

Rating Your Run

Teach your barrel horse how to rate for better turns with a few easy exercises.

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A winning barrel horse must know how to rate, says Martha Josey, world champion barrel racer and clinician. In simple terms, rating means slowing down and positioning your horse properly for the barrel turn. A winning barrel horse, depending on his particular style of turning, will require different rate distances.

Team Josey clinician and barrel racer Ty Mitchell agrees that rating is an important key to success. "The two biggest things are rate (the horse working off his hind end) and bend. And if you don't have those two things, you're going to have a hole in your pattern," he explains. And the two go hand-in-hand: If your horse doesn't rate well, he'll blow through his turn and not bend well, losing valuable time.

For horses that love to run but are less keen on rating or slowing down for their turns, try these exercises. First, Josey recommends trotting from the alleyway up to the rate point, stopping your horse and then immediately backing him a few steps—teaching him to prepare to get his hindquarters up under him. "Sitting down is really important right there," she explains. "Let your horse relax and then walk the horse around that barrel." Next, trot to the second barrel, stop, backup, walk around it and then repeat at the third barrel. "You can do it over and over and over, as a horse learns from repetition," Josey says.

Mitchell also stresses slow work when teaching rate. "The misconception we see a lot at clinics is that people think they can only run their horse through the barrel pattern to fix their problems," he says.

Josey adds, "We teach going back to the basics, practicing perfect and then adding speed."

Mitchell explains that the horse must rate in order to properly use his hind end during the turn. "If the horse turns on his front end, he loses power by not having his hindquarters up under him." However, if he rates properly by shifting his weight to his hindquarters, he'll be able to pivot on his inside hind leg and make the turn correctly. Good turns are quick turns that don't lose forward motion.

Mitchell says horses that love to run and run fast need a great deal of rating practice. This way, when you run full speed, your horse will have it engrained in his mind to slow down in time for his turns.

"You want to do a lot of rating exercises, such as loping up to the barrel or trotting up to the barrel and dropping down to the next slower gait before the barrel," he says. "A lot of times people will rush the turn." Instead, follow Mitchell's advice for all of your slow work: "If we're long-trotting to the barrel, we're going to break down a bit before the barrel and make the horse short trot around the barrel. If you're loping to the barrel, break down to a trot at the barrel and let him trot around. If we're going a little faster—say three-fourths speed—then we may break him down to a lope around the barrel. Those are good rating exercises for getting a horse properly positioned for a turn."

Rating practice is time well spent because, as Josey says, "A horse that knows how to rate is not only enjoyable to ride, he will take you to the pay window."

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