



articles

RUDY HORSEMANSHIP

www.rudyhorsemanship.com

Hyperflexion: Too Much of a Good Thing

By Danee Rudy

From western pleasure to international dressage, we hear the debate over whether a horse is flexed enough or too much. For thousands of years, master horsemen have written repeatedly to never ride your horse “behind the vertical”, yet we see it in the show ring more often than not.

When we say “behind the vertical” we mean that if you were to drop plumb line from the horse’s ears, his nose would be behind that line. Ideally the horse would be “on the vertical” with his face on a vertical line, or just in front of the vertical. If his nose is really in front of the vertical line then he is pushing his nose “through or above the bit” and that is no good either as it hollows not only his neck but his back and the muscles we are sitting on, which makes for a stiff bumpy unpleasant ride for both of us.

Many riders learn the head should be down and nose in. Instead of trying to pull the horse’s nose under his poll (highest part of his head where the skull meets the spine) to get his nose in, we should be striving to encourage the horse to reach forwards, stretch through his neck and push his poll out over top of his nose. Call it semantics, but this change of thinking is huge as it now becomes obvious why no amount of pulling the nose in or riding in draw reins will ever give the horse a correct head and neck position!!!



Look at the first photo. This horse is well behind the vertical. Notice how the vertebrae in his neck are jammed together in an exaggerated “S” shape. If viewed from the saddle this horse’s neck will be skinny in front of the shoulders and then bulge half way between the shoulders and head. The ligaments that run across the horse’s back are pulled so tight that although the horse’s back is ‘up’ it is stiff and not able to swing with the horse’s stride. The muscles needed to pull the nose back and up against gravity restrict the horse’s breathing and the poor thing is stuck staring at the arena dirt.

The second photo is much more ideal. This horse is sufficiently stretching forwards. The “S” curve is gone since the base of the horse’s neck is lifted, which lengthens the neck. You can even see more of the first thoracic vertebrae than the first photo since the horse’s neck is no longer jammed into his shoulders. If viewed from the saddle the horse’s neck will be widest at the base, just in front of the shoulders. From there it will slowly taper towards the ears. This horse’s back will also be lifted, but the muscles and tendons will be much more elastic since they are not stretched to the fullest. This horse may have bounce to his stride but it will be elegant and rhythmical- The motion of this horse’s back will feel soft and buoyant, where horse one would throw the rider around. Because his back can swing, the second horse will get good blood flow through his back muscles where we sit. This horse is also more open in his throat latch area since he is slightly in front of the vertical, which means he can easily breathe and see where he is going!!!

I would love to now explain in a few simple sentences how a rider can achieve such lovely positioning from his horse, and while it is much more simple than most riders think, it is still too difficult to describe in so few words. I will say the horse must first be relaxed- mentally and physically. He must accept the rider’s aids and not be in pain. Then the balanced rider can show the horse how to bend, which softly stretches the outside of the horse’s body while putting more weight on the horse’s inside hind leg, which strengthens it, allowing the horse to reach further under his belly with every step. This strong, supple, elastic, and well balanced horse will often instinctively raise the base of his neck and stretch forwards- even bridle-less!!! It is my dream that every trainer and- more importantly- every judge, understands the importance of healthy self-carriage in the horse. Until then I hope horse owners ride their horse in the way they feel is most beneficial for their horse- whether or not it wins them a ribbon.

[Copyright 2009 Danee Rudy]