


# SHOWING SOFTLY

## Polish your PERFORMANCE

with Shelley Penny



**I** do a lot of exercises with the horses where I keep it very soft - asking them to lower down and come back up in the frame and carry themselves there. Once I have them responsive, a like to do a lot of bigger circles winding down to smaller ones and vice versa, going back up. Asking them to go nice and deep into their circles and then lengthening coming out.

I'll change tempo and rhythm, asking them to go forward and back, stronger work, slower work, but always if I feel them hit the bit, I ask them to back off and go lower and deeper again.

I keep coming back to the basics the whole time. If I feel I'm losing rhythm and balance, if the horse is running underneath me rather than getting a bouncing rhythm, then I'll stop and back off.

Always with a naturally a high framed horse, you must ask him to lower in front, to come down and stay very soft into the bridle.

I am not very strong and I hate a strong-going horse.

My pet hate is a horse that locks on to one side of the bit and the moment I feel this I'll ask him to go into an even deeper frame. Lower the inside hand and ask him bend around into a deep circle keeping the inside leg on and outside leg behind.

Quite often I'll start horses on their lateral work on a little 10-15 m circle. I just keep the outside leg behind and push the horse's hindquarters slowly in on a small circle, making sure my outside leg is strong and that they are having to bend. I use the exercise as an introduction to lateral work; they are actually feeling that leg on long before I ask them to move sideways.

I think it is very important that a horse starts his lateral work very early on. He must accept it, because when you ask him to come down into the bridle, you usually find that you can't get him to really accept the bridle until you've done lots of lateral work. I like bring the hindquarters to the inside of the circle keeping the horse fairly deep and low in the bridle, pushing the hindquarter across because it makes them very supple and makes them come from the hindquarter. If you are pushing the hindquarter to the inside then the horse has to relax the back - then you find it easier to lift the head up and teach him to carry himself.

As you are asking stride by stride, and pushing the hindquarters into the centre you can then ask the horse with one hand to lift his neck up, and come very quietly into the bridle. It may take you half a dozen circles asking one stride at a time with your leg. Then if he responds to your leg and steps into the circle with his hindquarters, you ask him to come up in front with your inside hand and if he stays soft in that position, then you ask him to come up an inch at a time. If you suddenly feel that he falls out of balance or reacts in a way that you don't like, take the aid off, stop asking him to go sideways, ask him to go forward on the circle again, lower his head down and get him around your inside leg, then you can start all over again teaching him to come back up.

Once he shows you that he is trying, don't stay with the exercise for too long, go out of the circle, ride a straight line, drop the head down to the ground. At the end of the straight line pick him up again asking him to sit there in your hand, it might not be really high but ask him to sit there and hold his position. Don't expect him to hold himself for too long. You never hold him, you keep shifting his position until he carries himself. You teach him by asking him

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to lower down, come up, come back to the walk.

In all your work you need lots of downwards transitions. Don't pull on the horse's mouth to come into the downward transition. If you are trotting along and you want to come into a downward transition, you should slowly lean back, sit harder and gradually close your leg around the horse's sides. It is not a pushing leg, it is a closing leg, you are slowly closing a clamp around the horse's middle. Again it will take 6-8 strides or it could even take half a circle. In the early stages when you are trying to get him to respond, just be patient. Check the horse in front with your hand, check him once and release, if you feel the horse come back into your leg, keep the leg there, close it at the same time so you check the hand into the leg and then release the hand. Ask him to lower his head as you release, actually I ask them to check in a downward motion so that they actually lower the head down and then I release. By asking them to lower their head to the ground at the same time as you 'close the clamp', they learn to come into the halt down rather than throwing their head up in the air with every downward transition.

They will then learn so that the minute they feel the rider lean back they will come to stop instantly and they actually walk into the halt rather than stepping back. It is very important to always ride the downward transitions with a forward feel.

Because you have the horse's head and neck down in so much of this work, you are in control. You can now ride the horse up from behind as you strongly as you wish, with as much impulsion or lack of impulsion as you require and the horse is now yours to do with as you desire and you ask for as much as

you want. And because you have your legs wrapped around him nice and strong, he has accepted the fact the your leg is there, you can produce anything that the horse has to give, because he is willing to give it to you, he is not trying to take hold back or resist.

