

Bucking, Barn Sourness, Gate Sourness, Rearing Solved with One Exercise

Everyone encounters the horse that resists going past the arena gate, or refuses to leave the barn, or resists working by bucking or rearing. These acts are very frustrating, and an ride on this horse is more dangerous than it is relaxing. The common solution is to put a pair of spurs on the rider's boots and a crop in their hand and reprimand the horse every time he wants to stop at the gate, not leave the barn, or buck or rear in resistance. There is a better solution to fixing these dangerous acts - the one rein stop.

Whenever I train a horse, no matter what I am teaching him to do, I want to redirect the horse's energy instead of fighting it. When a horse begins to fight his rider, the horse is trying to find a way out of working. I want to show the horse that it is easier to continue walking around the arena or down the driveway than it is to fight.

Before I start schooling a horse to stop his fighting behaviors, I have to teach the horse how to flex his neck and move his haunches around his forehead. The first step to teaching a horse this exercise is to soften the horse's neck. I start by pulling one rein to bring the horse's nose to the rider's foot, and then I wait for the horse to release the pressure on the rein. It may be necessary to start in stages, at first only asking the horse to bring his nose a couple of inches in one direction or the other. Gradually, I increase the pressure on the rein until the horse understands how to bring his nose to the rider's foot. When I ask the horse to bring his nose to my foot, I leave enough rein so that when the horse does release the pressure on the rein, his nose touches the stirrup. I work both the right and the left side of the horse and ask the horse to give his head multiple times, so that he understands exactly what is being asked.

Once the horse's neck has been softened, I then ask the horse to move his hip around his forehead. I first ask the horse to flex his neck and then add pressure with my inside leg behind the girth, to ask the horse to move his hips. It is important to place my leg behind the girth, so that I teach the horse that my leg behind the girth is a signal to move his hip, and my leg at the girth means to move his shoulders or rib cage. If I ask the horse to flex his head to the right, I am going to add my right leg to move the haunches to the left, and vice versa. I will work this exercise until the horse willingly flexes his head and steps his haunches around his shoulders in both directions. I am now ready to work on the original behavior problem.

I take the horse to where the behavior typically occurs. A problem can't be resolved if it can't be reenacted. Wherever I am working the horse, it is a priority to allow the horse to behave.

I am not going to school the horse unless he fights. In the case of a barn sour horse, I begin by allowing the horse to walk freely down the driveway on a loose rein. If the horse hesitates, I squeeze my legs and cluck to the horse, and allow the horse to respond by walking forward. If the horse begins to fight the pressure, I reach up on one rein, flex the horse's neck, and move his haunches around his shoulders until the horse freely performs what I am asking. Then I release the rein and ask the horse to walk down the driveway. If he resists, I spin him around again. When the signal comes to move the horse's haunches, the horse should be moving quickly. Some horses can be lazy about moving their hip around, so I suggest sometimes wearing a short, blunt, English spur for encouragement. In most cases, this exercise has to be repeated many times before the horse realizes that it is easier to walk down the driveway than to fight my aids. This exercise may need to be repeated daily for several days, but every day that the horse is schooled, it will take less and less time for him to walk down the driveway.

This same exercise can be used for horses that are gate sour or have bucking or rearing episodes. (Note: This is not an exercise for teaching a horse to approach a scary object.) As I school a horse through this exercise, I am redirecting the horse's energy and showing the horse that it is easier to walk forward. Many horses soon begin to enjoy being ridden because they don't associate being ridden with a fight. Instead, they arrive at the final solution with little pressure and they recognize the act of riding as an act of relaxation.