

Questions & Answers

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horse understands our rein aids, he no longer reefs.

Using 'Learning Theory', we can break this down to absolute basics in that the aid used to slow or stop a horse is squeezing our fingers on both reins (applying bit/

Your questions answered by experienced horsemen and women, professionals, trainers and riders.

Q Reefing

Hi, my horse tries to yank the reins out of my hands even when I'm letting him go on a longish rein. I try to keep my hands soft and the reins not tight, but he wants them long. I've had his teeth done. What do I do?

Charlotte, Queanbeyan ACT

A Hi Charlotte, 'Reefing' is a term used by many horse owners to describe the action of a horse pulling the reins from the rider's hands, usually in a strong and possibly repeated motion. Often this sudden hard pull will dislodge the rider's position, and also adjust the rein length - with many believing that this is why the horse does it - it has learned it can remove the rider's contact.

While reefing is a learned behavior, the horse isn't being 'naughty'; rather, the rider has unknowingly taught the response. Often it starts when riders stand around talking and allow the horse to remove the rein/rider contact by creeping the reins out of their hands, instead of the rider initiating a clear signal for the horse to relax (giving the rein).

Reefing is thought to be a training issue, but if the behaviour persists it is wise to try to eliminate any other possible cause; for instance, forcing the horse into a frame and thereby causing tightness and discomfort, too-short reins, sore teeth, or a muscular-skeletal problem in the horse's body may be possible reasons for it to try pulling the reins long, looking for relief.

Sophie McLean from the Australian Equine Behaviour Centre sheds some light on the matter.

Research shows that horses are incapable of planning ahead, they are simply creatures reacting to stimuli, so it is important that we consider this when assessing this behaviour. The horse does not reef because he 'wants' a longer rein, he reefs because when he does contact from the rider's hands (and sometimes the legs and seat) are removed, therefore the behaviour is directly linked to the reward. When a horse is well trained it maintains a correct outline and consistent contact, only reacting to the cues of the rider. Reefing is a learned response, and the reward is the removal of pressure. We can tackle the reefing specifically, however, we are far better to dig deeper and tackle the real problem - the horse offers inconsistent responses to our rein aids. When the

nose pressure). Therefore pressure on the bit/nose means to slow the legs. The reason the horse knows this is through negative reinforcement; the removal of pressure when the response is given, which signifies the reward, i.e. we apply a rein aid, and give when the horse slows, teaching the horse that this is the correct response.

What is happening with your horse is that he has re-trained himself so that when he puts pressure on his mouth/your hands, you are dislodged and the rein pressure removes, therefore rewarding himself for the reefing. He has also shown you that he misunderstands what the rein aid means.

You can fix this by first of all teaching him the correct response from the reins, ie Stop. When you apply a rein aid he must go down a gait, slow or shorten his stride, depending on your signal. Even from a halt, when you apply the reins, he must take a step backwards because backwards is biomechanically the same for the horse as doing a downward transition. We can begin training from halt; when re-training his stop response, use pressure by squeezing both hands on the reins, applying pressure to the mouth and releasing the pressure as soon as he takes a step backwards. Repeat until he responds immediately and obediently. When he is light and obedient, practice the same from walk to halt, trot to walk etc.

In a lot of cases the horse will have stopped reefing the reins by now, because his responses to the bit pressure are much clearer; but if the behaviour is well established you may need to address it more directly. Do this by maintaining a strong position so that he cannot dislodge you, and when he reefs the reins, immediately do a downward transition (if already at halt, step backwards). In extreme cases you can ask for 2 gaits down, i.e., from trot to halt. Leave no delay between the reef and your response. He will soon learn that pressure on the mouth (in any form) means an immediate response from his legs - stop/step back, slow, or shorten.

It's really important that our horses are provided with simple and easy to understand rules. It's not fair on them to have to decipher which of our aids mean different responses. We need to keep it as clear and simple as possible as this is how we avoid problems such as reefing, heaviness, and other problem behaviours. If we are clear and effective riders our horses become happy and secure, without developing problem behaviours.

Sophie McLean is the Business Manager for Australian Equine Behaviour Centre and Course Co-ordinator for Equitation Science International.
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