

Barn DANCE

When the weather's bad, turn the barn aisle into a practice pen.

By Brent Graef

Photos by Holly Clanahan

SOME PARTS OF THE WORLD MIGHT NOT HAVE BAD WEATHER, but in the Texas Panhandle, sometimes it gets nasty. The wind blows, the winters are cold, the summers are hot, and our horses still need to be worked.

But you can get a lot of work done without braving the elements by using the barn aisle. You'll want to do short sessions, and when I do work like this, I'm not working on the horse; I'm working to improve my timing – both the timing of my request and the timing of my release.

Don't just go through the motions while you're doing the exercises we'll discuss below. Think about: What is the horse's understanding? Is the horse thinking, is he feeling, is he trying for you?

Because you'll be in a confined space, that almost forces you to move in slow motion. And that's a good thing. Notice your horse's expression – is he focused on you, or is he gawking in the other direction? – and how he moves his body, how he has to prepare his body (by shifting his weight, for example) to move a certain way. These little pieces will have big payoffs.

And one other note: When I do work inside the barn, I never go into it with a set agenda. I might have an outline of what I'd like to accomplish, but I always stay flexible. See what the horse is offering and then flow with that. Give the horse what he needs at the moment and what he can handle and then build on it. We can build on little things, and we'll have a good deal going.

Hurry It Up, Slow It Down

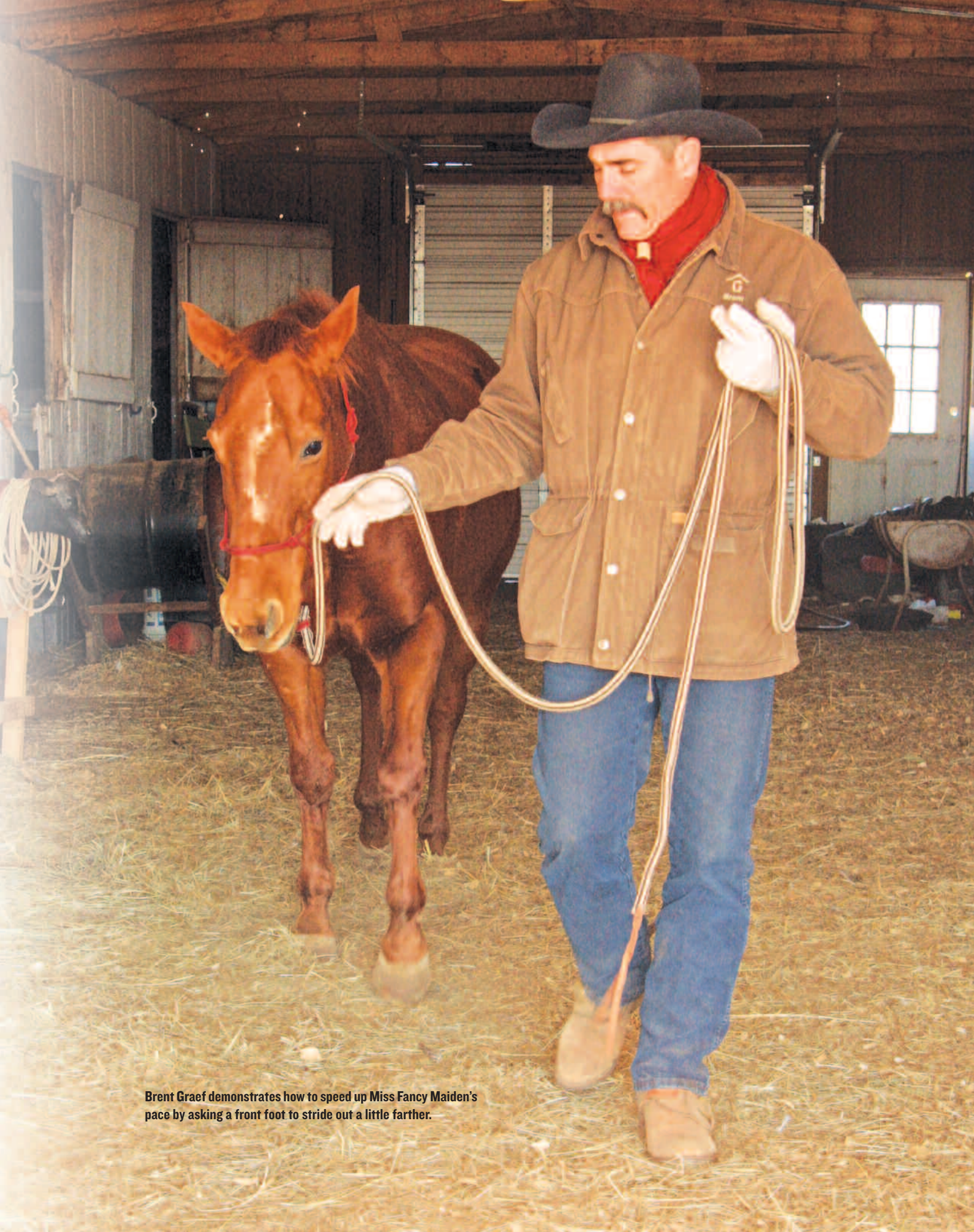
THE DAY WE SHOT THESE PHOTOS, IT WAS COLD AND THE WIND was blowing about 40 mph, so the barn roof was flapping and my mare, Miss Fancy Maiden, had a lot of distractions.

