

## Checks & Balances: Teaching the Half-Halt

*By Diana Mead*



*In Memory of Sweet Amy*

In my sixty plus years of riding and learning, I searched for an understanding of the half-halt. Ultimately, the horses taught me. I discovered that horses learn best when the lesson is simple. By isolating each part of the half-halt, I found it easy to teach the horse. In turn, the horse relaxed and responded with ease. As I shared this information, other riders also found success.

### **Riding in Balance**

The first requirement of the rider is to be in balance with the horse at all times. In order to respond to the constantly shifting movement of the horse, the rider must have body control and flexibility. The horse's center of balance lies slightly behind and below the withers. Staying in balance with that place during the action of the gaits is paramount. The rider's contact with the horse through the seat and legs must go along with the horse's movement. If the rider can follow the horse's movement, then the rider can positively influence it.

A simple balancing test is for the rider to stand up in the stirrups, first in walk and then in trot, and to remain standing while the horse moves forward. This exercise will require that the rider adjust body and leg positions. The same point of balance achieved in the standing position must be reached as the rider sits in the saddle. Oftentimes, if, after much practice, it is not reached, the problem may be in the saddle fit.

Many saddles work against the rider finding that point of balance. The rider may be sitting behind the horse's balance point, constantly climbing up and out of a hole, often pitching the shoulders forward to compensate. In this case, the horse is often found leaning on the bit to find its balance. Or the horse will hollow its back and raise its head to escape the rider's weight placed too far back on its loins. In contrast, the rider may be pitched in front of the horse's point of balance, too far forward, contorting the upper body to seek balance. Here the horse will often dive down with its neck in order to maintain its balance. One way or another, the horse will swim under the rider's weight, wherever it is. All the riding instruction in the world will not make up for an ill-fitting saddle. Correct saddle fit for both horse and rider is critical.

### **Three Stages of Teaching the Half-Halt**

#### **Stopping the Horse with the Body (No Reins)**

This exercise involves body action. As a prerequisite, the rider must be able to follow the horse's rhythmic gait in balance with (1) a steady seat – no upper body tossing around left or right, forward or back; (2) fluid flexibility of the hip, knee and ankle joints to absorb the horse's motion, and (3) continuous soft thigh and calf contact with the horse's sides. Note: Any gripping of the horse's sides with the thighs constricts the horse's shoulders and tightens its back.

Tuning into the horse's rhythm is paramount to the long-term success of this exercise because the horse can only respond appropriately at a particular moment in the stride.

A rider who is in balance with the horse can slow the horse with body aids only, without use of the reins, by producing one or more of the following actions: (1) slow the response time to the gait's rhythm, (2) lower the knees by increasing the knee bend and keeping the legs on the horse's side and/or (3) widen the chest, bringing the shoulder blades closer together. As the knee bend increases, the ankle joint increases and the hip joints open to the same degree. Flexibility in the joints is paramount to success. These actions will influence the location and amount of weight the horse feels from the rider's seat bones through the saddle. The effort to slow the horse is produced by the action(s), followed by a moment of relaxation, repeated in rhythm until the horse comes into the desired slower speed or complete halt. It is in the moment of relaxation on the rider's part that the horse has the freedom to respond gracefully.

The first attempts of this exercise are done in the walk, to slow down the horse and then ultimately to come to a complete halt. This exercise is a foundation for the half-halt. It can be practiced in every warm-up. Once mastered in walk and halt, the exercise can be practiced in trot. With the horse moving along in an active working trot, the rider can apply the aid to slow down the gait for one or two strides and then allow the horse to move out again. This can be done in a rising or sitting trot.

Thus, the horse learns to listen to specific direction from the rider's body. This exercise provides the tools for the rider to affect the rein aid through the rider's body. It shows the rider that it is not necessary to pull on the horse's mouth as a first line of defense.

### **Legs**

Before the rider can add the leg aid to the half-halt, the horse must accept pressure from the rider's lower legs and respond by moving forward – by increasing the stride or changing the gait, say from walk to trot. From that understanding, the rider can add the leg aid in the relaxation phase of the half-halt. The horse will be ready to accept the combination of the aids that are asking for both slowing and going. Once the aids are coordinated in that fashion, the half-halt becomes not only a stopping exercise but also a balancing exercise.

### **Hands**

Only balance and a steady seat will produce good hands. The rider must provide level, giving hands to the horse. There are two forces at work here: one is the horse and the other is the rider. The horse will not offer contact with the rider's hands through the reins. The rider must take charge of this education, but only with steady hands that offer contact and comfort to the horse. The horse must learn to trust the rider, both mentally and physically.

Can the horse trust the rider's hands?

Good hands can only come from a steady seat with flexible hip, knee and ankle joints to absorb the rhythmic motion of the horse. From level shoulders, each arm falls down with elbows bent to present a straight line from elbow through the forearm and hand and rein to the bit, thus providing a connection to communicate, to take and give, never to abuse.

Once the exercise of stopping the horse without reins has been mastered and the rider has established, a light contact of both reins with the bit, these two elements can be combined. The rider can increase pressure on the bit by applying the body aids against steady hands. When the rider alternates action with a moment of relaxation, the horse is given an opportunity of complete freedom to respond.

Repeating this rhythmic action/relaxation provides the horse with ongoing opportunities to respond. Thus, a friendly conversation between rider and horse is established.

When the horse yields to the reins – either by softening in the jaw or poll or by slowing down – it is critical that the rider never pull back or down on the reins. The rider may feel the need to pick up what is perceived as slack in the rein. If the horse has not been previously abused in the mouth, it is most likely that the horse is just giving to the rein pressure. Whether or not the horse has been abused, it is judicious to give the horse the benefit of the doubt and keep practicing the exercise.

Thus, the rider and the horse can begin to feel the difference between a softening of the contact and a dropping of the contact. This distinction is critical, for if the contact is dropped, the rider must re-establish contact before proceeding. The horse must never be punished in the mouth.

### **Canter**

Applying the half-halt in canter provides a unique opportunity for the rider to synchronize with the horse's rhythm. The moment in the stride when the horse pulls the rider deepest into the saddle is the moment when the rider can apply a half-halt. The horse will affect its own half-halt as well as the next moment of relaxation. The canter is a good teaching tool to bring the rider into the rhythm of the two phases of the half-halt.

### **The Fruit**

The half-halt is like a musical chord played in endless variations. The degree to which each of the components of the half-halt is applied will determine the horse's response. The half-halt provides the horse with important information. It can be a request from the rider to increase the quality of the horse's stride by bringing its back up to increase the activity of the hindquarters. In addition, the half-halt can alert the horse to transitions, either within the gait – shortening or lengthening the stride – or from one gait to another or to a full halt.

The half-halt provides an excellent path to trust between rider and horse. Playing the horse as a finely tuned instrument, the rider can truly ride the horse every stride in harmony and comfort.



For elaboration on *Checks & Balances*, see *Conversations with Riders* and *Lessons*.