

Perfect Your Roll-Back

Learn to efficiently stop and change direction with your horse.

By Jennifer Nice

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Cutting, reining and working cow horse competitions share many similarities, one of which is the roll-back. Whether executed while working a cow or when riding a reining pattern, the roll-back is the most efficient way for the horse to stop and change direction.

To execute the roll-back properly, the horse must come to a complete halt by stopping squarely on his haunches, then rock back on his hocks and turn through a 180-degree change in direction. Often, riders make the mistake of trying to pull the horse back and into the turn before he has stopped completely. This prevents the horse from being able to stop squarely on his haunches, and forces the horse to fall onto his inside shoulder. In a reining pattern, this would result in a penalty. In cutting and working cow horse competition, this could give the cow an opportunity to slip away.

When teaching her students how to execute the roll-back, trainer Keli Hendricks of Petaluma, Calif., first instills the stop in their minds. "A good exercise is to ride your horse forward, stop square on his hocks, back a couple of steps and then roll back through a turn," says Hendricks, who has been training reining and working cow horses for 10 years. Prior to training professionally, she competed as an Amateur and Non-Pro, winning numerous championships. She now focuses on offering private clinics at her Rockin' H Ranch.

Hendricks' technique teaches both the rider and the horse to think "stop" before turning. When applying this to cow work, the rider should stop squarely and then change direction. "This is the most efficient way to hold a line," she says.

When working a cow that changes direction unpredictably, riders must focus on keeping their eyes on the cow but their upper body and shoulders square with the horse's shoulders. "A common mistake that riders make is to try to help the horse turn by using their body," Hendricks says. "As the cow turns, the rider will turn his or her body with the cow and try to pull the horse into the turn. You want to ride square into the stop, keeping your hips square with the horse's shoulder, and only your head and your eyes on the cow," Hendricks says. "You want to give the horse direction with your rein, but you don't want to physically pull the horse into the turn."

For riders who are having trouble stopping squarely with their body independent of their eyes, Hendricks recommends practicing the roll-back on a fence line. This provides both a physical and mental barrier to help horse and rider stop squarely and then roll back into the turn.