

Dear Debbie...

Your questions answered by Debbie Reilly

I own a five-year-old Welsh X who is doing very well with his lateral work. How do I teach him to lengthen and shorten his stride in canter?

Wendy Gilliam, Norfolk

Achieving good lateral work, where the horse is working clearly through his back and engaging the hindquarters with a clear cross over behind, is a vital step towards achieving collection and extension work. The ability of your horse to reach through with the inside hind when asked is the key to achieving this, and uses the same skills required for lengthening and shortening the stride at all paces.

With any new skill or movement to be learnt, a form of 'shaping' behaviour is the fastest and most effective way of enabling your horse to understand.

This means breaking down your ultimate goal into small, progressive, bite-size steps, rewarding and re-enforcing each positive step in the right direction. For example, with lengthening and shortening the stride, the first step would be to look at collecting the canter for a few strides at a time by gently restricting some of the forward movement, whilst maintaining the activity, rhythm and engagement from behind.

As soon as a couple of collected strides are achieved, then allow the horse to move on into an active working canter. When this is easily achieved, the number of steps asked for can be increased progressively, as your horse understands and becomes stronger within the movement.

To help with the collection, circle work can be used. For example, using the full school in a working canter, ask your horse to come onto a 15 - 10 m circle, using the outside rein to gently restrict the forward movement and to collect your horse whilst bringing him around onto the circle. Once a few steps of collection are achieved, allow your horse to move on freely as you rejoin the outside track of the full school.

Counter canter is also an excellent exercise to practise, as this helps the horse to engage his back end correctly and to come up in front, all important for achieving good lengthening and shortening of strides. I like to work my horses on long-lines to observe their movement and to encourage engagement from behind. It can also be useful to work your horse over canter poles, changing the distances to alter the length of stride.

Once your horse is sitting back on his hocks and maintaining a good active collected canter, then you can start to allow him forward into a few lengthened strides, again maintaining the activity, rhythm and engagement from behind. Look at asking for a couple of strides of collection, either on a circle or around the short end of the school, then allow him forward and ask for a couple of lengthened strides.

Ensure that he stays up in front and that you are not asking so much that you lose the rhythm and engagement from behind. Again, as your horse becomes confident with this you can progress to asking for more steps.



I have over 15 years experience with horses and competing, so I decided to take on an ex-race horse that has proven to be great in every way. I recently took him to a local show, but when it came to the journey home, he wouldn't load. It took me over 45 minutes to get him in the trailer, and only after a lot of help from other attendees at the show did we finally manage to persuade him in. This I believe was a traumatic experience for him, and ever since then he refuses to go anywhere near the trailer. I have tried to take things back to basics but I am now beginning to lose my nerve a little, as he is very strong willed and stands at 16.2hh.

Caroline Bailey, Greater Manchester

Well, I certainly understand your concerns. Loading difficulties are one of the most common problems I deal with, and generally one of the easiest to fix. However, they can certainly be very frustrating, traumatic and potentially dangerous for all involved, as travelling goes against almost every instinct of the horse, often inducing instinctive 'flight' or 'fight' reactions. As you have also identified, unfortunately all the 'helpful' people around, although producing a temporary fix, tend to just add to the adrenaline levels and re-enforce the horse's fears.

The key factor to establishing consistent loading is to gain your horse's full trust and respect from the ground, therefore regaining his confidence in your leadership. Establishing leadership is all about influencing your horse's movements with minimal effort and maintaining good special respect. The first step to reshaping this behaviour is to establish halter work skills, so that he will walk instantly with you at your shoulder when you move away, stop when you stop without bumping into you and back up when requested - all without using any pressure on the lead rope.

Once this has been established in a quiet environment, you will want to look at achieving the same next to your trailer. Some trust building exercises can be useful at this stage, for example, asking your horse to walk with you over a white sheet or a tarp. This will give you the opportunity to potentially observe him in a more stressful situation, and to work through any evasions he likes to use.

When you feel confident that he is responding quickly and consistently to your requests in a variety of environments, you can start to approach the trailer. Always work to maintain your horse's attention and focus on you, and reward each and every step in the right direction. If he stops, continue on in front of him, and gently encourage forward movement by applying a little pressure on the halter. If necessary, move onto an angle to put some bend in his neck to encourage a step to rebalance, always instantly releasing and therefore rewarding each positive try or forward motion. If he runs back then allow the long-line to slip through your fingers, and only reapply the pressure as soon as he stops.

