

REIN AIDS: A DIRECT LINE OF COMMUNICATION

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Reins are used for more than steering your horse. They are a tool through which you communicate with him, not only to tell him where you want to go, but to educate him with the goal of making him lighter and more sensitive. The more accurately he learns to bend and the more you learn you use the inside and outside reins with sensitivity, the better he will travel in a straight line.

The Outside Rein

The outside rein helps stabilize the horse. He should be encouraged to stretch into a firmly held outside rein, creating steady contact with the rider's hand. This rein should also establish the space the horse is to move within, creating a solid supportive boundary. As he learns that the outside rein will always be there to support him, he will seek that contact and fashion his frame and attitude accordingly.

If he seeks the outside rein's support, but that rein is loose and flapping about, he will lean forward, overbend to the inside, probably stumble and certainly become confused. If you are inconsistent in the application of this rein, he will learn to ignore it altogether.

If he leans heavily onto your outside hand, several things could be to blame. You may be forgetting your driving aids, pulling on him, or he may be lame. Think about why something is going wrong, don't just react and use force.

You connect the outside bar of your horse's mouth to your own outside hip via the bit, rein, your arm and elbow. Your hand is an adjustment tool, a living valve that regulates the energy within this arrangement. With your outside elbow resting on your outside hip, you create a "wall" with the outside rein that holds your horse and his energy.

This arrangement of outside rein/arm/hip determines the horse's degree of flexion, both laterally and longitudinally, his pace, length of stride, and extent of engagement. It does this, not by taking, but by yielding. A yielding hand is a soft, sympathetic hand. Establish a base frame/attitude from which you send the horse always forward to your desired position. Even the halt must be forward, moving the horse into the hand that stops yielding and sets, but pulls. Similarly, the rein-back should send the horse into two outside reins that are firm and set with both legs equally behind the girth and seat lightened.

Think of sending your horse "to the outside rein from the inside leg," which is particularly useful at the canter because it keeps the horse from swinging his haunches to the inside and will help maintain the rhythm and pace without breaking gait or becoming off-balance.

The Inside Rein

Your inside rein must work in harmony with your outside rein. While the outside rein is a firm and supple wall; your inside rein is a fluid, softening, actively yielding and massaging instrument that will bring your horse's energy to its most beautiful form.

The inside rein can, at times, become completely loose, for example, when you stroke the horse's neck with your inside hand to relax him. However, if you drop the outside rein for even an instant, you drop the horse, ruining his rhythm and frame. The inside rein is really only a regulator of spongy flexions and a reminder to the horse through the reins contact that you're present up there.

You can "talk" to your horse through the inside rein to help keep his attention and get it back through active, yielding and softening, like a massage, when he strays.

The inside rein, too, is attached to your hip, but in a less rigid way. Keep your own shoulders lined up as you wish your horse's shoulders to be. If you fail to do

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this, the rein effects will be incorrect. For example: Watch a horse always take the wrong lead in a canter depart when his rider twists her own outside shoulder back, counterflexing him. The exception to this is the green horse that goes into canter on the forehand with his first stride initiated from the inside foreleg instead of the outside hindleg through "popping" the shoulder.

As your horse's schooling advances, your rein aids will become increasingly indirect with the motion toward your navel or toward his opposite hip rather than a leading sort of rein used in the beginning phases of schooling.

And when you yield a rein, you should yield it toward his mouth so he will relax and stretch in that direction.

Just as a rider's leg taken off the horse's side opens a vast space for this body to "fall" into, a rein aid dropped, forgotten or ignored will throw the horse into a vacuum of confusion and will guarantee a poor response.

The horse that isn't used to work on the bit or that overreacts must be ridden in exercises that demand his attention and reward his submission, all while maintaining his balance and confidence. Leg yields, transitions, cantering large circles and trotting serpentines are a few of the many helpful movements.