

Introducing a Sidepull to Teach Proper Turns

The following photos illustrate the process I use to introduce horses to the sidepull bridle. It is best to educate the horse about his poll joint using a combination of massage and training. Then and only then can he easily release the muscles at the top of his neck and turn his head properly in response to rein pressure.

Regardless of which type of sidepull you try (or even if you keep the horse in a snaffle bit), I would recommend taking your horse through these steps. (For further information and photo how-to lessons on the principles of a proper turn, refer to the WHJ ar-

ticles with clinician Harry Whitney: "Is Turning a Real Drag?" in the March/April 1998 issue, and "The Role of the Reins," in the May/June 1998, as well as "Poll Power," by Barbara Chasteen, in the March/April 1997 issue.)

Please note: A horse with tight muscles due to vertebral misalignments, dental problems, or saddle fit problems may not be able to do these movements. If your horse fails to improve or resists these movements, contact an equine massage therapist, or a veterinarian trained in chiropractic care or acupuncture for assistance.



Meritaj is extremely stiff when turning left (see photos on page 7). The poll turn exercise will teach him to release the muscles at the top of his neck and turn his head properly. First, I massage Meritaj on his neck right behind his ear, to soften the muscles of the poll. I also stroke in the direction of the hair or plant my fingers and move the tissue in small circles.



I use my right palm to stroke the channel between Meritaj's jaw bone and his neck. Then I plant my right hand on the round part of his jaw (cheek) and gently push his jaw away as I use the fingers of my left hand to pull his nose toward me. I don't force him; I simply add pressure until I equal his resistance and hold the pressure until he yields. Note that his right eye barely shows in the photo.



Although his right ear and eye are trying to look straight ahead, Meritaj starts to turn his head to the left. We can clearly see his right eye now and his head and neck have turned to the left. If his poll had released completely, the bridge of his nose and face would have turned even more to the left and we would see more of the round part of his right jaw sticking out to the right.

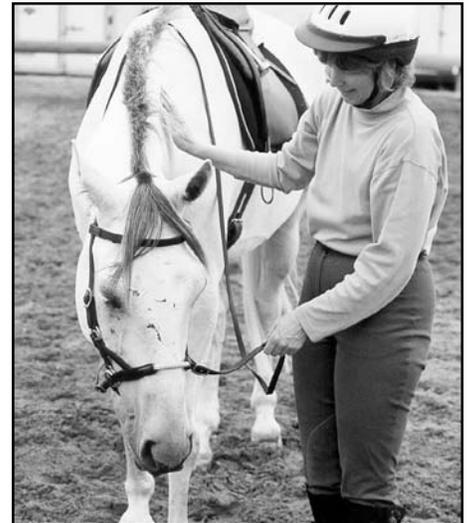


Now I'll teach Meritaj how to turn his head in response to the sidepull. The noseband rests at least two inches below his cheekbone (horses with long faces or protruding cheek bones need it placed lower). The jowl strap is tightened snugly below the curve of his cheek, but the chin strap is loose enough so that I can get two fingers between his jaw and the strap.

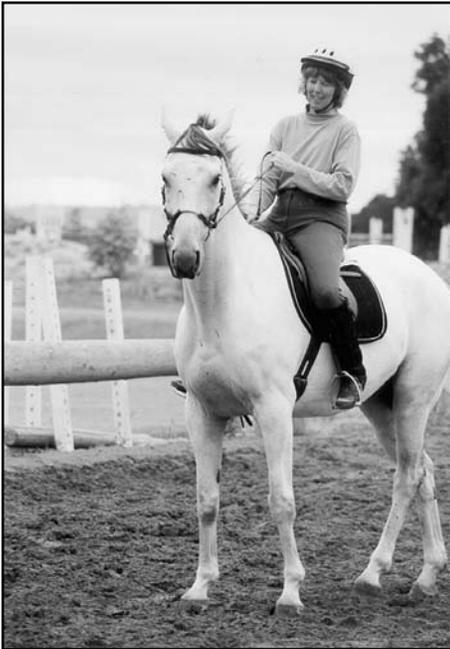
I pet Meritaj in the groove between his jaw and his neck to demarcate where he should turn. I position my left hand out to the side and tighten the rein until I meet resistance. My right hand holds steady to encourage Meritaj to tuck his cheek under his neck.



