

Keys to Suppleness

Before you can get a true connection and ride your horse on the bit, he needs to be supple. The following exercises can be used to loosen or “unlock” your horse:

POLL: Alternate flexing your horse’s poll 1 inch to the right and left by rotating each wrist upward, like you’re turning a key in a lock. Continue left, right, left, right. When your horse is supple, you’ll feel less resistance turning your wrist. “Do not saw on your horse’s mouth right and left or alternately vibrate the reins,” says Savoie. “You’re turning your entire wrist.”

NECK: While riding on a circle, use the inside rein in the same manner as unlocking the poll, but ask for a bigger bend (7 inches to the inside, as opposed to 1 inch). Do three bends in a row to the inside, quickly but smoothly, not waiting for him to “give” (that’s his jaw giving, not his neck). Keep contact with his mouth instead of letting the rein get loopy.

Be sure to squeeze with your inside leg at the same time you use your inside rein; this will put your horse “through” into your inside hand. The outside rein should stay steady and supportive, limiting the inside bend to 7 inches, and then straighten the neck. Don’t let your outside hand go forward; keep your hands side-by-side. Leave your horse alone for six to eight strides following the suppling to see if it worked, then do another set. If it was effective, he will lengthen and lower his head and neck, and feel more relaxed.

Repeat this exercise in the other direction. Very stiff horses will require support from the outside leg to prevent their hindquarters from swinging off the track of the circle.

SHOULDERS: Starting at the walk, make a 20-meter square instead of a circle. Ride your horse with a 1-inch counterflexion to the outside throughout the exercise. At each corner, move both hands to the inside to swivel your horse’s shoulders around the 90-degree turn. Soften on the straightaways, but don’t let the reins go loopy.

HIPS: In a leg-yield, your horse moves 50 percent forward and 50 percent sideways. This exercise will loosen your horse’s shoulders, back and hips. If you’re leg-yielding to the right, keep your right leg on the girth to maintain forward movement, and place your left leg 3 to 4 inches behind the girth to ask for sideways movement. If your horse isn’t moving sideways enough, coordinate squeezing your left leg as his foot is about to push off the ground. Your left rein should ask for a 1-inch left flexion by “turning the key in the lock” with your left hand, and your right rein should have steady, supporting contact. Take extra care to remain sitting squarely on your horse, not leaning to one side or the other when using your aids.

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