

TURN SIGNALS

Feel how your horse turns naturally

By Joe Wolter, as told to Lesli Groves

Too often, riders expect their horse to turn when the rider is ready, without considering whether the horse is ready. If the horse doesn't turn instantly or doesn't make a smooth turn, the rider might think the horse isn't being responsive. But maybe he is. Maybe he wasn't in a spot where he could react right away. Or maybe he turned when you cued, even though he was out of position, and the result was probably awkward.

Why does this happen? Think about how a horse is constructed. To turn left, for instance, his left front foot has to reach to the left. He can only do that as his left foot is coming up off the ground, while his weight is shifted slightly to his other legs.

To illustrate a point about how a horse turns, sometimes at our clinics I ask people to step down off their horses and pick up one of their horse's front feet. Notice how he shifts his weight so he can lift the foot. When I ask people to do this, they're usually focusing on that foot they want to pick up. They don't think about where his other feet are. A lot of times people don't put it together that their horse is leaning on them or pulling away from them because he can't balance on his other three legs. So the horse doesn't give the person the foot right away, he shuffles his feet a little, and the person thinks the horse is being stubborn, instead of smart.

It's more important to learn the feel of a horse turning naturally than to know intellectually where all four feet are all the time

Once we had a bunch of ranch mares to turn out where a friend of mine was living. I needed to trim the mares' feet before we turned them loose, so he held them for me. I'd reach for a foot and he'd say, "Don't pick up that one; pick up this one over here." And they'd practically pick their foot up for me. I'd trim that foot and go to the next and he'd say, "Wait a minute." And he'd

rearrange the mare just a little and, again, she'd give me her foot. It might have gone over my head at that time if he'd tried to explain that he was arranging the three feet I wasn't going to pick up.

If you take a sideways step to the left, you'll naturally do so as your left foot is coming off the ground, and your weight is on your right foot. But if you mechanically thought out every step you took and every turn you made, you'd probably trip. That's why I don't encourage people to think about all this too much. It's much more important to learn the feel of a horse turn-

ing naturally than to mentally chart where all four feet are all the time.

It will help also to pay attention to where your horse's mind is.

Have you ever been riding along when your horse sees something he's unsure of? He shifts his mind, then his body, then his feet and then he's out of there. Notice the sequence.

Let your horse go where his mind takes him. Notice how it feels when



To understand how a horse shifts his weight to turn, pick up one of his front feet.

he stops or turns on his own. That's the kind of feel you want to have when you cue him – like he's doing it on his own. Watch loose horse's minds and bodies as they move about. Imagine how it would feel if you were on them.

Sit on your horse like you enjoy being there, *alive*, in sync, moving along with him. Don't inhibit his movement with legs braced like 2x4s stuck in the stirrups. Feel his movement. Go with it.

Notice how his ears, eyes, head, throat and neck are positioned. What is the saddle doing? Is the front tipping one way or the other? When you can recognize how he feels just before he turns on his own, you'll have a better idea when to cue him.

I feel it is best for you to find these things out for yourself, at your speed. Don't get hung up on intellectually knowing what foot follows another. If you think too long about mechanics, you'll ride mechanically. Develop a feel for what a horse does naturally and you'll become a more natural rider. ☺

Trainer and clinician **Joe Wolter** spent his life on ranches in California and Nevada, where he was influenced by some great horsemen, including Bill Dorrance.