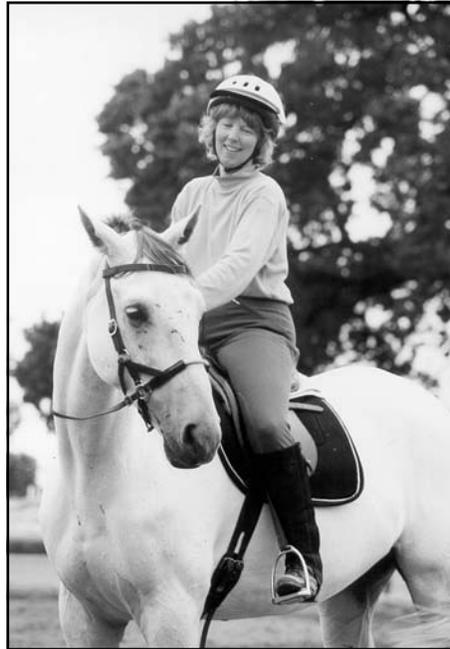
Meritaj has turned his head and put slack in the rein. I praise him and release even more rein so that he has freedom to lengthen down to the ground (see next photo). Here, he has not released his poll joint completely and turned correctly. He has tipped his nose up slightly toward me and kept his left cheek pushed out toward me instead of tucking it under his neck so his head could truly swivel toward me.



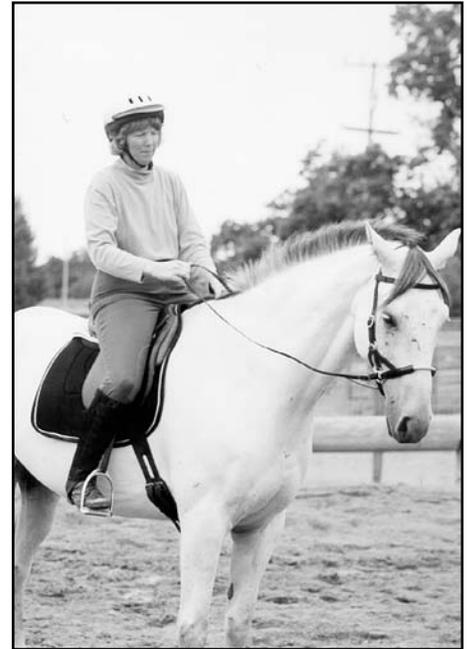
Meritaj has completely released his poll joint, and then stretched toward the ground. All the earmarks of a proper turn are present: his head is softly turned to the left so we can see his right eye, his eyes and ears have remained level, and he has allowed his jaw to rotate under his neck so we can see the curve of his right jaw bone out to the side. Note how relaxed he is – the poll release feels good!



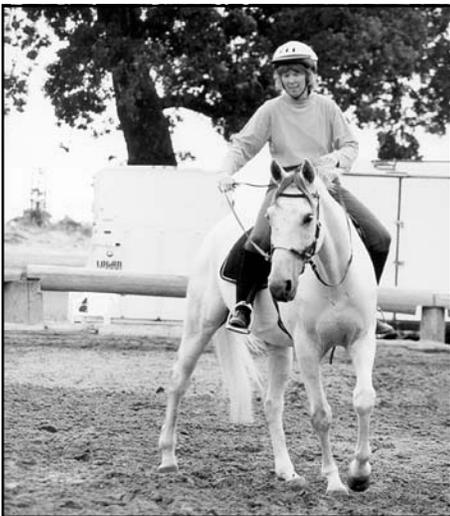
Mounted up, I first check whether Meritaj will turn in response to rein pressure when standing still. I take the slack out of the left rein to ask him to turn his head to the left (his stiff side). Instead of yielding, he raises his head and braces hard against the rein. In response, I move my rein hand to the center of his body to match his resistance and wait for him to yield. Locked up in the front of his body, he starts to move his hind legs. His pinched nostrils and high head reflect his stress.