So a good place to start was to simply lead her and get in time with her feet. I'll concentrate on one front foot, recognizing the instant it's about to leave the ground. If I want to influence a foot, the time to do so is just before it lifts off. That's the point in time when, if my timing is good, I can speed that foot up, slow it down or move it sideways or backward.

Let's say I want to slow "Fancy's" pace. I'll focus on the right front foot, and just as it is about to leave the ground, I will put some "feel" down the lead rope, squeezing the rope and lifting it lightly, with soft hands. I'm asking that right front to take a little shorter stride. I'll squeeze and lift the lead rope as she lifts that foot, and I'll hold the lead rope roughly where the reins would fall. You'll hear people talk about getting the reins connected to the feet? Well, here, your reins are the lead rope, and you can use it to directly influence the feet.

If you've never paid a lot of attention to your horse's footfall, this is a good place to start practicing that. It takes practice, and it takes awareness. Then, as you progress in your horsemanship, you can time your riding aids to the horse's footfall. He will appreciate that and be much more responsive.





Brent Graef demonstrates how to speed up Miss Fancy Maiden's pace by asking a front foot to stride out a little farther.

I might slow Fancy's stride down for a few steps and then ask her to speed up. I'll do that by putting some energy down the lead rope, maybe swinging it forward a little bit, as her right front foot is about to leave the ground. You're asking that foot to reach a little farther with each stride.

Experiment to see how little it takes to influence that foot. You don't have to do much.

You Put the Right Foot In ...

AS YOU AND YOUR HORSE GET MORE TUNED IN TO ONE ANOTHER, you can start asking your horse to do a little more. If your horse is calm and you're sure he won't run over you, you can turn around and walk backward slowly.

Just as an example, we'll stay focused on the right front. As your horse begins to pick that foot up, lift your lead rope out to the horse's right side, asking him to move that foot over to the side.

How little does it take? How good is your timing?

As you're asking your horse to reach his foot to the side, watch what he does with the rest of his body. The more he shifts his weight to his hindquarters, the farther he'll be able to reach with that front foot.

When you're riding, you want your horse to shift his weight to the hind end, and this exercise helps him figure out how to do it himself. It's a more solid deal than if I tried to make him shift his weight back. If I set things up to where he has to think, if I allow him to think, he's liable to be more responsive because he'll start searching for the answer.

When he finds the answer, he really found it if he has been able to think through it. If I just make him do it, make him, make him, then we're just going through the motions. I want to have my horse real sensitive and working with me, rather than going through the motions and not enjoying his job. If I can ask for a movement when he can do it – when his feet are in the right position to respond to my request – he'll start feeling back to me more, and he'll start searching.

One Step Forward, One Step Back

IT'S GOOD TO MIX THINGS UP, SO YOU'RE not drilling on one thing. I'll do leading, I'll adjust the stride, I'll move the foot over here, move the foot over there, get in time with the other foot. And we'll also work on backing a little bit.



To back a horse, hold your hand with the thumb pointing down.

In backing up, I'll look for correctness in his movements. I will grasp the halter knot under the horse's chin lightly, with my thumb pointed down.

If I'm on the right-hand side of the horse, I'll use my right hand; if I'm on his left, I'll use my left hand. There are a couple of reasons for that. If a horse was to try to bite me, with my hand in this position, I can easily block him with my elbow. If my thumb's pointed up, my face is the first thing in his way.

Also, if my thumb is pointed up, I'm more likely to pull on my horse if we were to have a disagreement, and I don't want to do that. If he acts up, it's better that I push him away from me, not pull him toward me.



Brent lifts up on the lead rope as a front foot is leaving the ground to ask it to slow up.

Another safety consideration: I won't stand directly in front of him. If he gets worried and strikes or paws, I want to be standing to the side of the horse. If it's a horse that tends to be "snaky" or dangerous anyway, I'm probably not going to work with him like this in a barn aisle; he needs room to move, so we'd just wait for better weather.

