

## Can't Relax at the Lope

**Trouble slowing your horse at the lope? Try this conditioning program.**

*By Dale Rudin*

**Q.** I am training my 4-year-old horse for western pleasure. She has the headset and the nice slow speed at the walk and the jog; however, no matter what I do, her head is high and she is really fast at the lope. Is there any advice that you can give me to slow her down a little?

**A.** It takes physical endurance and strength to perform the lope well. My guess is that your horse is moving slowly at the walk and jog by dragging her hind end instead of using it. When it's time to lope, her lack of balance and topline development are more evident. Try this conditioning program to develop her hindquarters and topline:

After a warm-up, walk your horse through a series of turns, circles and changes of direction while maintaining a steady pace. This will limber up her body and determine if she's maintaining proper alignment. Her body should follow the arc of the path she's traveling on. Her spine should be in line from poll to tail, and she should maintain a forward gait. A gait that lacks forward motion will have an uneven cadence, and your horse will feel as though she's drifting off the track. If that happens, hold her head and neck on track with your reins. Take the slack out of both reins so that the contact is even. Make your inside rein short enough to create the right amount of bend for the arc she's traveling on. Keep your arm muscles loose and your fingers soft while you drive her forward between the "walls" of reins you've created. Press with your calves or nudge her forward with your heels.

The extended jog and long-trot will build your horse's loping muscles. Ask her to move forward and evenly between your reins, again while riding turns and circles. Once she's working well on a bend, ask her to track on a straight line. If she elevates her head or loses energy, move her back into a bend and drive her forward until she relaxes, lowers her head and neck, and carries herself with light or no contact on the reins.

When she's using herself well at the walk and trot, she'll be ready to lope. Do most of your loping on circles and turns to keep your horse supple and encourage her to engage her hindquarters. As your horse becomes stronger, you can reintroduce work on straight lines. Keep the training sessions brief. If she becomes tired or sore, her gait will deteriorate and she'll dread the work. Keep her fresh and interested with a loose-rein walk whenever she gives you a few good strides.

Dale Rudin trains western performance and all-around horses at Sycamore Trails Stables in Southern California.

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