

Contact & the Neglected

RELEASE



You've worked hard to establish good contact with your horse, but don't forget that the release is just as important in improving his relaxation, self-carriage and submission.

Text and photos by Cindy Sydnor

You need to ride your horse more over his back. He needs to be rounder in order to be more through, more *durchlässig!*"

We hear comments like this frequently, from very good and well-intended trainers and instructors. Enticing a horse to use his back as the connection

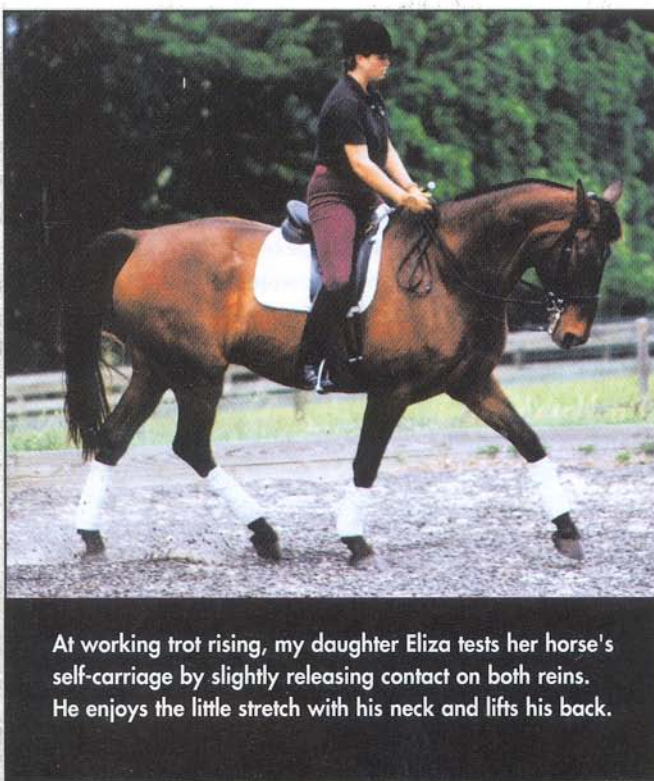
between the carrying and thrusting powers of his hindquarters and his free-moving, lightened forehand is worthwhile. There is no question that this effort includes the rider's driving aids, the horse's back activity, the horse's acceptance and submission to rein contact and the rider's skill with that contact.

Experienced riders know the feel of the horse's hind legs thrusting into the rein contact. They recognize when his back is lifted and swinging and when it is stiff or hollow.

Learning to feel this and understanding what to do when the feel is not quite right takes the rider many years and many horses.

When the horse accepts the rider's aids—relaxes his underneck, flexes his poll, relaxes his jaw and becomes round over his topline—the feeling is unmistakable. It is rarely instantaneous and often improves throughout the ride and over months and years.

The part of this feeling that is sensed by the rider's hands is very important to most riders—sometimes too important. The feeling is so important that once they have it, they often do not want to relinquish it; they cling to the contact before the feeling is correct—coming from the horse's hindquarters to his front end.



At working trot rising, my daughter Eliza tests her horse's self-carriage by slightly releasing contact on both reins. He enjoys the little stretch with his neck and lifts his back.

The goal of this article is to describe the release of this precious contact with one rein or two as well as to discuss its purpose, technique, timing and varying degrees. The skillful release of contact improves the horse's relaxation, renews his desire to go forward, contributes to and tests his self-carriage and increases his willingness to be submissive and light. In short, it improves the quality of the contact.

Serious riders are concerned with these qualities. But they also are concerned with the frame or silhouette of

their horses and sometimes pursue the frame at the expense of correct submission and self-carriage. One of my best instructors says that you should be able to cut the reins between the bit and the rider's hands, and the horse should continue in a round, balanced, forward self-carriage because he is not held by the reins. The horse is holding himself with the light contact of the reins as a stimulus and guideline. (He did not say how



I could reattach the rein, but the concept was clear!)

The Introduction to the Release

The release of rein contact is taught to young horses as soon as they can maintain a fairly steady rhythm at walk and trot on large circles and straight lines. They are invited to chew the reins out of the rider's hands. Part of the incentive to chew the reins or "to be shown the way down," as it is expressed in German, is accomplished by little releases in combination with the driving aids. The horse starts to seek the contact as it is lightened by the rider's release. As the rider feeds out segments of the reins, the young horse learns to enjoy the sensation of stretching his neck forward and down toward the bit. It feels good to the horse to lift and stretch his back as he seeks contact with the rider's hand. He is praised for this response and, at an early age, begins to enjoy pleasing his rider as he does something that feels good.

