

Developing a Connected PARTNERSHIP

WITH YOUR TRAIL HORSE



part seven by PEGGY CUMMINGS

Are you looking to improve your balance, ease and lightness in the saddle, making the ride smoother for both you and your horse? Follow Peggy Cummings each month as she provides insights and commentary into the balance and movement of trail riders and their mounts. We invite you to submit photos for consideration for use in the column, which will appear in both *Trail Blazer* magazine and on www.trailtownUSA.com. Send your photos to Editor@trailblazermagazine.us

Efficiency of movement means that the horse is able to release his poll and lengthen (“telescope”) his neck. This enables him to shift weight more dynamically, allowing his topline to stretch, his back to lift and his abdominals to engage and his legs to work independently from each other. Last month I began focusing on what you can do to help your horse from the ground so he can carry you more efficiently. This month I will share a few more powerful—yet quick and easy—things to do walking beside or standing still with your horse.

The exercises I recommend that you experiment with are:

- Shoulder Press
- Wither Rock
- Combing the Line



(A) **Shoulder Press:** as you press the shoulder lightly with a softly closed fist, keep your own knees, hip joints and back soft and released. This is not a “pushing” exercise, and if your body is tight the horse will respond in kind with tightness and bracing. The most important part of this exercise is the slow release of pressure, as this is when the horse finds his own self-carriage and his own sense of balance without having to brace. (B) You can also practice Shoulder Press while walking.

The first exercise is **Shoulder Press**. While standing or walking alongside your horse, make a fist with your hand closest to his body and press in gently into the fleshy part of his shoulder muscle about two and a half fist widths behind the point of the shoulder.

If you are on the left side, hold the rein or lead in your left hand while maintaining a light contact as your right hand does the pressing. (If you are standing beside the horse, an alternate place to hold the horse is at the noseband’s T- junction of the halter or bridle.) Slowly press in to the soft fleshy area just behind the point of the shoulder for four counts, hold for four counts, and then release the press for eight counts.

Begin with a very light press, just enough to know and notice that you are doing something different. The most important aspect at this point is that you consciously maintain softness in your lower back, hip joints and knees as well as maintaining a straight wrist. This is not a *pushing* exercise, and if your body is tight the horse will respond with tightness and bracing.

More often than not, when you first press on a horse’s shoulder in this way, the shoulder that they tend to fall in on feels heavy and unyielding. So just press enough to meet the pressure and stay soft and relaxed in your body. Notice what changes each time you press. When the horse actually softens his bracing and shifts his weight to the outside shoulder, the press will feel lighter and the horse more flexible. That is what you are aiming for.

After doing Shoulder Press six or eight times, giving the horse a short time to integrate the exercise, add **Combing the Line**.

Combing allows the horse to integrate the sensations of the press. Combing a line or rein is a soothing, oscillating rhythm that also encourages a horse to relax and stretch into contact (see *pohots* on page 27).

While holding the line or rein with one hand, reach up to where the line or rein meets the halter or bridle. Surround the line or rein with your hand and slide down towards your belly and the midline of your body. Make sure your forearm stays soft, then repeat the slide with the other hand and continue alternating. You may even discover that as your body remains soft it invites you to swivel slightly as you are combing. All the better! Notice what happens to the horse’s neck and head as you repeat the sequence of Shoulder Press and Combing the Line. It should extend forward and “telescope,” and the back should come up.

This exercise is really useful because it helps a horse release tension through the base of the neck and shoulders, especially if the horse has a high head carriage and tends to be heavy on the forehand. As you are pressing, this shifts the horse’s weight off the shoulder you are pressing on and allows his rib cage to bend and the hind leg to step under. It also helps the horse to shift weight off the forehand.

This is a great way to help supple your horse and help him before and after riding, especially if you have been on a very long ride and before and after trailering. If your horse tends to hesitate or be wary of going on a trailer, this exercise can help him be more relaxed as you begin loading. Also it is a great way to work

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with horse for a few minutes after a long trailer ride especially if you are riding the next day, as it will release tension out of tired muscles.