I'll put very little pressure on the halter knot – really just a touch – to ask him to move backward. Again, see how little it can take. I am looking for him to step back with correct cadence (diagonal legs moving at the same time, like a trot cadence), for him to break at the poll and be smooth, light and responsive.

When he's backing nicely, I'll start to "pyramid." I'll ask him to take five steps back, five forward; four back, four forward; three back, three forward; two back, two forward; one back, one forward; pick up a foot and start it back, then bring it forward; hang it in the air. Then you know the lead rope is connected to the foot.

You want those changes in direction to be smooth, like a swing swinging back and forth. If there's any hesitation there, that means the horse

has a brace that needs to be worked out – and you do that by improving your timing, asking the horse to move a foot just as it's about to leave the ground, then giving him a small release as soon as he is committed to move that foot.

Next time, we'll talk about how to work on lateral flexions. By doing this, you can get a good "ride" in, never leaving the barn aisle. ☐



Brent directs Fancy's left front foot out to the side.

AQHA Professional Horseman Brent Graef of Canyon, Texas, offers horsemanship clinics across the country, as well as a Yaboo online discussion group that deals with training issues. Visit www.brentgraef.com to learn more.



Rainy Day Rewards

These barn-aisle exercises have big payoffs, no matter what the weather is.

By Brent Graef

IF YOU COULD HELP YOUR HORSE RELAX MORE, BE MORE SUPPLE and trust you more, wouldn't you do it? What if there was a way to improve your canter departs or your lead changes without ever getting on your horse?

There are a couple of exercises that seem very simple but have big payoffs. And like the exercises we talked about in the January-February issue, these can be done in a barn aisle if the weather's bad. But you'll want to have these in your repertoire even on a sunny day.

Working the Occipital Condyle

FIRST, LET'S TALK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT ANATOMY. THE HORSE'S

poll is the top part of his skull, just behind his ears. The atlas is the first vertebrae behind the poll. The joint between the poll and atlas is what we'll be focusing on flexing. (The technical term is the "occipital condyle.")

We can flex that joint easily and softly by putting one hand on the horse's nose and the other hand on his jaw. You want to move the horse's head from side to side, isolating that one joint. The movement is almost as if you're pushing the nose away and pulling the jaw toward you, but you'll use a very light feel that indicates to the horse which way you'd like him to tip his head – like opening a door so he can find his way through it. It's a very small swivel-type movement. That



To ask for lateral flexion, I'm quivering my hand, like I've had too much caffeine, and I'm waiting on my mare to think things through.

HOLLY CLANAHAN PHOTOS

Lateral Flexions

IN THE BARN AISLE, YOU CAN WORK ON LATERAL FLEXIONS with your horse in a halter and lead rope, or in a snaffle-bit bridle.

To begin, stand a little ways behind the withers. If my horse has a saddle on, I'll stand toward the cantle, rather than at the saddle horn. That way, as the horse moves his head around, I'm not blocking him; he has room to bring his head around.

When I ask for his head, I do it very gently. Instead of pulling on the rein or lead rope, I'll just let my hand tremble, like I drank too much coffee. And I won't increase the pressure or the vibrations if I don't get a response; I'll just wait.

If the horse's ear rolls back toward me, I know he's thinking to me. He has to *think* about moving the head before he can move it. If his ears are straight ahead, not focusing on me, I'll tremble the rein until I get an ear. Then the nose will follow.

