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THIS MONTH

MY HORSE WON'T TURN ON HER HINDQUARTERS

Team Horse & Rider trainer Robin Gollehon teaches our reader how to gain control of her mare's front and back ends to perfect those pivots and improve her overall Western pleasure performance.

PRODUCED BY ALANA HARRISON
PHOTOS BY DARRELL DODDS

OUR PRO:

Team H&R member Robin Gollehon has been training professionally for 30 years and has more than 75 ApHC world and national championships to her credit, especially in yearling longe line, Western Pleasure, and hunter under saddle. She was an AQHA Congress reserve champion in 2005, and was previously named World's Best Exhibitor, World High Point Lady Exhibitor, and the Appaloosa Pleasure Horse Association Trainer of the Year.

Robin has also bred multiple world and national champions and is the owner and promoter of the leading ApHC Western pleasure sire, Zip'n To Paradise. As a member of the AQHA Professional Horsemen's Association, Robin trains youth and amateurs at her training and breeding facility, Gollehon Show Horses, in Trafalgar, Indiana, with her husband and business partner, Roger.

OUR STUDENT:

Cindy Lamb-Basham of Longview, Illinois, has owned her 5-year-old Appaloosa mare, Oh Golly Miss Molly ("Molly") for three years. As a graphic designer for the University of Illinois, it's difficult for Cindy to keep up a full-time training schedule with Molly, but she enjoys showing in non-pro Western pleasure, halter, hunter in hand, and hunter under saddle—all of which she's been successful in showing at the regional level. But she wants to take showing to the next level. At press time, Cindy and Molly were preparing to compete in their first Appaloosa World Show in Fort Worth, Texas. To fine-tune her Western pleasure performance, Cindy knows she needs to get Molly to effectively use her back end—the essence of a turn on the hindquarters.

THE PROBLEM:

"I think Molly is doing well as a Western pleasure horse, but I'm currently having trouble getting her to turn on her hindquarters. Instead of keeping her hindquarters stationary while moving around with her front end, she's keeping the middle of her body still while moving both her front and back ends. I don't know if I'm causing this because of something I'm doing, or not doing, but I know I need to correct the problem to perfect my performance. What can I do?"

ROBIN'S FIX:

"Too often I see riders, both youth and amateurs, sabotaging their training and ultimately their performance in the show



pen by setting their horses up incorrectly for a particular maneuver. It's imperative that you fully understand the mechanics—the cause and effect—of what you're asking your horse to do, so you can use the “effects” to your advantage.