Wither Rock

Another very supportive exercise to do as you are standing or walking beside your horse is **Wither Rock**. With your hand closest to the horse, press on the swell or pommel of the saddle, or the withers if the horse is untacked, as if you are pressing the horse away from you. Press for four counts, hold for four counts and release the press for eight counts. Do this a few times and then reach to the offside on the swell, pommel or withers of the horse and bring it toward you. Again bring the withers toward you for four counts, hold for four counts, and release for eight. This is another way to help the horse release and stretch his neck, withers and head. Begin the exercise with enough press to match what the horse presents at the time. Each time you do the exercise, notice any small changes the horse may exhibit such as taking a deep breath, softening or closing his eyes, flaring the nostrils and shivering of the whiskers, especially

Wither Rock (A), bringing the horse toward you. Wither Rock (B), sending the horse away from you. This exercise helps the horse release and stretch his neck, withers and head. Notice how this horse is taking up the connection on the line, a wonderful feeling that I call reciprocation. Photos by Melanie Powell www.shybuckstudios.com

around the bottom lip. Softening the bottom lip, lowering the head and neck and improving the walk may also become apparent.

After you have done Wither Rock six or eight times and have given the horse a small amount of time to integrate between each exercise, add Combing the Rein. Experimenting with different possibilities and learning to watch for small changes gives you more options with your horse and more understanding about his behavior and movement. The more tension and bracing in a horse's body, the more

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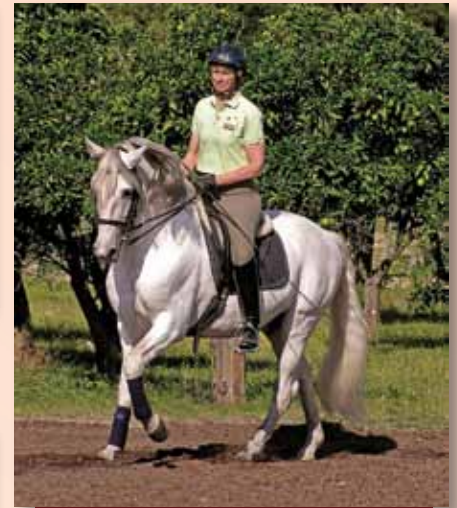
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Combing the Line during groundwork exercises provides a soothing, oscillating rhythm that encourages a horse to relax and stretch into contact



Peggy Cummings aboard Libérale, a 14-year-old Lusitano stallion.
Photo by Melanie Powell
(www.shybuckstudios.com)

behavior issues, evasions and unsoundness can appear.

Including the exercises of Caterpillar and Walking the "S" from last month's issue is really beneficial for not only deworming, loading

and standing still issues, but also releasing tension, helping with exhaustion and aiding recovery. Most of all it is about really getting to know your horse at a deeper level, helping him be the best that he can be and HAVING FUN!

Peggy Cummings is the creator and founder of Connected Riding and Connected Groundwork, an approach to riding and handling horses that gives both horse and human more freedom, confidence and lightness in any situation. For further information, visit Peggy at her website: www.connectedriding.com

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BLOW OUT!

Studies show that the leading factor in roadside breakdowns is (surprise!) tires...



As temperatures cool across the country, tire pressures will also decrease. Given these facts, if you travel with horses, your best preventive measure is to perform periodic air pressure checks on both your tow vehicle and trailer tires.

“As weather patterns transition to cooler temperatures, now is a very important time to check tire pressure on all vehicles, says Mark Cole, managing member of US Rider, a national provider of roadside

emergency assistance for equestrians. “A general rule of thumb is that for every 10-degree change in temperature, tire pressure changes by 1 pound per square inch (PSI). Pressure goes up when temperatures are higher and down when temperatures are lower.”

US Rider recommends checking the air pressure at least once a month. Additionally, since tire issues are the number one reason for disablements with a horse trailer, be sure to check the tire pressure on both your tow vehicle and horse trailer prior to each trip.

To determine the correct tire pressure for a car or truck, look for this information on a placard located in an interior doorjamb or your owner’s manual. The air pressure for trailers can be found stamped on the tire sidewall. Tire pressure recommendations are listed as “Maximum Cold Air Pressure.” Unlike vehicle tires, trailer tires should be inflated to the maximum pressure indicated on the tire.

Always check tire pressure prior to traveling while the tires are cold. Avoid taking tire-pressure readings in direct sunlight, which will increase pressure readings.

“We recommend that horse owners own a high-quality air-pressure gauge, know how to use it and know their vehicle’s pressure readings,” notes Cole. In addition to preventing blowouts, tires that are properly inflated will last longer, handle safer and get better gas mileage by reducing rolling resistance.


Consider investing in a tire-pressure monitoring system. This gizmo will help alert you to any sudden drops in air pressure, allowing you to take preventive action to avoid a blowout.

For additional safety tips, visit the Equine Travel Safety area on the US Rider website at www.usrider.org. Safe travel!

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