Horses being retrained at any age

benefit from this exercise and usually must accomplish this before other aspects of training can proceed. It may not be the first exercise when retraining some horses, but if it is not accomplished, then the training is not correct and will not proceed well.

This introduction to the release of the rein contact then leads to more subtle but equally relaxing and physically and psychologically pleasing sensations for the horse. This is an important part of the development of harmony between horse and rider.

As the young horse becomes stronger and better balanced at the working trot and canter, at leg yielding in walk and trot and at basic bending school figures, a good rider will recognize the moment to release the contact of the inside rein while maintaining the contact on the outside rein. The most reliable moment to try this release is on a large circle or on the long side or coming out of a corner. In other words, it most likely will be successful when the rider feels the horse is confident in his balance

and rhythm. When the rider allows the release to last for several strides, moving the hand with the loose rein up the horse's crest and then gradually stroking down the crest and reestablishing the hand position next to the other hand, it is called "stroking" or *Überstreichen* in German.

During this moment of release, the horse may relax a little more in the jaw and poll, drop his head and stretch his neck very slightly. But he will be limited from going too far by the outside rein contact. If this release reminds him of the pleasant sensation of chewing the reins, that's good. This reconfirms the mental and physical harmony between horse and rider.

In dressage tests, stroking is a test for self-carriage: Can the horse maintain rhythm, balance, impulsion and submission for three to four strides without the contact of the inside rein?

Subtler Rein Releases

As the training progresses, subtle rein releases, not easily seen by a spectator,

When Eliza feels her horse is confident in his balance and rhythm (photo A), she releases the contact of the inside rein, while maintaining the contact on the outside rein. This contact limits how much the horse can stretch, but it reminds him of the pleasant experience of chewing the reins out of the rider's hand.

Photo B shows Eliza in the collected canter demonstrating the one-handed release called *Überstreichen*. This release improves the horse's relaxation, renews his freedom to go forward, contributes to and tests his self-carriage and increases his willingness to be submissive and light.

In photo C, Eliza demonstrates the subtle release of contact in piaffe, which contributes to the ease of the execution of the movement by lightening the horse's front end.



are used. Perhaps the most important release is done at the end of the half halt. Every time the rider moves the hand forward, either merely lightening the rein contact or purposely releasing the contact fully, the well-trained horse remembers the pleasant sensation he learned when he first chewed the reins out of the rider's hand. The release or softening of the contact as the horse goes forward out of the half halt renews his desire to go forward and seek the contact with the rider's hand. But now, in better balance, the contact required can be lighter than it was before the half halt.

The release after the half halt is done after the restraining rein aids and the overlapping driving aids of seat, leg and possibly the tap of the whip are given. After the horse's weight has been shifted onto his hind legs, the release of rein contact renews his desire to go forward. If the rider is careful to sit straight and deep during the release, he will experience "holding the horse on his seat." The brief release of contact will not cause the

horse to fall on his forehead. He will begin to discover how to elevate his forehead with the sense of balance, freedom and impulsion working together. The quality of a rider's seat makes or breaks this experience, however. If the rider loses his balance once the contact on the reins is loosened, the horse will lose his balance.