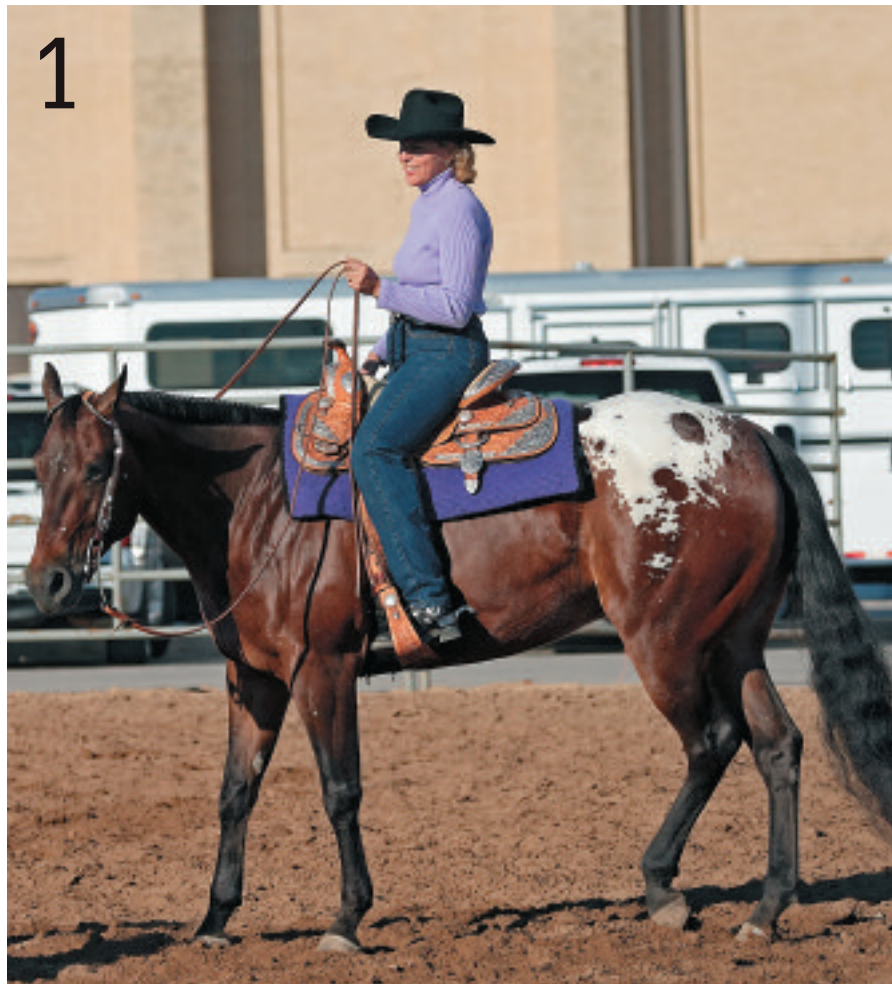
“You need to grasp the physics of how your position and cues influence Molly's understanding and execution of your request. These physics are a direct result of how horses are built, and how they move. To effectively teach Molly to do a turn on her hindquarters and work off her back end, we need to examine how you're cueing her when she isn't doing what you're asking. From there, we can see what changes you need to make to utilize your knowledge of these ‘horse physics.’ Remember, Molly's ‘raw’ reactions are natural for her—they can be altered by advanced training and reconditioning, but for our purposes, we're going to start simple.

“The exercises that I discuss in this article are to be done at a walk or a standstill. Errors are magnified at the faster gaits, so it's important to practice slow at first. And you're right to be concerned about your future Western pleasure performance. Even though you wouldn't be required to do a turn on the hindquarters in a pleasure class, Molly will continue to work on her front end if she doesn't master the usage of her hindquarters—which will not be especially impressive to a pleasure judge. Peak performance in almost all classes stems from back-end propulsion—so now is the time to work on achieving that.”

1. HORSE PHYSICS 101

“To effectively teach Molly how to do a turn on her hindquarters, you must gain control of her front and back ends—independently from one another, so that you'll ultimately be able to keep her back end stationary while asking her to move her front end, and vice versa.

“Let's say you're asking Molly to pivot to the left. Since we teach horses to move away from pressure, you should apply your right spur slightly behind the cinch, and lightly neck rein Molly to the left. Her head should only bend to the left enough so that you can barely see the corner of her left eye, and her hindquarters should stay still while her front end walks around with her right front leg crossing in front of her left front. However, as in photo #1, Molly is bending too far, bulging her shoulders out and away from the turn, and turning with



her front and back legs, keeping her center still like a carousel horse twirling around a pole.

“Molly is naturally inclined to turn like this because of the position you're allowing her to assume. You're letting her bend too much (in other words, she almost folds in half bringing her head and neck too far to the left) which prevents her from being able to physically work off her back end—ruining your chances of a decent pivot. With too much bend, Molly's weight will naturally shift to her front end, encouraging her to move her back legs—rather than keeping them stationary as we want. This is that ‘law of nature’ (horse physics) that interferes with your good intentions. Having shifted her weight to her front end, she'll likely do a turn on the forehand, or turn around her middle.

“You're not using your hands effectively to control Molly's head, neck, shoulders, rib cage, and hips. And even though you're initially using your legs to cue her properly, Molly isn't respecting

the barrier you've created with your right leg. So, you have to make her understand she can't step into pressure by reinforcing your cue with your leg.”

