

Increase Barrel Racing Flexibility

Champion barrel racer Marlene McRae advises how to increase barrel racing flexibility.

Q. What is the best way to increase my young horse's flexibility for barrel racing?

A. Choosing the right bit and using your leg pressure effectively will help your horse build flexibility and bend. A horse must understand that you want him to give from the rib cage, as well as his neck, so proper hands and effective leg work is very important.

The bit I prefer for these exercises is a D-ring snaffle. Remember: On a snaffle bit, your reins attach closer to the corner of the horse's mouth which will result in more bend than with a shanked leverage bit. Keep in mind that when you ask for bend, apply inside leg pressure along with rein tension to show your horse that he needs to shape his body in a half circle.

I like to ride with shanked and rowelled spurs during my training sessions to increase the sensitivity of the sides of the horse (for riders with solid leg position only). To use the spurs correctly, point your toes out, heels down and apply pressure with your calf while extending your heel (that your spur is on) until the results you want are acquired. Remember: You don't have to use your spurs all the time even if you are wearing them. You then have the option to use your spurs when going at a controlled speed. If your foot is parallel to your horse's side, then you won't be using your spurs. The position of your rein hand is important in controlling the hip. For proper balance, keep your hand as high as your hip bone—never below this height. And make certain that the outside rein is loose.