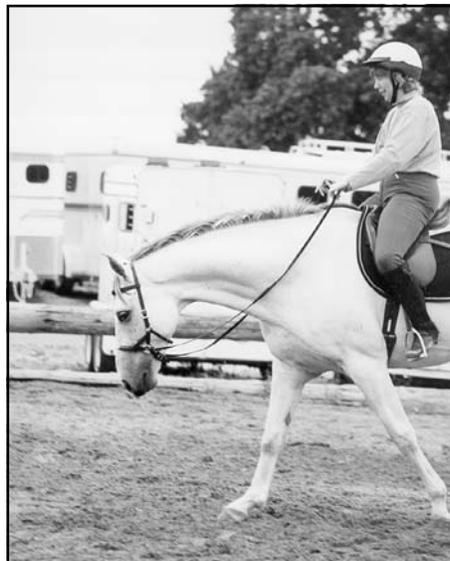
Meritaj finally turns his head and his neck in a big round movement in response to rein pressure. His ears are level and his eyes are level, but he has not allowed his jaw to turn as much as I would like. I put slack in my rein, praise him verbally and pet him on the withers. His ears and his nostrils have relaxed but his face shows that he is not too sure about what just happened. It is important to give Meritaj a moment to think and relax before I ask him for the next step.



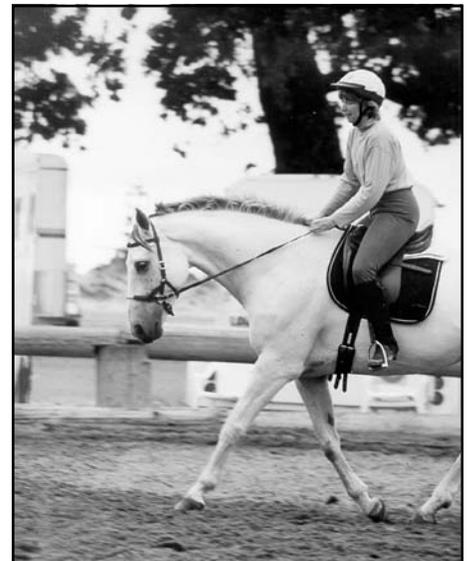
Now I try a poll turn to the right. As I take the slack out of the right rein, Meritaj listens to me and starts to turn his head properly. He is relaxed (shown by the position of his ears out to the side and the open position of his nostril and softness of his mouth). His neck is lengthened and stretched forward so that his poll is the highest point of his neck. When Meritaj is in this position and state of mind, it is easy for him to allow his head to turn on the top of his neck properly.



Guiding the horse through big round turns is an important way to teach him to turn at the poll properly *and* turn his body. I am holding my right hand out to the side (a "leading rein") to give Meritaj a clear cue to turn his head and body to the right. Meritaj is relaxed and bending around the turn nicely, but he is not completely released at the poll. He is not bracing against my rein but he is looking to the outside of my circle and not allowing his jaw and face to swivel to the right. If he had turned properly we would not be able to see his right eye.



As you wind your horse around through big round turns, he should relax his poll joint and turn his body properly through the turn. Once this happens, he may further relax and offer to stretch his head and neck down toward the ground. I am feeding out the reins to Meritaj as he stretches downward. His neck muscles are relaxed and he is taking nice long strides. His muscles all along his spine have relaxed and he is able to lengthen from head to hindquarter.



Once your horse turns properly at the poll and relaxes all the way down his spine, you may feel him move into the light and elevated movement called "self-carriage." In this photo, Meritaj is carrying himself effortlessly in a beautiful working trot. His right hind leg is reaching well up underneath him, indicating that he is pushing off strongly from his hindquarters. He has arched and lengthened his neck and remains in light contact with the reins.