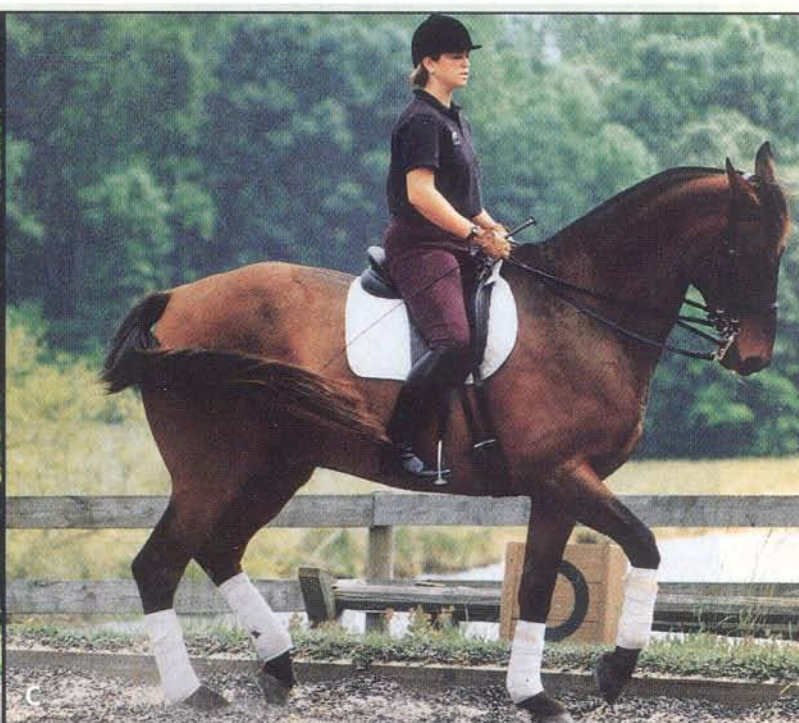
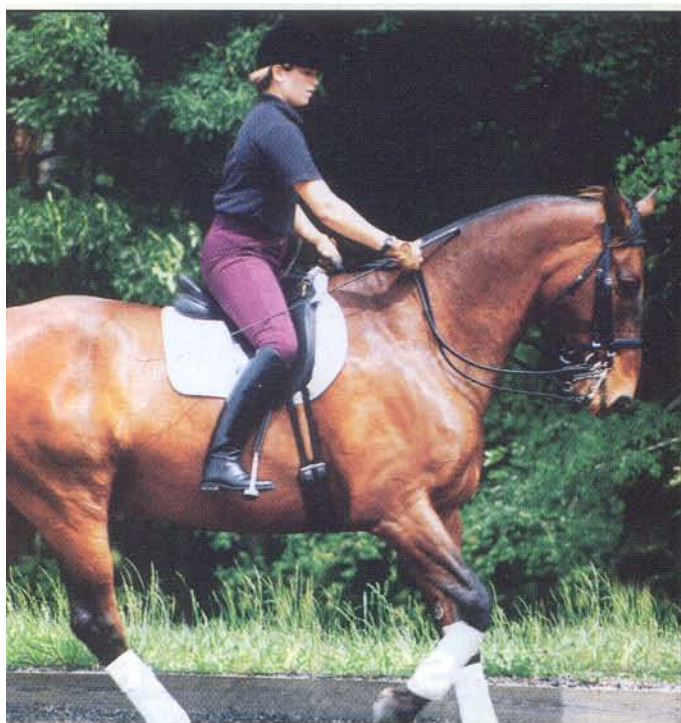
In shoulder-in, haunches-in, renvers and half pass in both trot and canter, a subtle release of the inside rein or both reins can enhance the expression of these movements. After the half halt and sideways-driving aids in the half pass, the horse will often reach farther sideways if he feels the release. This is best demonstrated by horses that can do beautiful canter zigzags in the Intermediaire and Grand Prix tests. But the release is equally important to the Second and Third Level horse learning the lateral work because the principle is the same.

The timing of the release always comes between the thrusting phase, when the horse pushes off with his

hind leg, and the carrying phase when it lands. The exact moment is dependent upon the situation. Then, after the release, the rider resumes the contact as lightly as possible, always trying to resume with a little less weight in the rein than he had before he let go in the release. This feel is what makes dressage riding such a unique and unequalled delight.

There is another important release that is initiated by the horse. In German, it is called *abstossen*. The horse pushes himself back (away) from the bit. Once the right combination of energy or impulsion and balance has been found in the walk, trot and canter, the horse initiates this *abstossen* himself and lets go—a little—of the contact on the bit. He has been using the contact to help him achieve his balance, and now he is saying that he doesn't need it. It is a little like a cyclist letting go of the handlebars for a moment.

When a good rider feels his horse pushing back from the bit, he also should give a little to reward and





encourage the horse to remember the pleasant sensation of stretching and lifting his back into the rider's seat. This always stems from the early forward, downward stretch the young horse learned. If a rider can make a horse's back "happy," he has discovered one of the most valuable secrets in riding. The release reconfirms the true partnership of horse and rider.

The Release in Exercises

The release is also an important part of the half halt preparation for extensions. If two or more half halts are given to engage and shift weight back before going forward into the medium or extended paces, a slight release as the signal to extend is given, encouraging an uphill, expressive transition. Resuming the contact after this release must happen quickly but

softly to help the horse maintain his balance. If the release is too much, lasts too long or the resumption of contact is too abrupt, the balance can be lost. This is probably one of the more difficult releases to master.

