

HALT!

WHO GOES THERE ADEPTLY?

WORDS: DEBBIE KNOWLES

ALL HORSES and in ANY DISCIPLINE, if they are well ridden and well schooled, should be able to execute and maintain a square halt.

It's an obedience thing in a lot of ways. Your safety can rely on it also. In most dressage tests, counting for two movements, a square and maintained halt can win or lose you the test. It's nice to win.

In our Pony Club days we all knew that "at the halt, the horse must stand quite still and straight. His weight distributed equally over all four legs, fore and hind being in pairs abreast with each other. This is termed 'standing square.'" Throughout the halt, he must remain on the bit and balanced. He must continue to accept the bit (he can be allowed to champ the bit quietly). The rider must remain attentive. The halt must not be abrupt. The steps preceding the halt should retain their correct tempo and speed."

Many riders, if you ask them what areas they think they need to work on, will want to improve something about the trot or canter as that will be where they 'think' they have a problem. This is often on a horse that they can't lead, have no control over at the halt and can't get on unless someone gives them a leg-up. Walking BEFORE running is still a good way to learn anything so improvement to the halt WILL be of benefit to the other paces and all your schooling in general.

As with all horsemanship, the halt begins with your groundwork. You bring the horse in and tie it up to prepare for riding. It moves around, kicks out at you, squashes you against the rail and, eventually when you get out to the arena, won't stand still for you to get on. I'm enjoying my day already - not! It doesn't have to be a battle.

Let's do that paragraph again... you bring the horse in; he calmly and willingly stands at a ninety-degree angle to the rail where you have asked him to stop. He doesn't move his feet the entire time you are working around him unless you have asked him to move over or are picking his feet up. This is not hard to achieve and is a wonderful basis for all your future schooling.

In days gone by, when still judging dressage, it was an unusual thing to be able to award a rider two good marks for their halts at either end of the test – the mark would have included a straight line as well and that's another story in itself. A few could accomplish a good halt and they were the 'better' riders as, to achieve and maintain a square halt is a great advertisement to show everyone just how well schooled your horse really is!

A badly performed halt is usually a sign that the horse is not truly supple, and that because it finds it difficult, was not stepping under itself before being asked to halt. What does this mean? It means that the rider needs to know what the horse's feet are doing to achieve a good halt and the horse needs to be sufficiently schooled meaning it is 'on the aids' and therefore displaying calmness, suppleness, balance, activity with a swinging back and has the ability to engage its hindquarters when ridden.

"The aim of schooling your horse for anything is to produce an animal that will do all that you want it to with the minimum of exertion on your part."

Some of us are slow learners and still think that by buying a longer whip, sharper spurs or a stronger bit that we will then be able to 'force' the horse to do what we want. I'm not too proud to admit I've been down this path too but in my heyday at 5'4" and 55kgs, still couldn't 'force' a 550kg horse to even pick its foot up if it didn't want to! And that was before I got on it. So, one day the little light goes on and you realise THERE ARE OTHER WAYS but where do you look? That's for you to discover, if you want to, this article is now sidetracked and we're heading back to the halt...

So, the halt is important for obedience and safety whether you are taking a youngster out to do in hand classes, riding a paced & mannered show class, a dressage test, show jumping, eventing, or just wanting to be safe and enjoy your horse when working around it. The horse also has to 'halt' to stand still in a float, to be shod, clipped etc so it's quite a handy exercise.

On the ground, a horse that will not move his feet unless you ask is recognising your space and accepting you as the 'leader' for want of a better description. He has 23 hours out in the paddock to move his feet around as and when he wants and can quietly learn to acknowledge you and your space for at least an hour a day. If they can't, they aren't worth much to anyone in the long run. Likewise when being ridden, the uneducated horse will pull on the reins when you ask him to halt and even once halted, he won't stand still, will rub his nose on his legs or – worse still – on any person nearby – how rude!

We will let our horses walk in front of us, rub on us, barge into us, push us over, hit us with their heads and stand on our feet. Another horse won't accept this but we do. How tolerant are we of people doing this to us? Not very - catch yourself next time you stand in a queue somewhere and the person behind stands too close and keeps bumping into you!

I'd like my horse to halt nicely when I ask – anywhere and everywhere – how do I achieve this?

