse's legs,” said David.

“I've always maintained that the higher the head the less control we have, the lower the head the more control we gain. You only need to go to any horse event and if you see a rider having trouble with their horse look and see where the head is.”

Once you understand why a horse speeds up it's important to work on the solution to fix the problem. The first step is to achieve softness with your horse.

“The first ride I have on any new horse is to teach it to give to pressure. I achieve this by jogging my horse around and applying pressure to the horse mouth,” said David.

“This will cause the horse to slow down and possibly give the rider an uncomfortable ride due to the horse not stepping deep within his stride so I will apply leg pressure to keep him going forward.

“In doing this the horse will fight the pressure, he will throw his head up then to the left and the right, as he realises there is no release there he will throw it down to see if he can get some relief, as he does this the rider must decrease the pressure and the horse will learn that when his head goes down the pressure is no longer there.

“Horse's learn more through the release in pressure more than the increase in pressure,” said David.

The second step is to consider whether a series of manoeuvres will make your ride a little easier. Manoeuvres are created through exercises and are designed to provide more control over certain sections of a horse's body.

“People often talk about having ‘buttons’ on their horse. In my experience, buttons help to create a manoeuvre. To give an example when you put your left leg on to lope that is the button. What follows from this is the manoeuvre which is getting your horse to rotate his hip to the inside and make him look to the inside and combine this with a half pass then you have created a manoeuvre to lope off.”

Other buttons include pressing your legs into your horse's sides and have him lower his head to the position you want. The verbal command of ‘Whoa’, neck reining and squeezing to slow down are all buttons used to provide direction for your horse.

“These buttons we talk about are taught through consistently asking the horse for the correct response to any aid that is given to him, remember horses learn through consistent training,” said David.

Interestingly enough David claims that no horse will naturally travel faster on his own merit. He says there will always be a reason for his increase in speed which can more often than not be attributed to the riders influence.

“If a horse is not sound in some way and in pain it may result in him trying to run away from the pain. If your horse is ‘fed rocket’ fuel then he will also try and run just because he is full of energy. You need to consider all the reasons why he might be speeding along, assuming a horse is ignorant is not the answer.

“Some mornings when I come out to ride I may find my horse is full of energy even though his feed is designed not to fire him up. Horse's love to run so when they are confined

over night they have excess energy to burn. “I have no problem with a horse that may be fresh and this is why sometimes I may lunge them before getting on so we get the excess energy out. Other horses may be fresh only long enough until the desire to run wears off,” said David.

The challenge we face as riders comes when we need to get our signals through to the animal.

“No matter what you do on a horse you always have to go through their brain before you get to the body. The brain will analyse the information given to it and then will process it. As the rider we fill the brain with the relevant information needed to perform the movements that we require.

David described what the performance of a Quarter Horse should be like in his own words. “I'd like to think of the pleasure horse as a long distance runner. I should be able to walk, jog and lope for many kilometres after all our pleasure horse derived from the American cowboys travelling long distances to round up the cattle.

“The speed I like to travel in the show ring can be determined on how quickly you are moving with each stride. If my horse is jogging then I don't want to be bouncing quickly as this will mean he is travelling too fast, I want to be moving in a slow cadenced fashion.

The same goes for the lope. “In the lope I want to have a slow rolling motion to my body. Your body movement in the saddle will always tell the judge how your horse is travelling. If your horse is four beating then the rider will be bouncing in the saddle as though they were doing a fast jog, the rider will feel no rolling motion at all,” said David.

At the end of the day the key is to create that slow cadenced ride that every spectator and competitor would like to feel. But mentally as riders we need to commit to the slow. Often we don't realise how fast we are sending our cues to our horse. If you think slow and wait a moment between each manoeuvre, your horse will also learn to think slow. If you talk softly and slowly through your hands and legs your on the way to mastering the slow down.

Article by Cie Jai Leggett with David Norbury