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The Misconception of “Collection”

By Danee Rudy

Collection has been defined over and over and over again, yet the word has been thrown around so much that it has lost a lot of meaning. It is nice that more riders are becoming aware of collection, however they have a poor understanding of its actual meaning, and many uses of the word are incomplete if not plain incorrect.

Misconception number 1: Collection means tucking the nose.

If a horse's nose is poking way out, he is obviously not collected, however 'breaking at the poll' is far from collection, and is definitely a case of more is NOT better!

Sit so that the vertebrae in your back (lumbar and thoracic) are aligned well- not hollow or slouched. Then allow your head to drop forward just enough to stretch the muscles slightly. It is a very relaxed yet powerful position. If you then tilt your head slowly from side to side you will feel that it relaxes the muscles along your entire spine.

Now, at your own risk, drop your head even further forward so that your chin actually touches your sternum, just below your throat- and make sure your teeth are touching- no cheating by opening your jaw! If you even can get in such an awkward position you will find it is quite straining to the muscles and very difficult to breathe. You may also notice that you lean forward to get yourself in that position. If you make your horse assume this position you should go apologize right now and finish reading later!!!

We need enough vertical flexion from our horse to release and relax the topline muscles, however we don't want to close the angle of the jaw so much that our horse's face comes behind the vertical. Although this position does lift the horse's back, it also stiffens the back so much it can no longer swing.

The other thing I don't like about the idea of 'tucking the nose' is that it encourages riders to pull the nose under the poll. For a horse to move properly,

he can't have his neck crammed into his shoulders, but must stretch and lengthen the spine. He does not need to bring his nose under his poll, but rather needs to extend his poll over top of his nose. This simple change in semantics makes a huge difference and will obviously never be accomplished by any amount of pulling backwards on the reins.

Misconception number 2: Collection means shortening.

When a dressage test calls for a collected trot they are indeed looking for a shorter stride than a working trot, however there are many other qualities that make up collection.

I used to think of collection and extension as complete opposites, however that could not be further from the truth. I've heard collection be described as coiling the horse like a giant spring and extensions as releasing the potential energy of that spring. While that sounds nice it often leads to riders jamming the horse's neck into his shoulders in an attempt to 'collect' and chasing him onto the forehand in a very strung out way to get an 'extension'. In correct collection the horse must stay loose and swinging in his entire topline, which requires him to extend and stretch his entire spine. The horse becomes shorter on a horizontal plane during collection because his haunches lower and his withers (and thus his poll) rise. It is like fitting a long stick into a box- it may not fit if you lay it parallel to the long side of the box, but it may fit in the box diagonally- the stick did not get shorter, it is just aligned on a different plane. This is where we get the term putting a horse into a 'frame'. The frame refers to how a horse is 'shorter' horizontally and taller vertically when collected. Since most riders don't know how to lift the forehand, they try to squeeze the horse on the horizontal plane instead. Instead of turning the stick (or the horse's spine) onto an angle (haunches down and forehand up), they try to compress it. If someone would try to compress the stick it would break or bend. The horse's spine isn't so much different, and riders very, VERY often confuse back tension and pain with belligerence and lack of submission.

Misconception number 3: Collection means raising the poll.

The horse's poll will raise during collection, however poll raising is a side effect of a much more important characteristic of collection- raising of the withers. In the early stages of training we want to elongate the neck. To do this the poll will actually drop relative to the withers. (But not below the withers! Stretching to the ground is a wonderful exercise but to achieve collection we will need to bring the stretch up and forward instead of down and forward.) A horse's shoulders are connected to his spine only through soft tissue- there is NO bony connection. This means a horse can actually lift his spine while his front legs remain on the ground- cool, huh? But if you concentrate on lifting just the

head, the horse will only hollow his back. If you can get the horse to lift the base of his neck while doing transitions to activate the hind legs, eventually his haunches will lower, his forehead will raise and the poll too will be lifted.

Misconception number 4: Collection strengthens the Topline. If you engage the muscles above the spine the back will hollow which is exactly the opposite of the result that we want. It is actually the muscles under the spine that lift the back. So why do correctly ridden horses have such thick well developed backs? Those are loose flabby muscles fed by great blood flow. The tight stringy muscles of nervous, hollow backed, inverted horses are the muscles that are overly tone from incorrect use and tension. The constant tension of the muscle restricts blood flow and gives the bony backed image that we associate with a hollow inverted horse. So a great topline is the result of relaxation- not strength.

Misconception number 5: Collection is only needed for certain disciplines.

While a trail ride certainly does not require maximum collection, it is unfair to ride a horse that is not reasonably well balanced and strengthened. At the absolute least the topline should be relaxed and the back under the saddle lifted and swinging. This will allow the horse to carry the rider's weight comfortably. If the horse shifts enough weight onto the hindquarters that his weight is balanced 50/50 on his front and hind legs, he will last for many miles and many years. Since the average horse carries the majority of his weight on his front legs, some degree of collection is needed to make him a sturdy happy riding horse. Often horses that are acting poorly are those who are so tight in their back that just being sat on is painful. A tight back makes them more prone to throwing their head and suddenly the horse is now 'hard mouthed' in addition to feeling like a jack hammer. This spiral of tension will continue if the rider is never introduced to a few methods to help his horse relax and collect.

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