In tempi changes, releasing as the horse changes in mid air encourages a bigger, more ground-covering, expressive change. It can mean the difference in competition between a 6 for correct but somewhat short changes and an 8 or 9 for "nice forward, expressive changes!" This release is usually done with the inside rein of the new lead, not both reins. It is often so subtle that if watching, you would not see the rider's hand move much or see the rein become loose, but it is happening. The mere relaxing of the rider's shoulder muscles constitutes a softening that the

horse clearly feels in the rein and appreciates.

In the walk, both collected and extended, either a slight or a very clear release as the horse's neck naturally reaches forward is helpful. In the extended walk, in which the horse is not required to be on the bit, the release of one or both rein contacts usually enhances shoulder freedom. In the collected walk, subtle little releases or softenings can be made to show the horse he is still somewhat "free" to go forward. These releases often help improve a lateral collected walk, because the horse thinks of stretching and lifts his back more than when he is walking poorly. Lateral movement in the collected walk is a sign of tension in the horse's back. Even in the halt and the halt and rein-back, little softenings or

Ultra fit Spurs.

In close partnership with Sprenger, the Olympic champion and trainer of the German Dressage riders, Klaus Balkenhol, has developed the new BALKENHOL SPURS.

The Sprenger tradition of developing innovative and high quality products is continued with these new spurs.



1992 / 1996
Gold medal winner Olympics

Klaus Balkenhol

Klaus Balkenhol



This unique fit and design eliminates pressure and movement thus providing correct spur performance and protection of the boot leather.

pat. pend. 09/753,010

47435-000 55 35 mm / 1.3/8"
007 55 35 mm / 1.3/8" with rowel

47425-000 55 25 mm / 1"
007 55 25 mm / 1" with rowel

Please also ask for the heavy Balkenhol dressage spurs made of German Silver.

For the retailer nearest you contact:
German Equestrian Mfgs., Inc.
Toll free 866-Gem-Tack · e-mail: GemTack@msn.com



SPRENGER
www.sprenger.de

releases ensure the maintenance of a lifted, relaxed, correctly working back. When horses step back with their hind legs in the halt, it usually comes from back tension. Likewise, when a horse drags his front feet in the rein-back, it also usually comes from back tension.

In riding into the halt from trot or canter, a good rider prepares with several half halts, which include subtle releases. When the signal for immobility is given with the last half halt and the horse stands, bearing weight on all four feet, there should be a very slight release during which the horse relaxes while maintaining full attention. Then the contact is carefully reestablished for the transition forward.

During any exercise, including piaffe and canter pirouettes, probably the hardest for most horses, the care-

ful release of contact is not only possible but contributes to the ease of execution. In contrast, if the rider maintains constant contact with no lightening of the rein weight, the horse must struggle under this added weight and often loses the sense that he can be active with some freedom. In these difficult exercises, the equal softening or release of both reins is best, as one might cause a loss of balance.

Horses content and confident in self-carriage will rarely be behind the vertical. The poll may or, in cresty-necked horses, may not be the highest point, but behind the vertical can never be the best self-carriage. When the horse is more than a few degrees behind the vertical, he cannot be in self-carriage because his balance has become damaged by the "broken neck"—overflexion in the third verte-

bra. When significantly overflexed, the horse cannot even see ahead. He can only use his peripheral vision—not a very proud look. It is good to keep Emerson's words in mind: "For every excess, there is a defect; and for every defect, there is an excess."

Remembering the importance of the release in every stage of your horse's training—from the basic chewing the reins out of the hands to the more elaborate release in the half halt—will help ensure that you have a relaxed, forward-thinking horse who is in self-carriage. 🐾

An examiner for the U.S. Dressage Federation Instructor Certification Program and a USA Equestrian "R" dressage judge, Cindy Sydnor was long-listed for the 1975 Olympics. She teaches and trains in Snow Camp, North Carolina.



Passage, Piaffe, Pizzaz!

Markel's Team of Dressage Insurance Specialists



Kelley A. Corrigan
Maryland
410-792-8090
301-474-4111



Lisa Seger
Georgia
877-634-0521
770-740-8332



Kelly Davidson
Kentucky
606-473-0470



Tami George
Arizona
800-231-0670
928-541-7772

Known as the *Insurance Company with Horse Sense*®, Markel is represented by a team of Dressage Horse Insurance Specialists with a life long commitment to the horse industry.

They're individuals who understand Dressage and your unique needs.

The protection your horse deserves. Call us today.

Underwritten by:



Mortality coverage available online 24 hours a day at
www.horseinsurance.com