2. LET'S TALK HANDS & LEGS

“As in any training maneuver, I like to break things down into individual parts. That way your horse can better understand what you're asking her, and you can concentrate on the specific part of your riding that is ‘broken’ and needs to be fixed.

“Let's start with your hands. You're allowing Molly to bend too much out of position. First, switch to a snaffle bit instead of a shank to give you better lateral control. (You can go back to the shank as soon as Molly masters this maneuver.) Split your reins, holding one in each hand with even contact on both sides as shown in photo #2. You want to ‘trap’ your horse's head between the reins so she can't move any farther right or left than where you position her.

“Hold your reins as if you're holding

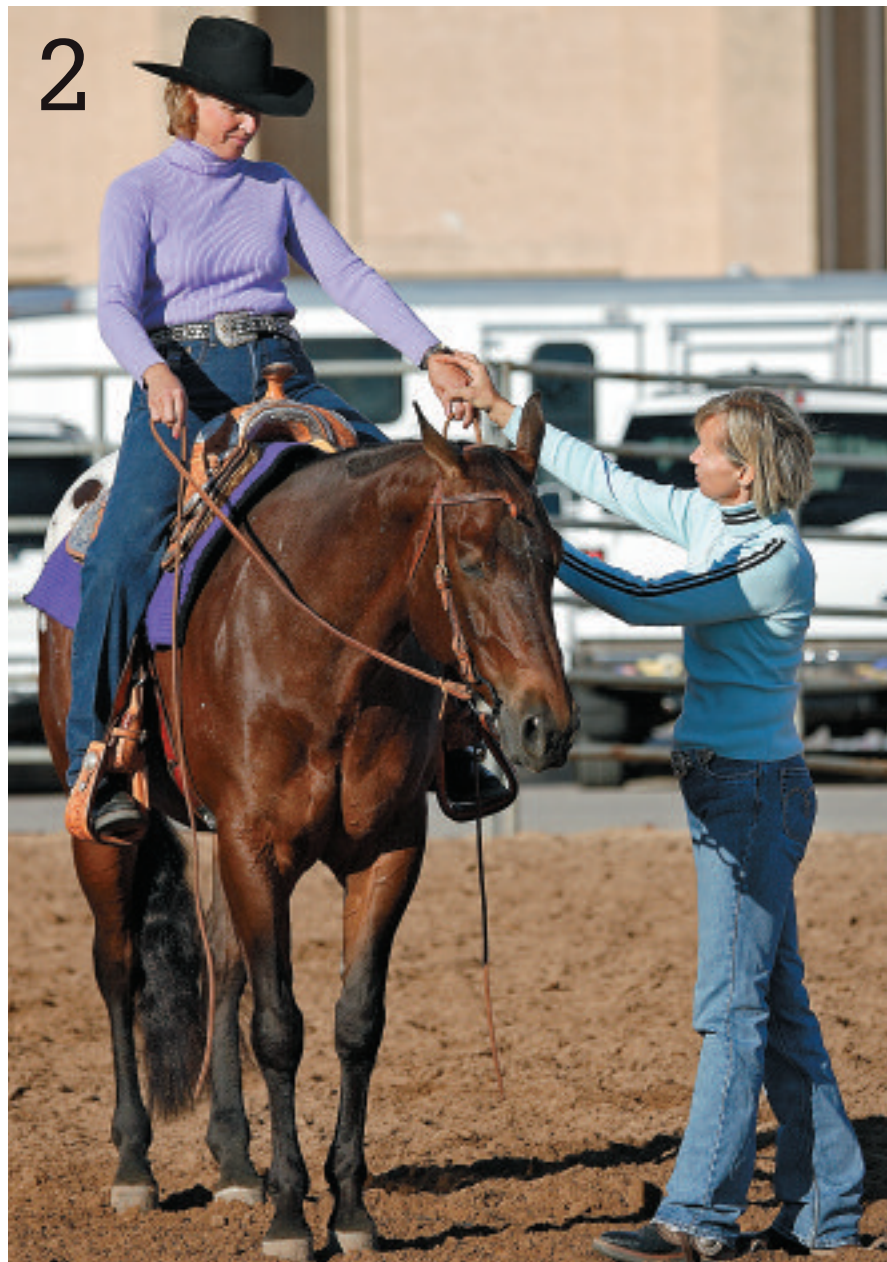
bicycle handlebars—pulling with one hand and giving with the other as Molly gives her head and neck to your rein pressure. If she walks forward you're not holding her enough; if she backs up you're pulling too much. It's imperative that you have equal pressure on both sides of the bridle. The farther out you hold your rein, the more bend you're encouraging and the more movement you'll get in her hindquarters—not what we want for a pivot on the hindquarters. Think of your rein pressure kind of like playing a video game—you have to react to what your horse gives you as you go, making adjustments as necessary.

