

## Neck Reining Made Simple

**Without good neck-reining responses, a horse won't do well in western pleasure, reining, barrel racing or most other western events.**

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Neck reining to a western horse is like a steering wheel is to a car. Without it, you have no control over where you go. It's one of the first fundamentals a western horse learns, and without good neck-reining responses, a horse won't do well in western pleasure, reining, barrel racing or most other western events.

Fortunately, training a horse to neck rein is a simple process — or so says trainer Clark Bradley, and he should know. During his long career, Bradley has brought along hundreds of horses, and he's taken more than a few of those to the top ranks, claiming championships in National Reining Horse Association Futurity classes and at the AQHA Congress in versatility, western pleasure futurity, junior reining, senior reining and team roping.

### Getting Started

For the uninitiated, neck reining is the cue that tells the horse which way to turn. Neck reining uses a loose, indirect rein across the horse's neck to encourage the horse to move away from the pressure; both reins are loosely held in one hand, which is positioned above the pommel at about waist level. Explains Bradley, "You give your cue with the pressure of the outside rein against the neck. If you want to go to the right, pick your hand up towards your right shoulder and lay the left rein lightly against the horse's neck. On a finished horse, the true neck rein is a loose rein: There's only pressure against the neck and no pressure with the bit at all." The neck-rein cue should be very light, and the reining hand should never cross an imaginary line from the horse's neck to the rider's shoulder.

Bradley likes to introduce neck reining during a horse's first mounted lesson. He says that since a green horse must be taught steering anyway, neck reining can be incorporated into that process. "The first day you ride a colt, you can ask them to neck rein," he says. "They're not going to respond, but it's a teaching process and it's not complicated."

He usually starts horses in a sidepull for the first few months, then moves up into a D-ring or O-ring snaffle. After about six to 12 months of training, he puts them in a broken-mouth bit, such as a short shank snaffle. Training sessions generally last from 30 to 45 minutes a day, five days a week.

During the first several months of training, Bradley rides with both hands, first asking for the neck rein, then rein-forcing with a direct inside rein. "Too many people forget to neck rein," Bradley warns. "They just pull the nose to the inside and hope the horse turns. They must use the neck-rein cue, first."

He begins by having the horse walk forward. "Then when I want to turn slightly to the right, I'll put the left rein against their neck. Then I shorten the inside rein and actually pull their head to the right. As soon as they respond, I release the pressure." Initially, turns are not large, only about 10 degrees. After obtaining some sort of turn, Bradley rewards with a release, then repeats the lesson a few more times.

The only other aids Bradley uses when teaching neck reining is to keep his legs in the side of the horse to maintain forward motion and to bump the outside elbow with his stirrup or leg to encourage the horse to move his outside shoulder over. "I want the horse's whole body to turn, not just his head. If that doesn't happen, I'll keep pressure on the reins and use the outside leg to make sure that happens."

Once the horse neck reins well in a circle at a walk, responding to either just a neck rein or both reins, Bradley starts to neck rein at a trot. Many horses can move up to the trot stage in just two weeks, he says.

When the horse can trot a figure-eight in 30-foot circles well, with either a neck rein or with two hands, Bradley begins neck reining at the lope. But he cautions riders not to attempt neck-reining lessons at faster gaits until the horse responds fairly consistently in a slower gait. "I like them pretty broke to trotting before I try to lope them," he says. "A lot of people try to lope them the first week, and they don't have enough steering mechanism. They can get in a lot of trouble."

If Bradley has difficulties getting a turn at a lope, he drops down to a trot or a walk, but always makes sure he gets some

sort of change of direction before releasing the pressure. "If you neck rein and neck rein, and then decide to forget it, the horse will forget it, too," he warns.

Because neck reining is a simple command, most horses catch on to the basics fairly quickly. "After you ride them about a half dozen times, they'll start to move away from that pressure," Bradley says.

#### Make No Mistakes

Although neck reining is one of the easiest commands to teach a horse, there are still a few ways in which a rider can go wrong. The most common mistake is when the rider wants to turn, but the horse won't, so the rider pulls one hand farther to the inside. "But the farther your hand goes inside, the more pressure you're putting on the outside rein, which forces the horse's head to turn to the outside," Bradley says. If the horse doesn't turn, make the correction by going to two hands and shortening the inside rein. "Put their nose slightly to the inside and move the horse's shoulder over."

Bradley often sees riders using just one rein to get a turn. "A lot of people, especially when they're riding youngsters, just pull the rein to the right when they want to turn right. Pretty soon the horse just turns his head to the right, but his shoulder is still off to the left, the hips are swung to the left, and they lose the whole body position. You've got to use both reins on the horse to keep his body lined up. The head should be slightly to the right, with the body still going straight. Use more left rein to move the horse's left shoulder over and to keep his body alignment correct. This is important in all stages, but especially in the first few months."

Another problem Bradley observes is busy hands. "A lot of people, when they're just riding along, they're moving their hands all the time, even the advanced riders in the show." This constant hand movement sends conflicting signals that could eventually make the horse immune to neck reining cues.

Some riders also make neck reining for the green horse unnecessarily complicated. "I want to keep it very simple so the horse can understand. A neck rein means to turn. I use my legs to keep the motion or as a correction," says Bradley. The only exception, he notes, is a slight leg cue for the finished horse when performing a spin or a fast lope.

By far the worst mistake a rider can make is inconsistency and not following through. Always insist on getting some sort of turn when you ask, and always reward by releasing. Warns Bradley, "If you continue to pull across their neck and nothing happens, they learn to ignore the pull. Every time the rein touches the side of their neck, you must make them turn slightly, then release the pressure."

From start to finish, Bradley says that it takes six to eight months to get a horse ready to show in a reining class. "If you're going to a NRHA reining for 3-year-olds, then they usually require 16 to 18 months of training." But by heeding Bradley's advice, neck reining could be one of the easiest commands your horse ever learns.

#### Further Reading

[Steer Clear of Neck Reining Problems](#)