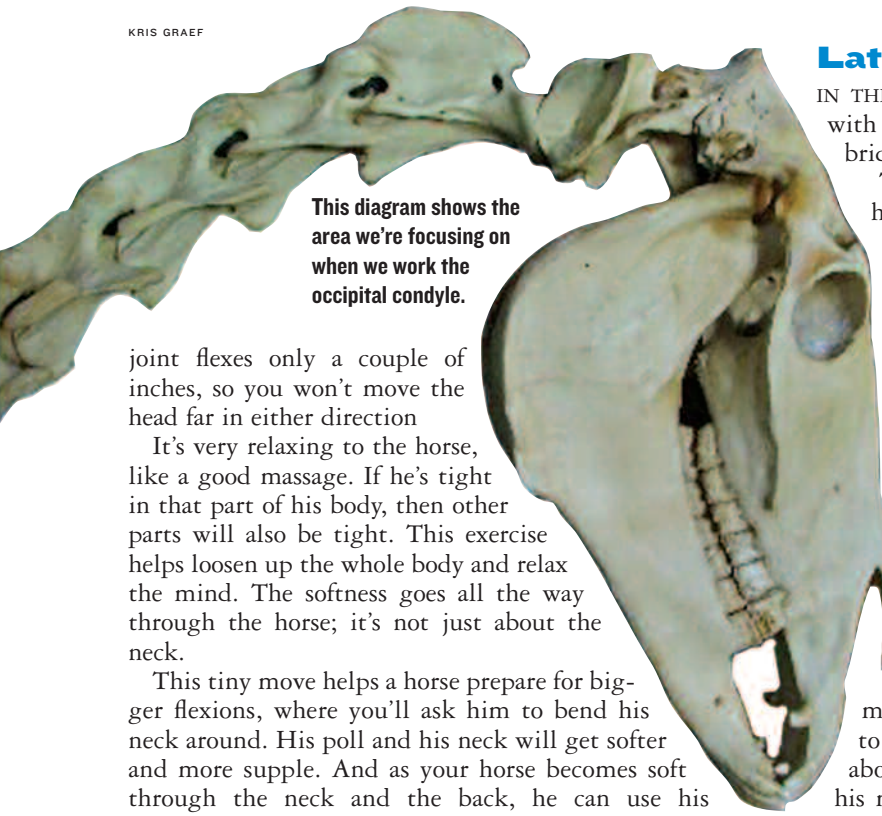
After he flexes his neck, I'll wait until his eye rolls around and looks at me before I release his head. I

want his mind coming to me. It's about getting his mind to me, not just getting his neck flexible. Also, you'll want that flexion to start with that first joint, the occipital condyle. If that joint is locked, the flexions will be stiff and incorrect.

If the horse resists, or pulls against you as he's trying to move his head around, it's possible that he has dental problems that aren't allowing him to physically move his head like that.

It's also possible that he's just stiff or resistant. In those cases, you can touch the horse on the shoulder or girth area to bring his attention back there. (Again, you want the mind moving back toward you.) Sometimes, you just hold that soft feel on the rope and wait – even if it takes a while – until he gets soft.

This is something you can play with. You'll want to flex your horse in both directions, and you can ask him to bring his nose all the way around one time. Then next time, just go halfway around. Next time, a quarter of the way. I'm going to mix it up a little bit, so it's not just a con-



This diagram shows the area we're focusing on when we work the occipital condyle.

joint flexes only a couple of inches, so you won't move the head far in either direction

It's very relaxing to the horse, like a good massage. If he's tight in that part of his body, then other parts will also be tight. This exercise helps loosen up the whole body and relax the mind. The softness goes all the way through the horse; it's not just about the neck.

This tiny move helps a horse prepare for bigger flexions, where you'll ask him to bend his neck around. His poll and his neck will get softer and more supple. And as your horse becomes soft through the neck and the back, he can use his hindquarters properly and become much more athletic.

If a horse is relaxed in his neck, vertical flexion (where his face tips vertically, toward his chest) becomes easier, too. Sometimes this exercise will also help a worried horse calm down and build trust in you.

You'd like the head to move like a well-oiled hinge, but if your horse is tense, just concentrate on moving slowly and smoothly, and after your horse has tipped his head to one direction, wait for him to relax for a moment, then ask him to move his head the other direction. Feel for your horse to relax the muscles in his jaw, throat and tongue. Really, you want the muscles to relax all the way down his topline.

This exercise can also be done from the saddle, by asking for slow, tiny flexions one direction and then the next with the reins. If you're sitting on your horse, pay attention to how his body feels. You should be able to feel the softness coming all the way through the horse as you work his occipital condyle.



Atlas

Poll

Occipital condyle

This is an enlarged section of the above image.



Here, I'm lightly asking Miss Fancy Maiden to work her occipital condyle.

ditioned response. I want the horse to be thinking about what I'm asking him.

Make sure that when your horse turns his head, his ears stay level. Some horses twist their heads around, so that if it were raining, one ear would fill up with water. This isn't a proper flexion, though, and it won't supple your horse.

Often, this head-twisting is caused when people use gradually increasing pressure to pull the horse's head around. The bottom of the halter is connected to the bottom of the horse's jaw, so if you pull on that, you're more likely to get the jaw cocked out of line. And if that's when you release the pressure, you've taught the horse to cock his jaw.

Work to get the horse's mind with you. Then the horse will bring his head around of his own accord, and it's much more likely to be a correct movement. You'll want to release when his ears are level, his eye is on you and his muscles are soft and relaxed.

Another Piece of the Puzzle

IN OUR HORSEMANSHIP, WE CAN DIG JUST ABOUT AS DEEP AS WE want to go. Some folks get by just skimming the surface, while others really want to fine-tune their feel and their timing.

