

Competitive Edge

To deliver a slow, balanced, swinging-reins jog like this, your horse has to be able to keep his shoulders up as he travels. My exercise will help you develop this physical skill.



Shoulders STUP!

Is your horse a heavy-on-the-forehand jogger? Use this exercise to lift his shoulders and restore his rear-end drive.

BY KAREN QUALLS, WITH JULI S. THORSON PHOTOS BY CAPPY JACKSON

When you put your horse into a loose-rein Western jog, does he feel heavier and heavier in front, and get faster as he goes along? Does he automatically speed up if you aren't nagging him constantly with repeated contact on the bit? Do you ever give in to the temptation of riding him in some kind of restricting, head-setting device, just to keep him from lugging on the bit and jogging faster than you want?

If so, your real problem isn't too much speed. That's just a symptom of a larger problem that you can address, effectively, with the exercise I'm about to provide.

This exercise, designed to redirect your horse's body-balance point from his front end to his hindquarters, *gets his shoulders up*, so he can't lean on them for that ground-pounding gait. The exercise also builds hindquarter strength, which in turn helps make it possible for your horse to drive from and *stay* balanced over his rear end. It's demonstrated by Kat Halverson, one of my amateur riders, aboard Reddys Little Leaguer.

WHAT YOU'LL DO, AND WHY

You'll start by putting your horse into a jog on a loose rein. When you feel him start to lug down in front, you'll make enough lifting contact with his mouth (you'll see how on the next page) to curtail forward motion, get his poll up, and guide him backward for three or four steps. This will rock his weight back over

Event appeal: Western pleasure; any other event in which your horse's jog influences your riding (Western horsemanship, for example), or is judged on its own merits. If you don't compete, you'll still appreciate riding a better-balanced jog.

Goal: To get weight off your horse's front end by elevating his shoulders in a way that builds strength in his rear end and restores its drive power.

Benefits:

- You'll have an effective way to correct your horse when he drops his shoulders and gets heavy in front.
- As his rear end gets stronger, you'll develop his ability to deliver deep, balanced jog strides that originate from improved rear-end drive.
- Your horse's jog will get slower. This will occur as his rear-leg steps get deeper and his front-end steps aren't loaded with excess weight carried over his shoulders.
- You'll lessen the concussion on his front end, contributing to future soundness.
- You'll find your horse's jog much more pleasant to ride, in the show ring or out.

his hindquarters and get his shoulders up in the process.

Then, using leg and rein pressure, you'll guide him into a quick turn on the hindquarters (less than a full turn at first, to slowly build strength). He'll have

to balance himself over his rear pivot leg in order to deliver the turn.

From here, you'll ask your horse to jog right out of the turn by squeezing him forward with your legs, and softening your rein contact as he gives you deepened steps from behind. Since he may only be able to deliver that deepened drive for a few steps at first, you'll repeat the stop-back-turn-jog sequence when he drops onto his shoulders again.

TIPS FOR GETTING BEST RESULTS

As you study the how-to photos on the following pages, keep these tips in mind:

- If you ride your horse two-handed in a snaffle bit, rather than one-handed with a leverage bit, you'll need to place your reins in one hand before you begin the exercise sequence. You'll see why when you view the photos.
- If your horse hasn't learned how to back up willingly when you ask, you'll need to teach him that skill before you can be successful with my exercise. Ditto on his ability to do a turn on the hindquarters in response to leg and rein pressure.
- For best results and least risk of injury to your horse's legs, work on level ground with good footing.
- Plan to incorporate the exercise into your horse's regular riding routine. It requires practice and regular repetition to be most effective.
- To build strength in both hind legs, do an equal amount of turns to the left and the right. →

1. WHEN YOUR HORSE'S JOG GETS HEAVY IN FRONT...

Curtail forward motion and rock him back off his forehead by removing slack from your reins, as shown, and applying enough bit pressure to tell him to start backing up. Note how the horse's weight is carried over his front end at this point.



2. TO MAKE SURE HE GETS HIS SHOULDERS UP...

Maintain lifted rein contact and ask your horse to take three or four rearward steps with his poll raised, like this. An elevated poll makes it impossible for your horse to keep his weight concentrated over his shoulders. Here, you can see how the horse's weight is redistributed to his hindquarters as he steps back.



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3. TO LOCK IN A HINDQUARTER BALANCE POINT...

Use outside leg and rein pressure (here, from the left leg and rein) to initiate a turn on the hindquarters. Start with a quarter turn, building over time to a half turn, three-quarter turn, and eventually a full 360-degree turn. Note how Kat's horse is balanced over a rear pivot leg while beginning a front leg cross-over made possible by his lightened and lifted shoulders.

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4. TO RE-ESTABLISH YOUR HORSE'S JOG...

Use whatever degree of squeezing leg pressure your horse requires in order to resume the jog's impulsion. Maintain just enough rein contact to keep his poll up for the first step or two (remember, he can't drop onto his shoulders when his poll is up), but not so much that he's unable to get up into the jog. This takes a level of feel that's different for every horse, and you'll probably need to experiment with yours.

5. AS YOUR HORSE TAKES HIS NEXT FEW JOG STEPS...

You'll feel more of a lifting sensation under your seatbones than you did at the start of the exercise, and your horse won't feel so heavy in your hand. These are signs that he's keeping his balance rocked back onto his hindquarters, driving up and deeper with his hind legs, and not relying on your bit contact or his shoulders as a balance point. This is what you're after!

6. TO REWARD YOUR HORSE FOR THIS PHYSICAL EFFORT...

Pitch the rein slack back to him as shown, as a way to convey, "Good horse! When you stay rocked back with your shoulders up, I'll give you freedom up front." For effective shoulders-up training, it's just as important to give your horse a clear signal that he's doing things right as it is to correct him when he does them wrong. When he loses rear-end balance and drive the next time (until he builds strength, that could be in his next few steps), repeat the exercise sequence.



To see this exercise demonstrated in a frame-by-frame action sequence, go to HorseandRider.com this month and look for "Click 'n' Learn: Shoulders Up!, from Karen Qualls."

KAREN QUALLS trains Paint Horses and their owners for competition in various events, including ones that place high value on a balanced jog—Western pleasure, for instance. Her program, based in Chino Hills, California, has produced numerous world champions and all-around title holders. "The ability to get and keep a horse's shoulders up is more important than many riders realize," she says. "And like any other skill, it takes regular practice and repetition."

