

Turning Exercises

More than thirty years ago I adopted a pair of mustangs and trained them to drive as a team. I also trained them to ride and pack. When visiting with a teamster that showed big hitches in exhibitions, I mentioned to him that my colts turned one way better than the other. He suggested that I hitch them every day and practice turning them for 20 minutes.

After my share of runaways, especially with the manure spreader and mower, I got the Indian sign on them. The National Wild Horse and Burrow show was coming to Reno, so I hauled the team and wagon to town. They won all of the team events but there wasn't much competition. I never showed them again.

In a conversation I had with a mule trainer in Missouri, the trainer said that when he rode a young mule outside a pen, he seldom rode in a straight line. He frequently turned and changed direction with them.

There are many advantages to turning and changing direction when we ride. We establish our leadership by controlling the horse's movement. We soften our horse to our hands and leg cues. We keep the horse's attention on us instead of things that could distract his attention. Each of these advantages helps make the horse safer for us and improves our partnership relationship.

I have spent much of this winter working with a couple of horses and a mule with changing direction. Neck reining, leg cues and riding one handed are a part of this process. Ultimately subtle body cues are our goal when asking for a change of direction and a stop. When practicing I try to be less mechanical (using less hand and bit pressure) and more leg and body cues. With practice the pressure used with leg and body cues becomes less.

You can use various objects as aids and obstacles for this exercise or practice without using an obstacle. I use sage brush a lot because it is handy and is randomly scattered in a variety of configurations. Pick a sage brush to turn around, ride straight to it then look in the direction that you are going to turn keeping your forward motion. Looking in the direction of the turn gives your horse a pre signal as to what you are going to do. Use your cues to turn and don't lean your body into the turn. Use as little hand and leg pressure as you can to make the turn. If the turn isn't a good one, go around again and try to tighten the circle the next time. Make an occasional stop, back up a couple of steps, release any pressure on the horse and sit quietly for a while giving your horse time to relax and think. If he is doing well, pet him. Sometimes just weave through the brush or objects that you are using. Keep repeating this and then ride on out for a while and repeat the turning several times during your ride.

Many of us do a little of this and similar exercises but most would benefit from doing it more frequently. Change hands occasionally if you are riding one handed. Keep your cues consistent. When I practice this without using an obstacle, I make a 90 degree turn and alternate directions with each turn. The more times you do this the better the handle becomes on your horse.

Depending on where you are with your horsemanship, you can pick up the inside front foot (of the turn) before it leaves the ground and set it over in the direction of the turn to begin it. Do it again as you continue with the turn. This must be done before the foot leaves the ground because once the foot is in the air the horse can't redirect it. Do this with your hand and leg to start and as you progress you will be able to do it using less hand and with just the leg cue. See how little pressure it takes to make the turn. Use less and less pressure over time and eventually your horse will do most of this with only your body cues on a slack rein. Always look where you are going and work on the timing of your cues with the front feet.

You can use this exercise to redirect your horse's attention back to you if he is distracted by something else. In order to be safe, the horse must be giving you his attention. He should look to you as the leader in the partnership. If he is looking at something off to the right, don't look that way yourself. Do something on his left side to bring his attention back to you. Touch him with your left leg or spur or give him a bump on the left side with your hand. If he doesn't give you his attention, turn him around to the left by disengaging his hind quarters if you are in a safe place to do that. He needs to be paying attention to you.

If you watch some people riding in a group, it seems like their horses are simply going along with the other horses instead of mentally being with their rider. This is not a safe situation for either the rider or the others in the group.

If you work on these turning exercises, they become smoother and your horse will become softer the more you practice. For me practicing this in the brush is more interesting than using obstacles inside a pen. I think the horse likes it better also and it seems more relaxed. Always see how little pressure it takes to make your turn and continue with the same softness with everything you do with your horse.