

Train Your Horse to Wait for your Cues

By Dave Moore with Erin Sullivan Haynes

Remind your horse who's boss. Teach your horse to wait for your cues, instead of anticipating the next move and acting without your instruction.

Having your horse wait on you for instruction is critical in pattern events like reining and Western riding, where anticipation by the horse greatly decreases the quality of the maneuvers.

Photo by Cappy Jackson While judging reining and other pattern-oriented classes like Western riding or trail, I've often seen the same scenario play out. A novice rider approaches the arena on her horse with all the right intentions. But as soon as they get before the judge, the rider becomes insecure and anxious. She presses heavily on the gas and rushes the horse through the pattern. Because the rider has done this before, the horse has learned to go, go, go! He charges along, assuming what comes next, and all the time the quality of each maneuver deteriorates. The same sort of thing happens when a rail horse is allowed to take his gait cues from the announcer, instead of waiting for his rider's cues.

It only takes one or two classes like this for the horse to begin to "loose his wait," as I call it. Translation: The horse stops waiting and listening for the rider to instruct him what to do. Instead, he hurries a step ahead, anticipating the next maneuver, and makes the decisions on his own.

Teaching your horse to always wait for your commands is especially important in reining, where the judge expects you to not just guide your horse, but also to control his every move. The moment your horse makes a decision to do something without your say-so, it negatively affects your score, because your horse is no longer willfully guided, and your maneuvers are sloppy and imprecise.

I've developed some techniques and strategies for the practice pen and the show arena to ensure your horse maintains his wait, you maintain control, and you see those scores you've been hoping for.

Deconstruct the pattern.

When schooling for pattern-oriented events like reining, there's no reason to practice the patterns from start to finish every time. Running your horse through the same patterns at home or while warming up at shows only teaches him that the same things (circle, lead change, stop, etc.) happen at the same place, in the same sequence. Your horse will quit waiting for your cues, because he'll be thinking, "I already know what comes next—I've done this a million times." So when you're training, break the pattern down into

specific parts and work on them individually. Practicing this way will also help you avoid anxiety when showing. Instead of becoming overwhelmed by the pattern, you'll have the mindset of accomplishing individual maneuvers.

Avoid the obvious.

In reining, you know you'll be changing leads in the center of the pen in every class. You never want your horse to think the center of the pen is the place to change leads, because he'll learn to anticipate the action whether you ask him to perform it or not. For this reason, never practice lead changes in the center of the pen. Teach your horse to change leads all over the arena: in a circle or on the rail, but not in the center. The horse will learn that a lead change can happen at any place at any time, and he'll associate the maneuver with your command only. The same concept applies with spins, or any maneuver that happens in the same spot each time.

Expect the unexpected.

Bringing change and variety into the practice pen keeps your horse always asking, "What's next?" To achieve this mindset, set your horse up to do a certain maneuver, but then ask him to do something else. This will aid in convincing your horse that he must constantly rely on you, because there's no telling what's coming up.

When working on reining maneuvers, you can apply this concept to lead departures. Walk your horse on a straight line, and use your leg and rein to tip his hip and nose a little to the same side, so his body makes a slight "C" shape. Your horse is now in the perfect position to depart on whichever lead his body is curved toward—but, don't ask him to lope off just yet. Instead, walk him a few steps, then release him. Practice this all over the pen (always on a straight line).

When you're ready for your horse to lope off, give him a smooch sound to mean "go." He'll learn that even though you put him in the position to go, you're not always going to ask him to go. He has to wait and listen for that smooch. (Bonus: This exercise will also help your horse depart on the correct lead.)