

Developing a Connected PARTNERSHIP

WITH YOUR TRAIL HORSE



part six 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

In the first five articles in this series, I have talked about what the rider's body needs to do to be synchronized in movement with the horse. This month I am focusing on what you can do help your horse from the ground so that you can maximize his potential under saddle and enjoy a smoother, more enjoyable ride with less stress and fatigue. Let's begin with an excerpt from my first article in *Trail Blazer* (February 2010):

"A horse has to be able to 'telescope' the neck in order to use his back, stretch his topline and push from the hindquarters. This allows him to be more efficient in his movement, balanced in his body and independent in his limbs. The expansion throughout the spine during movement allows for accordion-like movement between the vertebrae and enhances freedom of movement, lightness and ability to recover.

"Therefore, a horse that is moving efficiently has his weight distributed on all four feet and is better able to carry weight and rebalance with ease. The stride of such a horse lengthens and his fitness and recovery improves. A horse that retracts his head and neck while moving is not efficient in his movement and remains on the forehand. This causes compression in his body and a lot of concussion to the legs, less ability to recover and difficulty in carrying weight."

Is your horse able to "telescope" his head and neck when you ride him or does he retract, carry his head high or curl his neck?

I teach a series of groundwork exercises to my students. These exercises are especially effective in releasing stress and tension and encouraging the horse into a neutral posture where he is able to carry weight more efficiently. The exercises also help relax the horse and lower the head, which aids in improving the quality of the warm-up and beginning of the ride. The exercise that helps a horse learn to telescope the head and neck is called *Caterpillar*. It can be done standing still or while walking.

Before you mount up, I suggest that all trail and endurance riders spend five minutes doing the following exercise:

✧ Stand on either side of the horse, facing his neck.

✧ Hook your fingers (left hand if on the left side) on the T-junction of the halter or bridle and allow this hand to remain a light support during the exercise.

✧ With your other hand (right if standing on the left side), cup your hand around the muscles that surround the vertebrae right at the junction of where the neck begins and the shoulder ends, just above the point of the shoulder. The hand position is simulating a clamshell.

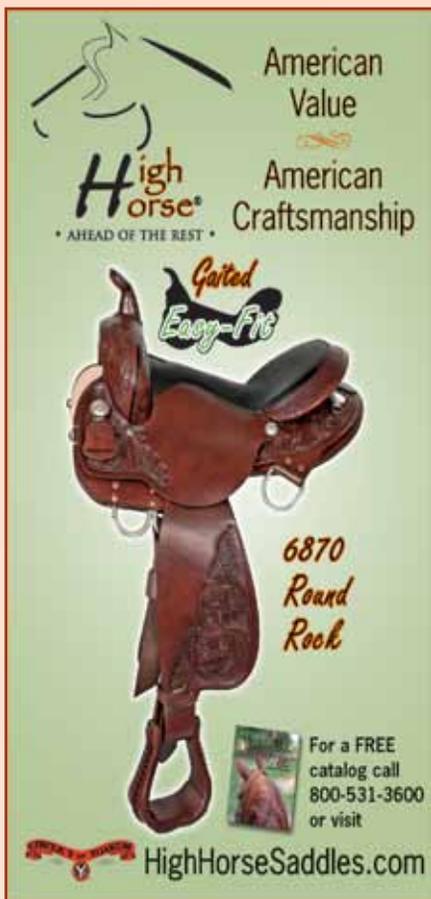
✧ The object is to cup your hand around the vertebra and slowly move up the neck, allowing the heel and the pinky side of your hand to press while the fingertips plow through the hair rolling the

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Photo by Gavin Park

The Connected Groundwork exercises in this article will help your horse "telescope" his neck, lift the back and push from the hindquarters, contributing to a smoother, more balanced ride for both of you, as this horse and rider beautifully demonstrate.



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This horse is not accepting contact and is going "behind the vertical!"



This horse is traveling head high, which hollows the back and creates tension.

skin ahead of the fingers. Your thumb follows along in the jugular groove.

- ✧ Begin this exercise with a very light pressure and increase it when you get signals from the horse that he is accepting your touch. He may start closing his eyes, licking or chewing. The horse may also do nothing until you stop the exercise and then lower the head and lick, chew or take a deep breath.

I suggest you get in the habit of doing this exercise 6 or 8 times on each side of the neck before you get on and when you get off. Take your time and breathe into your belly and back and let the ribs expand as you are inhaling.

Also, if you get off at any point in the ride, you can do the exercise while walking beside your horse. Slide your hand up the horse's neck while holding the T-junction of the bridle or the rein about two feet from the bit or hackamore.