Making it as easy as possible for your horse to do the right thing will also go a long way to reinforcing the fact that you are a fair and confident leader. For example, start with an open trailer with no partitions, and only reintroduce these when your horse is happily walking onto the trailer with the front ramp up, and standing quietly with you whilst the back ramp is closed.

On that note, the most important factor when dealing with a loading issue is to stay safe. A quiet and enclosed environment with a soft but firm footing, a secure trailer, the correct protective equipment and a long-line, plenty of time, and a calm and unemotional frame of mind are vital.

Remember that any of your fears will only add to your horse's concerns, and to his resolve that the lorry is a bad place to be!

If you are unsure that you can maintain this, it is well worth investing in a training session with a reputable professional, who will help your horse through this issue and then work with you, to ensure that you have the skills to work through any hiccups calmly and effectively at any future events.



My mare has just turned six. We have a fantastic partnership in every way, as I have owned her since birth. However, recently she has started to be a little bossy around the yard. She is stabled at night during the winter, but turned out during the summer months, and lately she has been a little headstrong when bringing her in and out of the paddock. She works well in the school but sometimes has a blow out if something startles her, and it takes me a while to reset her. This can be unnerving for me, as I have had a few bad experiences in the past. It's also time consuming, and as I work full time I don't always have time to restart things. Can you suggest any training I can do with her to keep her active, but without making her more hyperactive?

Mrs D Tyler, Surrey

The joy of owning and bringing on a youngster from birth, allows you to get to know all the little quirks and characteristics of your horse and develop a really strong bond, as you have already found. What you do need to remember though is that it is within the nature of the horse to test your leadership, as the hierarchy within a herd is constantly dynamic and is vital to the survival instinct of the horse. As a horse matures and grows in confidence within your partnership, remember that she has had the same opportunity to get to know all your quirks, characteristics, strengths and weaknesses too! The handling issues you have described are all potential examples of a horse starting to test your boundaries, and highlight an imbalance in the respect for your leadership. Therefore, these should be addressed as soon as possible. This in turn will encourage your horse to listen to you and respect what you have to say, even when she is startled or worried.

The simplest way to achieve this is to do a variety of exercises to get her thinking and using the logical, analytical side of her brain, encouraging her to respond calmly and quickly to your requests. This will also enable you to develop control of her adrenaline levels, encouraging a calm, safe and responsible ride and dampening the usual right brain thinking that produces the emotional, instinctive 'flight' vs. 'fight' reactions we all experience from time to time!

To start to develop left brain thinking you will need to set up some ground work sessions, keeping in mind that this part of the brain is also responsible for communication. Using clear and precise requests, initially within the safety of the school environment, you are looking to ask your horse to walk with their head at your shoulder, to stop when you stop and to back up when requested, all without touching you or you having to apply any pressure on a lead rope. (See Q1)

To achieve this it is best to work with a halter and a long-line to allow your horse clear choices. Keeping your requests simple and remaining calm and consistent with your boundaries, such as releasing and rewarding any positive responses and giving firm and consistent consequences to any behaviour you do not want. Ensuring your session is short and to the point and finishing on a positive note, will also encourage thinking and logical decision-making in your horse.

Once you are getting consistent results and you are comfortable with this then you can start to get creative, and look at achieving this within more potentially challenging situations. For example, asking your horse to back through an 'L' shaped configuration of poles, to follow you over tarps and past scary objects. When you feel you are able to maintain and/or regain her attention and focus with minimal effort, you can start to look at achieving this within some of her more challenging environments and situations.

If her adrenaline levels start to get too high, remain calm and take things back a step, staying consistent and firm with your boundaries and looking



for ways to make it as easy as possible for her to do the right thing. This will enable you to immediately reward and re-enforce any positive behaviour, and consequently encourage her to see you as a fair and confident leader. Once you become more confident in your ability to control her movements in all directions and her speed and adrenaline levels from the ground, you can start to apply the same techniques to your ridden work. n

For more information on the Understanding Equus approach to horsemanship and private consultations, please contact Debbie Reilly on 07715 732278, or visit www.understandingequus.com