Here's another piece of lateral flexion: As you tip the horse's nose to one side or the other, pay close attention to where he shifts his weight. Sometimes, if you bend a horse to the right, his weight goes to his right front. If you bend him left, the weight goes to his left front. Then, when you pick up both reins to ask for vertical flexion, the horse's weight shifts all on his front end – which is the opposite of what you'd like. I see lots of

people unknowingly train this poor habit into their horses.

Flexions that bend the horse's head all the way around (generally past 45 degrees) will cause him to shift his weight toward the front end, so I balance out those more extreme flexions with smaller flexions (generally 45 degrees or less), because that degree of flexion makes it easier for him to shift his weight to his hindquarters.

If I'm in the saddle, I might need to move my weight toward the opposite hip to help him. I might put light pressure on both reins to ask him to shift his weight back. Or I might flex him to a lesser extent. Remember, it's the extreme flexions – with the head all the way around to the side – that throw the horse's weight to the front end.

For this more refined piece of lateral flexion, make sure the horse starts with his feet squared up, so he's balanced and able

While asking her head to flex to the right, I'm pressing my horse's ribcage with my left hand, simulating where my foot would hit her if I were in the saddle. She's yielding her hindquarters.



to shift his weight appropriately. As you pick up the left rein, you'd like him to shift his weight toward the right hind. That way, he's prepared to pick up his left front.

More Flexions

WHEN YOUR HORSE IS ABLE TO SOFTLY FLEX IN BOTH DIRECTIONS, you can begin working his hindquarters. Flex his head to the left, for example, by reaching softly down the left rein, and then put the back of your hand or your thumb where your stirrup would be. If your horse is saddled, you can use the stirrup. Rhythmically bump, bump, bump. Get in time with the hind foot nearest you (in this example, it would be the left hind.) When it's about to leave the ground, bump with the stirrup or your hand so he'll step farther with that inside hind.

This is a great exercise for young colts, but it's also a good tune-up for older horses. You've got to have control of the hindquarters in order to get good canter departs, lead changes, or haunches-in.

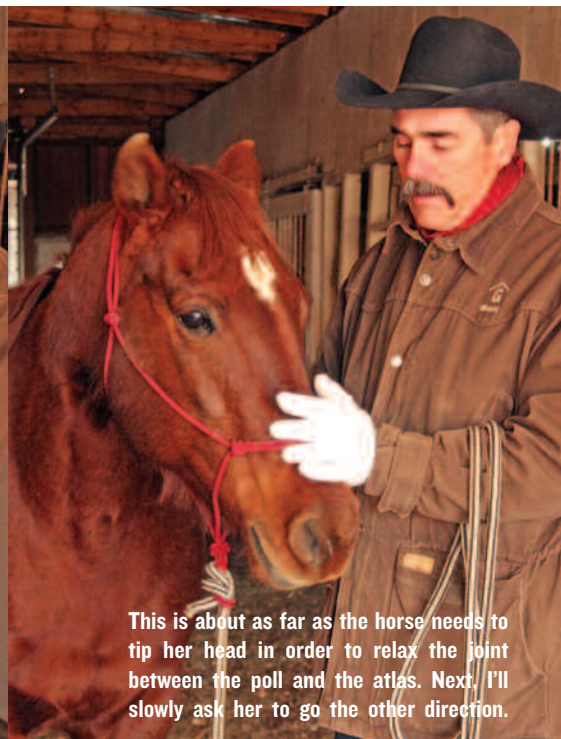
As your lateral flexions get nice and soft, you can use those to ask for vertical flexion. Flex your horse to the left, giving with your right rein so that he can move his head around. Then flex to the right, giving with your left rein. Gradually, you'll start giving less with the outside rein, so that the horse ends up staying straight and flexing vertically.

I've even done that on a young horse the first time she wore a snaffle. Pretty soon, she just tucked her chin. Of course, you never want to be too demanding, especially on a baby, but if you work in small increments, the horses tend to catch on pretty fast.

Make the Most of It

WHETHER YOU'RE WORKING ON THE GROUND OR DOING SLOW work from your horse's back, there are a lot of things you can work on. Sometimes, we get in our minds, "OK, I've got to get a ride in, and I've got to ride for X amount of time." But with exercises like these, you can get a lot of work done in five minutes. Get your five minutes in with your horse, then go inside and warm up. What little time you've got, make it quality time, and you can get a lot accomplished. ■

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This is about as far as the horse needs to tip her head in order to relax the joint between the poll and the atlas. Next, I'll slowly ask her to go the other direction.