

## A Hunter Frame

**How can I get my horse's headset into that long and low hunter frame?**

*By Cindy Hale*

**Q.** I want to show my horse in flat classes, such as hunters under saddle and hunter-type pleasure, but I'm struggling with his high headset. How can I get him into that long and low hunter frame?

**A.** A horse with his head in the air generally has a hollow back, which correlates with a short, stiff stride. That's not the sort of ground-covering, sweeping movement a hunter should exhibit. The ideal hunter on the flat needs a long frame—the amount of stretch or collection in a horse's body influences his length of stride—and a head carriage low enough so the horse can move freely. Here are some tips on how to achieve the hunter frame.

Begin by outfitting your horse in a mild bit. Some sort of snaffle is best. Too much bit and your horse will avoid or evade your hand, resulting in an even higher headset. As you work your horse at the rising trot, make a lot of serpentines and circles, always maintaining steady, light contact through the reins. Permit him to trot freely, even if his head seems like it's up in the air. However, make sure you bend your horse around each turn. Suppling your horse laterally in this way will also make him more comfortable stretching his neck out and down for the bit. If your horse seems a bit speedy, use gentle half-halts to slow him, but then soften your contact on the reins immediately as a reward.

Once your horse is bending around his turns, you'll notice that he's dropping his head and seeking contact on the bit. That's a good sign! Ever so gently pick up a little more contact in an effort to "meet his mouth" at the end of your reins. Don't let off with your leg pressure because your leg aids will encourage him to reach for the bit, creating a longer frame. When he lowers his head, reward him immediately by softening your contact. Let your hands tell him, "This is how I want you to carry yourself." Your success will be short lived at first. In a few strides, his head will probably pop up again. That may lead you to consider the use of draw reins, but beware: They are not a quick fix, and, unless you've done your homework on the flat, your horse will revert to his old habits as soon as the draw reins are removed. Instead, be patient, be consistent with your leg and hand aids, and eventually you'll have a horse that understands the lowdown of being a hunter on the flat.

**Expert:** Cindy Hale is the author of *Riding for the Blue* and *A Passion for Horses*.