“You can also apply your knowledge of physics in regards to your leg cues. Right now Molly is not respecting the boundaries you're trying to establish with your legs. (As we talked about before, when you allow her to bend too much in the direction you're turning, she'll step into your right leg with her hindquarters, sabotaging your pivot.)”

3. LEG REINFORCEMENT

“Here I'm going to give you an exercise to make Molly more respectful of your leg cues. Right now Molly is moving her hindquarters into your leg pressure (right leg) instead of away from it. Instead of tipping Molly's head to the left (in the direction of our turn), bend her to the right, still applying pressure with your right leg slightly behind the cinch, so your request is perfectly clear to her. We want her to take a couple steps away from your leg, reinforcing the idea she can't step into it. This will teach Molly to keep her hindquarters still, while moving her front end away from your right leg. Your hands are controlling precisely where Molly positions her head and neck, thereby, controlling how much bend she's allowed to have in her body.

“Start by asking Molly to stand straight and square. Begin asking her to pivot to the left by turning her head slightly to the left (the direction of your turn) by using your right leg at the cinch, and guiding her with your left (direct) rein. Feel Molly keeping her hindquarters stationary while moving her front end around, so you can react



the moment things go wrong. Molly may begin turning correctly with her front end, but after a few steps she may go back to her old habit, trying to bend too far, bulging her right shoulder out, and moving her hindquarters to the right. As soon as you feel her start to step to the right with her back end, tip Molly's head way around to the right and make her move her hips a few steps to the left by bumping her several

times with your right spur a little farther back to make your cue more clear. This will teach Molly to be more respectful of your leg pressure, and reinforce the idea that she needs to move away from your leg.”

4. PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

“After you feel Molly move her hindquarters a few steps away from your leg, go back to asking for your

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pivot again, tipping her head slightly to the left. The only visible changes we should see is you asking Molly to bend her head and neck in different directions in varying degrees, and where you place your cue leg. You should be using the same right leg cue throughout the maneuver. It may take several tries before Molly pivots all the way around on her hindquarters, but con-

tinue practicing, and make sure you reward her by releasing pressure and giving her a pat when she does take a few correct steps. You must give her positive reinforcement to make her want to try.”

PARTING THOUGHTS

“Make sure you work your pivots in both directions, practicing Molly’s

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‘bad’ side a little more. And don’t get frustrated if she doesn’t get it right away—give her a chance to understand what you’re asking for by applying the cue and then allowing her reaction time. If she doesn’t do what you ask, reinforce your cue in a way that makes sense to her. For example: Slapping her on the neck isn’t going to make her more aware of your leg pressure. If she continues to ignore your leg cue after you’ve given her a sufficient opportunity to react, use your leg harder until you get the desired reaction. And remember: Every horse is different—some need very little reinforcement; others need a lot, so it’s important to treat each horse appropriately. You have to learn to ‘read’ what your horse needs, and I promise Molly will tell you a lot if you learn how to listen to her.” ■