

# CUT YOUR HORSE SOME SLACK

If the horse thinks he can move, he won't have to test it

By Joe Wolter

**P**eople who come to our clinics always say, "You must be the most patient person in the world." The truth is, I'm not naturally patient. I've just learned a few ways of doing things when I first get a horse that save me a lot of time later.

For instance, I see people use a lot of energy trying to make a horse stand still. I find it much easier to let him, rather than *make* him, stand still. Considering how strong a horse is, and how much he outweighs you, it really helps if the two of you want the same thing.

If he wants to move while I'm saddling or getting on or whatever, I let him, but I put the movement to use. Instead of trying to restrict his movement, I try to do something with it, to direct it.

I can sense when he's about to move, and I try to ask him for movement before he does it on his own. Maybe I'll ask him to take a couple of steps forward or back. This can do two things: 1) make him a little handier, a little more responsive and 2) make him satisfied to stand still. You don't have to do so much that he's physically tired; just let him use that little bit of energy that he stored while he was worrying whether or not moving was an option.

Here's what I've noticed about horses: If they feel like they can't move,

that's all they think about. If they feel like they *can* move, they usually don't.

I understand that a young horse, especially, isn't going to want to feel restricted; he isn't too sure he'll be safe. So he's a lot more inclined to move around a little, and it's best just to guide and support him along, no matter how much time it takes. It will save you a lot of time and aggravation later on.

I suppose if I really was a patient person, I could ignore that my horse was walking off while I tried to get on, but I'm not that patient. Most humans aren't. In fact, a lot of people lose their temper. The madder they get, the harder they pull on the horse and the louder they say, "Whoa." As soon as the horse is satisfied that yes, indeed, he can move, then he'll stand still for a second. The person gets on, thinking he really showed that horse, by golly.

In fact, if you think about it, if you're holding your reins or lead rope in such a way that you're making contact, your horse may think you're asking him to move. After all, that's how you guide him. If you're holding onto him when all you want is for him to stand still, it's like driving with the brake on. He's not going to stay light and responsive to the bridle or halter if you hang onto him all the time.

I'm not suggesting that you give up control of your horse. Just don't hold onto him. Have slack in the rope or



**If you hold on** to make the horse stand still, he may be confused because you also use contact to direct his movement. It's like driving with the brakes on.

reins so he doesn't feel restricted, or think you're signaling him to do something. And when you want to direct him, all you have to do is take the slack out and make light contact.

Actually, you usually don't even have to make contact – he can feel the slack coming out of the reins or the lead rope. If a horse can feel something as light as a fly, don't you think he can feel the slack coming out of the reins or rope, especially considering the sensitivity of his nose, lips, mouth and muzzle?

When a horse gets further along in his understanding, we usually don't have these problems. But if we did, I'd be more specific about directing that energy. Even though I direct his energy in a small way, asking for a small action, I've got something specific in mind. Maybe I want him to take two steps back. Not three. Or to turn a quar-

### The horse feels

better if you leave slack in the lead rope or reins. If you need to direct him, just take out the slack. You usually don't have to make contact. If a horse can feel something as light as a fly land on him, he can feel the movement in the rope.



ter turn on his hind foot, and then come back.

When a horse is a little nervous or antsy, it seems like people are even more inclined to hold on tight than they are if a horse is lazy. Sometimes a horse gets a reputation as high-strung or nervous when he's really just more sensitive than other horses. He may need less contact than the others, less

pressure from the lead rope, less pressure from the reins. If he doesn't seem nervous when he's in his stall or out in the pasture, maybe you're making him nervous. Maybe he's just trying to do what he thinks you expect. These types can make great horses, because they're so responsive, so light, almost intuitive. But it takes a better rider, a more aware rider, to handle this kind of horse.

Sometimes I'm afraid people hang onto their lead rope or reins because of their own insecurity. The horse can sense that, and he's not going to feel too great about things either. It's kind of like how you'd feel getting into a car with someone who'd never driven before, who keeps getting the gas pedal and brake pedal confused.

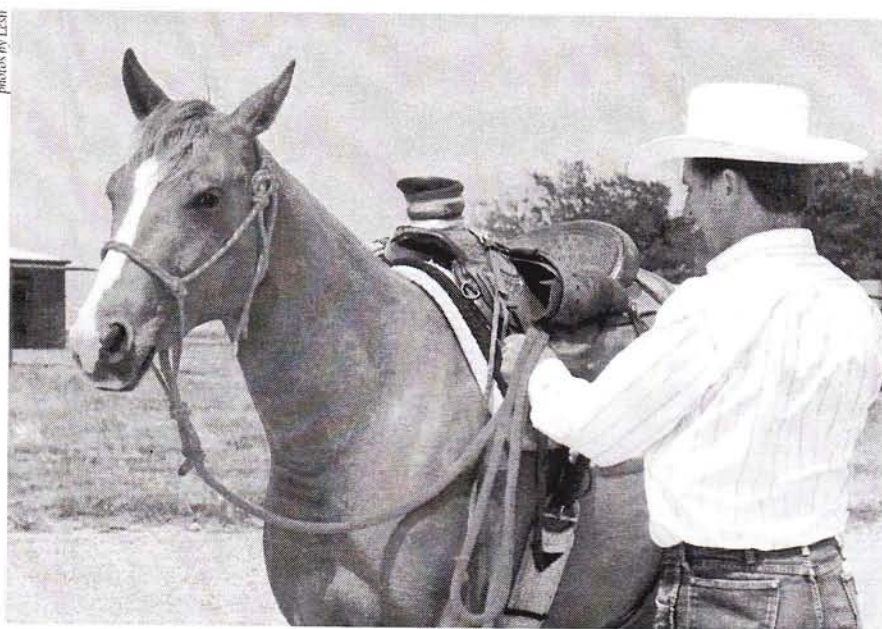
You've got to give the horse a chance. When you give him a little slack and don't hang on him or jerk him, he'll relax. And if he feels like he needs to move, give him a little job.

Remember that corny saying that was popular in the '60s? Something like, "If you set something free and it returns to you, it's yours. If it doesn't, it never was." I know it's corny, and maybe even a reach, but it's kind of the same thing. ☼

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**Joe Wolter's** chosen vocation is starting colts, although he is a respected teacher who accepts a limited number of clinic assignments. This month, he has been invited to conduct a special "big loop" roping clinic in Montana. He and Bill Dorrance are featured in a roping video available through Quarter Horse Outfitters, (888) 209-8322.

photos by Lesh



**When a horse gets a little nervous,** people tend to hold on tighter, which can make things worse. If you feel him start to move, start taking out the slack and directing his movement. Use that energy. A step or two may be all that's needed.