Horses really love and appreciate this exercise. If they appear not to like it, it is usually because they have excessive tension in the neck and poll area. This means they could really use this exercise and you have to begin by doing it at a standstill *very lightly* and *very slowly*. If somebody were watching you they would barely see

your hand moving up the horse's neck.

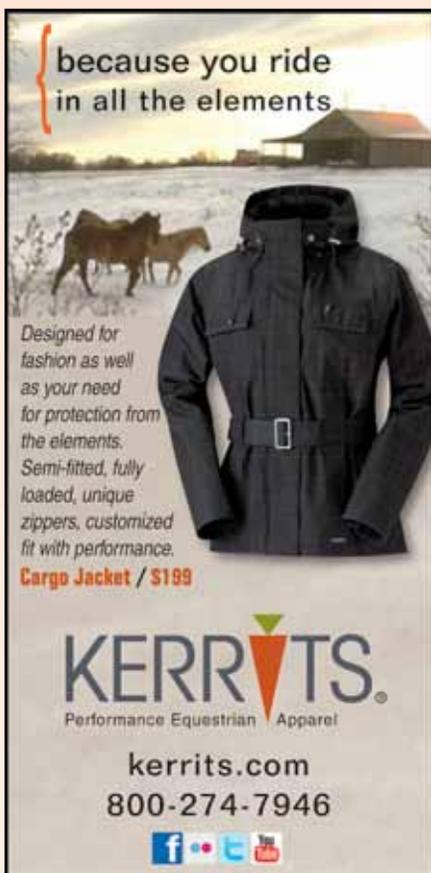
Just before mounting, walk your horse in a serpentine-like series of "S" curves by hooking one or two fingers at the center of the horse's noseband. This is truly a simple exercise and the hand that is hooked on the noseband of the halter or bridle must be absolutely feather light. The object is to neither pull nor push the horse around but to move your feet and your body so that the horse follows you and can loosen his body up by walking in squiggly lines.

If the horse seems "heavy" in your hand as you do this, really slow it down; in the beginning one direction may be easier than the other. Standing on one side may be easier than the



This horse is retracted in his neck, which takes away freedom of motion and prevents the spine from oscillating and moving freely. Photos this page by Peggy Cummings.

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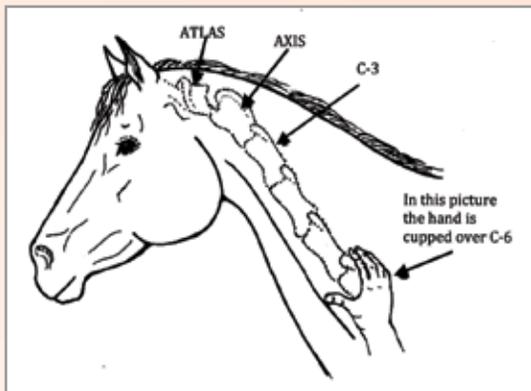
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Doing the caterpillar ground exercise and walking the "S" will take less than 10 minutes.

other. The object is to be able to go in both directions from both sides, with ease and lightness. If all you can do in the beginning is walk a curve in one direction that is a good beginning. You can even slow down the exercise to the point of standing still and taking one step at a time very slowly with a pause in between

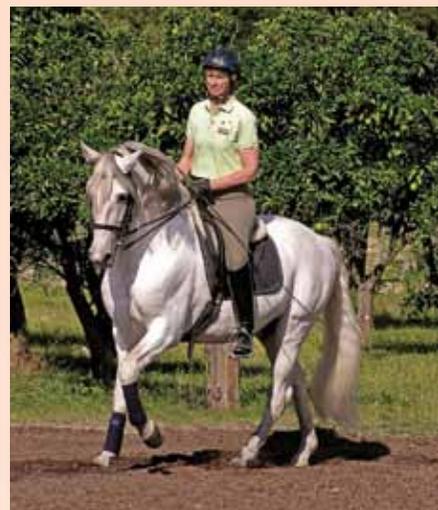
steps, in one direction so that the horse begins to bend through the neck without moving his feet, and then repeat from the other side. If you feel heaviness, slow down or change sides and above all let the horse do nothing for 30 seconds so that he can have time to absorb the new sensations in his body.



The line drawing shows the hand position at the beginning of Caterpillar. Illustration by Nancy Camp

Doing the *Caterpillar* ground exercise and walking the "S" will take less than 10 minutes. What is most important is to find simple ways of releasing tension and overriding bracing patterns so you and your horse can enjoy your rides and maximize your horse's efficiency and freedom while carrying you. Above all the biggest side effect of these exercises is increasing the horse's ability to recover his pulse and respiration.

Have fun experimenting! I would love to hear from readers who experiment with these exercises. Happy trails to you!



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

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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