Most people ride with their hands, so if something happens in the ring and horse's

reaction is to run forward, the rider's first reaction, when they lose their balance is to lean back, hit the horse in the middle of the back with their seat and then instantly hit them with the leg. The hand is actually the last thing that hits the horse within that sequence of the horse darting out from underneath you. You've lost your balance, your leg's gone on and you've smacked

him in the mouth with your hand. Most horses go 'Oh my god', shoot their head in the air and they become very afraid and they keep running on.

With my horses, when something happens, remember the way we have trained them with all their downward transitions: the sequence goes, lean back, sit down, close the leg, then the hand. That is the exact aid sequence that you have trained for stop. You haven't hurt him because it is a downward transition to him. So he jumps forward

and stops and says 'OK we're stopping' you then close the leg back on, you've never actually hit him in the mouth because he's instantly stopped because you haven't even got to the stage of the pulling backwards. You've leant back, sat and closed the leg, he's put his head down because you have taught him to do that in his downward transitions, then you close the leg on twice as hard and say go forward and he says OK and he is straight back where he was and he has confidence in you because you haven't hurt him.

You've never grabbed him in the mouth because when he has actually gone forward, you have released and just let him go and consequently he will just go forward straight back into what he was doing without a lot of fuss. It is not a clever trick, it is just using something to your advantage from your basic training, giving your horse confidence. It doesn't matter what happens when he shoots forward or sideways, the last thing you want to hit is the mouth.

**T**he grey horse is good because he stays very upright, a lot of horses going around corners want to lean or come shoulder first around a corner, he stays very upright, the back legs were travelling on the same circle as the front legs and the same with the head and the shoulders.

The circle is true, right from the hindquarters. He is lovely and slow and soft and the head is down and in the frame that I want. Because he is thinking about where he is placing his feet, as he is placing them I can correct them or I can push him across, I can open and close my leg on his side, push him across and bend him, because nothing is done in a hurry. You can feel what is going to happen three or four strides ahead of you, so if I want to ask for more I can. It is very important that the horse stays upright round his circles, if you feel them dropping in, correct it before they go too far, because when you have to over-correct it, you become too strong, then you hit them in the mouth and they become afraid in the mouth.



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Basically ride that transition forward into the downward transition, then fix it at the other end, under no circumstances try and grab first.

Most horses that leap or shy, if you actually ride them into the situation they stop, because they think 'Oh, it mustn't be a problem, you're not worried about it so why should I' so they tend to go on without a problem.

With horses that want to baulk and not go forward, again if you come back to your basic training of lowering the head, taking the horses' eyes away from what they are looking at, ask them to drop their head to the ground, the eyes are now looking at the ground, back to the long and low training that they have had. The horse instantly goes forward and trusts you. He may spook again, you persist, put him low and back down into the bridle, because remember when he's lifted up out of the bridle he's probably lifted six inches, the six inches you're asking him to lower is right back into the frame where you will both meet one another... it comes back to that again.

Don't ever make the environment at home too calm, you are better off knowing how they react to scary things than not knowing. Remember they will always react the same at a show, just in varying degrees. It will be worse at a show but if you expose him to new things at home, at least you know what you are getting, and you know how to cope with his reaction.

At a show, you should looking up and forward to where you are riding, being very aware of what is in your space where you've got to work and what is within that area. You've got to be like a computer and instantly everything prints out onto a screen - you have to be aware. You may see a sideshow and be aware that something may jump out or if you go right beside it, something may go 'bang'. As you come to that danger spot, play with your hands a little bit more, get his attention

with his mouth and say 'I'm might be going to ask you to lower the head down please' so that he is thinking about you and so if the 'bang' goes off beside him he is more interested in you than the bang and it becomes a little bang to him and not a major one. Once they are concentrating on you they don't hear a lot on the outside around them...

*Go deep, go soft, accept the bridle, then come right back up again and sit there oh so nice - but if something goes wrong - it's back down deep again!*

