

Forward Impulsion of the English Horse.

In order to mold a horse into the frame that a modern english horse must achieve to be competitive, you need to have energy. Forward energy to be more specific. If you use a body of water as an analogy it goes something like this;

Standing water has no energy, it is still and can not be directed. If you get the water moving in a certain direction you then have a river. This resulting river can then be guided by banks on either side (legs) or you can dam the river in front (a bit) and collect it. Going forward is the key to this process because you certainly cannot guide or collect water that is not moving. The same is true of horses. The first thing that you need in order to frame a horse is forward motion.

It's important to recognize when considering "making" a horse go forward that most of them "want" to go forward. It is their natural inclination to run and play when they are turned loose, especially when they are kept in a stall for many hours a day. It is how they express their happiness naturally. So going forward is something that is built into most horses and we need to harness it without diminishing it at the same time. My idea of the ultimate ride on an english horse is when the horse is going forward with that kind of bursting energy they show when first turned loose in a pasture; the tail flagged in the air and that extra bounce up front and push from behind, while under perfect control and softly and willfully guided, in a true english form.

So how do you get that ride with bursting yet controlled energy? While I'm assuming that horses want to go forward, (I also assume people are basically good) I will start with the question: why wouldn't a horse want to go forward?

There are countless ways which I manage to inhibit my horses impulsion but a few come to mind as my most common infractions. First, not having built in a solid enough cue (installing the gas pedal). Second ,a lack of acceptance to bit pressure. Third, a horse that does not soften readily will not go forward freely.

Lets start with the most fundamental, building the cue into your horse. Put in a different way, your developing signals that incite the horse into forward motion. Horses are simple minded and it helps to break things down into a single and specific cue. Let them think about one thing at a time and they will learn much faster without unnecessary confusion.

The simplest form of this cue, and the beginning for a young horse is to move from a stand still to a forward moving gait of any kind, using a stimulus like a nudge of your leg or a cluck while not having any rein pressure that may inhibit him. Once the horse gets the idea that every time you a) put your legs on him,b) tap lightly with a bat, or c)cluck, he

moves forward, the ball is rolling, and you can increase the intensity of the stimulus and the expected response.

You should expect your young horse to gradually move more aggressively forward and with a shorter response time. These are two gauges that you can measure the effectiveness of your cue; how quickly they respond and with how much gusto. You will need to work on these aspects of the cue with four basic tools: a) leg, b) cluck, c) bat, and d) shifts of the riders position. Apply the cue with one of the tools and expect a response, if you get it, reward the horse by ceasing the application and letting him move unimpeded. If you don't get a response, apply it again with more effort or maybe enlist another tool in to help. Always remember that when they do go forward, let them feel good about it. The better you let them feel about going forward the more they'll want to. This all sounds pretty simple, but if you consider that its the foundation that everything else will be built on, you may as well get it right. Its like learning to add, once you can add $1 + 1$, you have the ability to add $10 + 345$. Same process, more difficulty.

While I've talked about the most basic cue and a little equine psycho-babble about feeling good about going somewhere, lets put the two together. Take your trained english horse for example, you would like them to move with more enthusiasm and drive. Here is a training scenario that may be helpful. It uses the same cue that our green horse learned and applies it to a finished horse. Put your horse into a canter at a comfortable pace. When you're warmed up a little, release your hands and use some encouragement to accelerate. It is extremely important to release the reins a little, even for the trained horse. It not only frees him go somewhere, but also allows the hindquarters to come up underneath and thus elevate the front. After you feel a real change of speed, bring him back slowly, then repeat the same move; release the reins (open the gates) and encourage him through with a real burst of energy. After a few repetitions of this you'll not only feel greater reactions and implusion, but it won't be long before he is anticipating the opportunity to go forward and it becomes his idea to push aggressively from the hindquarters into any space left in front of him. Thats when english riding really gets fun! You'll then be tapping into the horses natural energy and expression.

If you have some forward cues that are reliable and your still having trouble with implusion it could very well be that when you ask for acceleration the horse actually tries, but runs into the bit and is not accepting the pressure on the bars of the mouth. This can be a big problem, you certainly will not improve implusion until the horse accepts the bit pressure and learns to move "through" the bridle. Often times it is as simple as wrapping the bit with latex or guardtex, this will alleviate the discomfort associated with bit pressure and the horse will be happier to move into the bridle. It can also be helpful to bit the horse in elastic reins so that he can get used to a yielding pressure rather the rigid effect of leather reins. They are generally more comfortable going forward into something forgiving like elastic, and will gradually become more accepting of pressure.

If your horse has good forward cues and is comfortable moving into the bridle you probably have pretty good impulsion but may lack the crisp clean steps from the hind end or more expressive bursts without breaking. A dull mouth or stiff neck is often the culprit that gets in the way of real free-wheeling and unimpeded motion. Softening the mouth's responses and suppling the neck will help tremendously to have controlled impulsion that encourages balance and freeness of stride. There are as many ways to soften a horse as there are horses and riders. It is certainly as important as going forward and should be addressed in more detail. Let's continue the discussion next month. Until then let's make sure our horses are happy to go forward and comfortably meet the bridle. The last thought that I would like to leave you with is that everything takes time. Any small change for the better is a step in the right direction. Be patient and have fun with your horses,
Joel