

## Something I Learned From A Horse

I have been working a bay mare that was stiff on the left side. Everyday I would work on the left side of her mouth, trying to soften that side so she would feel even in her mouth. Very often I would be successful but it was a nagging problem that seemed to come back almost everyday.

While at a show I had a veterinarian adjust her neck. She felt so much better, much easier to keep straight in the bridle. This did not come as a surprise to me, I knew that while I was tugging on her mouth I was actually trying to release her neck. It drove the point home that I was probably spinning my wheels working on her mouth, when that wasn't the real problem; and I may even be creating a secondary problem (making a duller left side of the mouth by using the left side so much).

So, I decided I would try to get her neck loose everyday before I rode her without a bit. The first thing I did was stand in the stall with her, on her left side, about in the middle of her barrel. Using my left hand across the bridge of her nose, I would slowly move her head around to look at me. In the beginning even this was difficult for her. She was resistant and it seemed uncomfortable just like under saddle. After a few minutes she would relax and bring her head around. I started to tickle her nose gently with my right hand when she brought it around as a reward. She actually started enjoying it. Soon, all I would have to do was to ask gently, using my left hand on her nose, and she would bring her nose around on her own looking for a little caress on her muzzle. She got where she would follow the tickle to the point that her nose would be touching the girth, and be happy about it. I did this about fifteen minutes a day.

Something that became apparent after about a week, was that the shape of the arc in her neck was changing. Even though in the beginning she was bringing her neck all the way around it was not in a perfect arc. She was flexing more back at the base of her neck and at the poll, but not a lot in the middle. By the end of the week she had a very even arc in her neck and every part of her neck was flexing.

The results were wonderful. It was gradual, but about the same time she got good at this exercise in the stall, she also got much, much more supple in her neck while being ridden. And, just as I thought, the left side of her mouth became a lot more responsive. It was clear that the primary reason for her stiffness was not her mouth and when I addressed the real issue the rest of the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. Once the tension that related to our daily struggle of flexing to the left while under saddle was gone, we were able to make more advancements in her training quickly, as that major road block was gone.

Now, every day we do this exercise before I work her. Her training is coming along nicely and we are all much happier.