

Half-Halt How-To

British clinician Perry Wood takes the mystery out of this essential riding skill.

By Sharon Biggs

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The half-halt is probably one of the most misunderstood, misused, skipped over and hardest to learn skills in riding. That may sound exaggerated, but even if you think you know how to half-halt, are you really sure you have a complete understanding of what it does? Take a moment to consider your own method of half-halting and how it's working for you. Is your horse responding well by balancing himself and moving forward with a better gait? Or are you thinking of changing your horse's bit because the thug just won't respond? If you answered yes to the former, then you're probably right on target with your skill, but if you're having some communication problems with your horse, you may want to rethink your method.

Perry Wood, author of *Real Riding, How to Ride in Harmony with Your Horse*, says that the half-halt is hard to understand because people focus too much on the physical mechanics of the aid. "The time it takes to think it through causes the aid to last too long and the rider ends up mistiming the half-halt or pulling against the horse," he says. "The half-halt is actually momentary. It shouldn't last longer than one footfall of the horse."

What Does the Half-Halt Do?

The name of the skill is a great description of what it does: It halfway halts the horse. Wood says, the half-halt is otherwise known as "Stop—oh no, I've changed my mind. Carry on, please." To analyze it a step further, the half-halt works by slowing the front end momentarily. And since you are continuing to ask the horse to move forward, the hind legs keep going and, as a result, the horse's frame becomes more compact and he begins to move with his topline arched. This posture helps the horse to balance on his haunches rather than on his forehead, or worse, on your hands. And as a result, he will be able to carry out the changes that you are about to ask for, such as a turn, transition or a change in tempo (speed). He'll also feel easier to influence and more comfortable to ride. "You'll feel like you are with the horse rather than somewhere behind him," Wood says. "The horse's movement will be more fluid. The flow of energy between the two of you will also become more fluid. It will feel easier to sit the trot and the canter. The horse will also feel stronger, taller and arched in his back."

Besides slowing and balancing the horse, the half-halt has other benefits too. "Horses tend to take over the tempo and the center of balance to make things easier for themselves," Wood explains. "Many times you're riding around thinking all is well and then you try to circle. Suddenly you realize your horse is off in a world of his own. The half-halt reminds him to be a team player and listen to your communication. It's often a little reminder that you're the one who's setting the agenda."

The Anatomy of the Half-Halt

1. First, make sure that as you ride along your back is flowing with the movement of the horse. If you always sit stiffly against him, he won't be able to feel the half-halt coming through your body.
 2. Lengthen your legs slightly, so that your lower leg asks the horse to step a little deeper with his hind legs.
 3. Next, decrease the flow of your back and seat by gently firming the muscles along your spine for a split second. Your horse should feel this resistance and he'll think "oh, you want to stop" and begin to shift his balance back in anticipation of the halt.
 4. If your elbow is hanging directly under your shoulder and not in front or pulled too far behind, the resistance from your spine will move down your arm and into the rein. Don't pull the reins. If you need to get your point across to your horse, squeeze the reins rather than pull back.
 5. Your lower leg should remain lightly on the horse throughout, ready to send him forward again. As you feel the horse make the shift down, apply your leg aid, soften your spine and move forward.
- The most effective moment to apply the half-halt is when the outside foreleg is going forward. "That makes the outside foreleg take a slightly shorter step," Wood explains.

The Wrong Ways to Half-Halt

Making the half-halt last too long. Riders often continue to brace against the horse and pull on the reins. They wait for the horse to give before they give. “The half-halt must last no longer than a stride, whether it works or not,” Wood says. “And if it hasn’t worked, repeat it slightly more emphatically in another stride.” If you hold too long, your horse will begin to fight you by leaning on your hands, rushing off or resisting your aids. Wood says, “Remember—it is best if the half-halt lasts no longer than one stride. If it doesn’t work, stop asking, then repeat it.”

Focusing too much on the reins. Many riders wrongly equate the half-halt with pulling on the reins. The old tug-and-release method to slow down is a crude approach to riding. However, if you feel like your horse is barging through your hands, rather than pulling on the reins, Wood advises you reconfirm the contact by closing your fist, much like wringing water out of a sponge. “Think of riding the horse forward into an already halted bit, rather than bringing the bit backward to halt the horse,” he says.

Not thinking ahead. “Riders need to notice when things are getting out of hand,” Wood says. “Some riders wait until the horse is really on his forehand and moving too fast. Then the momentum is so great the half-halt they need is enough to stop a bus.” Some horses need a half-halt even in the first stride of the canter or the trot. If you ask for the half-halt right away, you set the balance for the new gait so it doesn’t get out of control. “I’ve got a couple of horses that are really quick. If I don’t half-halt in the first stride, they will run out from under me,” he explains. If you’ve lost control completely, halt the horse and start the transition again.

Too mechanical. “People make the half-halt too active, which means it’s clumsy and it takes too long,” he says. “Horses are ‘push into pressure’ creatures. If you put pressure on the horse without any idea in your mind of what it is you’re trying to communicate, then the horse is going to resist you. The aids are meaningless unless they are supporting a clear idea.”

Riders often get wrapped up in the physical mechanics of the aid without having a concept of what the horse should feel like after they apply the aid. Try not to get wrapped up in how exactly you’re supposed to do it. Focus on how the horse is feeling to you. If you can’t get it, ask a knowledgeable friend or instructor for help.

Forgetting to customize the half-halt. Riders need to keep in mind that every horse is different. They may think that they are doing the half-halt correctly, but it may not be effective for that particular horse. And the same horse may need a different half-halt each day, in each circumstance or even each moment. “If you were able to use a light half-halt in the canter yesterday, today you might have to be a bit stronger,” Wood says. “It’s not a particular technique that you learn and that’s it. It’s what’s needed in that moment with that horse.”

“Sometimes the half-halt needs to be incredibly subtle because you don’t want to ruin the flow. Sometimes it might need to be repeated in a more emphatic way until you can get a response.”

Once you understand the concept behind it, the half-halt isn’t that difficult to apply. Mastering this multi-purpose aid will help you ride with greater collection and balance at all gaits—achieving improved halts, transitions and turns.

Further Reading
[Two Half-Halt Exercises >>](#)

Sharon Biggs is a frequent contributor to Horse Illustrated and a dressage instructor. She is the author of *In One Arena* (Half Halt Press) and the soon-to-be-released *Advanced English Horsemanship* (Bowtie Press).