



How to turn:

How do you get your horse to turn? Why does a horse do anything? The answer is always *because he or she feels like it*. That idea has some major implications for the way we ride. With all aids, it's useful to remember that they work best when used to communicate your wishes to your horse's mind so that he can carry them out himself and not to physically move the horse's body around.

To turn left, for example, the rider has to somehow cause their horse to feel like turning left. Somewhat confusingly, there are probably as many explanations doing the rounds on how to go about achieving that as there are riders. And even more confusingly, they can all work! Anyone skilled at training an animal to respond to a signal will be able to get their horse to respond to any system of aids, so long as they are consistently applied and rewarded. Each version of aiding has its own advantages and challenges. All turning aids rely on a push from the horse's legs for their effect, however, so the first thing you need is the ability to get your horse to push when you ask for it – something we covered in the first article of this series. Assuming that you are able to get your horse to 'push', the next task is to direct that energy.

If you ask a particular rider how they do something, their answer will tell you what they are *aware* of doing and not necessarily everything they are doing. If you are able to get their explanation to work for you, great! If not, it's not because you are useless or untalented, it's probably because you haven't got the full story. The 'magic' of riding, if we can use that phrase, lies in the relative blending of all the aids (from legs, seat and hands) but to understand how to blend the aids in harmony it's essential to discover and perfect their individual effects first.

Something that's not often clearly understood (and frequently even denied!) is that when riding anything other than a fully trained horse, "*the rider's hand is the primary aid and must act first*". This was first stated in 1733 by Francois Robichon de la Guérinière in his famous book 'Ecole de Cavalerie' (School of horsemanship) which is regarded almost universally as the 'bible' of riding technique. He also said that "*the seat and legs are (secondary) supporting aids which act in harmony with the rider's hand*", in order to clarify our meaning to the horse. A simple test of this reality is to try riding with your reins dropped on the horse's neck. If it makes absolutely no difference at all to the horse's performance in all circumstances, then you can ride only by the seat or legs alone – and, by the way, you have a trained horse!



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On the other hand (if you'll pardon the pun), it's certainly true that uneducated or poorly used hands cause all sorts of problems for horses and riders. The system of riding that insists the hands stay fixed and pretends they are not 'used' at all comes from military riding instruction where it was assumed the recruits would have to learn the basics very quickly and would never develop a high level of skill. This method of riding with the aids 'in opposition' was a very useful shortcut in the circumstances but the disadvantages of this convenient simplification include significant tension in the reins and a lack of impulsion. While these problems are only too often seen in modern day riding, they were overlooked in the military context since horses were schooled in groups (herds) by strong young men and on the battlefield, of course, lack of impulsion is rarely a problem. As General Decarpentry, a cavalry instructor and one of the creators of the International Equestrian Federation (FEI) said, "*In equitation, as in politics, we should be wary of over-simplification, this nearly always complicates matters in the end*".

Throughout the literature of riding there are three main 'rein effects' common to all systems; the half-halt, the direct rein (also called opening rein or leading rein) and the indirect rein (also called neck rein or supporting rein). There are other variations of these main three effects that can be used to add refinement in particular situations. Using these rein effects well will enable you to achieve balanced, flowing turns with a happy relaxed horse, useful as much for getting good marks in your dressage test as for making safe, tight turns when show jumping or galloping cross country.

The skillful combination of these three effects is the key to easy, flowing and graceful lateral work: the door to the fabulous experience of becoming a centaur. Using them poorly is the cause of many an unhappy horse and frustrated rider! At Holistic Equitation, our belief is that anyone can learn to use these effects very well indeed if they are given a clear understanding and are prepared to put in a little homework. Although they take a little time and practice to learn, each of the effects is in itself very simple because they are all based on simple leading. Simple leading is in turn based on how the horse controls his body naturally in the wild.

The half-halt as described by La Guérinière, the first author who wrote about it, is defined as a movement of the hand from below to above which has the effect of causing the horse to raise his or her own head and neck. It is essential that the horse raises his or her *own* head and neck rather than it being physically lifted by the rider which could cause hollowing. Please note that the rider's legs are not involved! There are, however, some instructors who use the term half-halt to describe the *combined effect* which we covered in the last article.



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When the horse raises his head and neck it affects his balance by moving the centre of gravity slightly towards the hindquarters. This change of balance has several progressive effects leading to slowing, stopping and backing.

The direct rein effect is a small sideways movement of one rein away from the centerline of the horse's body that draws his or her weight towards the foreleg on the same side as the rein being used. The continuing push from the horse's legs causes his or her haunches to move in the opposite direction to the rein being used and the horse rotates around the weighted leg. So a *left* direct rein causes the horse to turn left because the *haunches* skid out to the right, a bit like sliding a motorbike round a muddy corner. The left direct rein effect is signaled by turning the left wrist so that the fingernails point upwards and then rotating the forearm out to the left while keeping the elbow by your side.

The indirect rein effect is a small sideways movement of the rein towards the centerline of the horse's body, which transfers the balance towards the hind leg on the opposite side to the rein being used. The continuing push of the horse's legs causes the horse's shoulders to rotate around the 'weighted' hind leg and to move in the opposite direction to the rein being used. So a *right* indirect rein would cause the horse to turn to the left because the horse's *shoulders* move to the left, a bit like carving a turn on skis. The indirect rein is also signaled by turning the wrist (the right wrist, in this case) so the fingernails point upwards and then making a gentle sweeping action towards and perhaps slightly upwards near the horse's neck. The rein must never cross the horse's midline as doing so would alter the nature of the rein effect and produce a muddled result.

Skillful combination of the direct rein effect with the half-halt produces a turn on the forehand, while combination of the indirect rein effect with the half-halt produces a turn on the haunches. The skillful interplay of all three effects is the key to relaxed, graceful and flowing lateral work.

At no point should there be any change in the quality of 'touch' in the rein when using any of the signals. It's good to think of the hand merely as an amplifier. All of these movements of the hand should actually originate from your core and can (and should) be as small as your horse can perceive – and all horses can perceive a fly landing on their backs!