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Start at home, on the ground, when you next catch your horse. When you ask him to halt anywhere – watch where he places his feet. When you stop to open a gate, if he were to walk into your space to halt – push him back a step to correct him and, when he has halted nicely, reward him by leaving him alone. It may take you an hour today but, being the intelligent creatures they are, tomorrow it will only take about 5 minutes and then it will happen 'automatically.'

All you have to do is to 'correct them' at the right time. No bashing required! Watch where his feet go when you tie him up – if he steps forward to lean on the rail, just quietly correct him by asking him to step back into his place. Today you correct him 20 times – tomorrow 2 – it's not difficult.

I remember an advanced eventer, who had come in for schooling, trying to eat me the first time brought in from the paddock to saddle up. He had always been allowed to walk all over 'his' people, lean over the rail and swing his quarters around to stand parallel to the rail as well – it made saddling up a chore. I never hit him,

just quietly asked him to move back and stand still – he couldn't cope with that much discipline! Needless to say, initially he wouldn't stand still for me to get on either and was never truly 'on the aids' if the pressure was on at a show – his lack of 'basic' education would let you down when you most needed calmness and obedience. With more groundwork and schooling, he became safe, foot perfect and a joy to ride and compete.

Let's mention here too that some people actually like to bash their horses and do everything with force. That's your individual choice but not mine. If you school a horse with force you will have to eventually ride it with force. A horse never lies or forgets and it's not nice to be hurt by one that violently pulls back when it thinks you are going to hit it when you just raise your arm. That's not safe. Horses can hurt people and especially children. Although, having said that, a horse will normally know that the child means no harm and react accordingly - eg: the child can catch the horse and you can't! Makes you feel good huh?

Back to the halt – a square halt is actually good as a collecting and strengthening exercise as it asks the horse to step under itself and therefore engage the hindquarters. So, if a supposedly educated dressage horse struggles with halts, one would have to presume that its basics are a little lacking.

Any halt should be performed on a straight line. If you have trouble riding in a straight line anyway, you may need to improve this part of your schooling first. The horse needs to go forwards and straight, between hand and leg, to achieve the halt. You need to ride forwards into the halt. Try and 'feel' which hind leg is stepping under to be able to finalise the halt – if you feel one leg is left back you should be able to ask the horse to step up without him going sideways or further forwards.

With regard to show classes, the halt need not always be fully 'square.' Actually, if you are side on to the Judge, your horse's hindquarter will look rounder if the hind leg closest to the Judge is slightly back. This is especially so for in hand classes where the Judge



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wants to view all of the horse's legs – inside and out and the knack of standing your horse up in hand is therefore entirely different to a square halt ridden.

Be aware too, if your horse just cannot achieve a 'balanced' let alone square halt whether in hand or ridden, he may have soundness problems somewhere. If a horse doesn't halt balanced or has to shift his weight to halt it is often because he is relieving soreness somewhere in his body and/or feet and legs.

As a rider, halting by pulling on the reins is one of the hardest habits to 'give up.' If, as a very fortunate rider, you have been well taught from day one to 'prepare' for any and all transitions AND use your back and legs correctly, then you will be able to display a well-ridden halt where the horse does step under itself, keeps 'on the aids' and waits for you to ask it to move off again. Ask your Instructor to help you in achieving this ideal.

It's always good to remember that most basic of riding truisms – "one directs ones efforts to the WHOLE horse and not just its mouth."

WAIT is a huge word when talking about the horse and rider's reaction to halting, as the halt - any halt - needs to be MAINTAINED. Today, as a Photographer, it's frustrating to not be able to photograph some halts as they happen so QUICK! Blink and you miss it. In a show class, a halt at the end of your workout shouldn't be quick – let the judge have a look at your gorgeous horse before you walk back into the line-up. In a dressage test, halt and then salute – it's not all done at once and the horse should wait for you to put your hand back on the rein after saluting before you give him a long rein to reward, relax and walk out of the arena. Don't HURRY the halt! Any halt...

In closing, a good halt can tell you a lot about the relationship between horse and rider. If it is achieved so you hardly notice, the partnership is in pretty good shape. If it deviates off a straight line, legs are everywhere and the horse's mouth is open due to harsh rein aids – there is a lot of work still to be done but, thankfully, as they say - Rome wasn't built in a day.

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