

# Educating the Gaited Horse from Start to Finish

## The Beginning: Age 3 to 6 months

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Spring is upon us and I know many folks are getting excited for those new foals to arrive. Now is a great time to plan and get ready for beginning work with the new foals and to plan for the later work that they will need in this age range of 3 to 6 months.



Vertical poll release hand position



Vertical poll release executed

At 3 months they should be leading well from both sides and be very familiar with all the early foal basics in simple handling, boundaries, leading, stopping, standing calmly for a reasonable amount of time, and have much of the good citizen work in manners down well. It's not about perfection or making little tin soldiers in the work we are asking of them. It is very important they enjoy doing the work we are asking while getting better, more familiar, and comfortable over time with the work. Quality and refinement in work will come with good practice. We are in charge of helping the foal get better at these tasks as time progresses. They will need our help each and every time to guide them through all this teaching. It is our job to remind them what is OK, what is not, and helping them to be better in their lessons.

Now that they are at an age where they can learn a little more about quality of the movements we will be asking for in hand, this is a great time to teach them about giving us releases through soft support and showing them how to do so. Teaching to back in hand is a good exercise to start with. The quality we want to teach in asking for the back up now is very important. It will be the start of a great rein back as a riding horse.

Teaching a vertical poll release is very basic. It is the first movement that is the original point for all correct movements and exercises to start from. The term release means to ask the horse through simple signals, so that the foal/horse can learn to understand and "give" us the physical release we are asking for. It's not a forcing or making of a movement through our strength or over pressure applied.

A well executed release in any part of the horse's body is a responsive move and has no quality when it is in a reactive manner. These soft releases we teach now are also a creation of a solid emotional base on which to build. In our gaited horses where we are trying to achieve

that looseness element, in flat walks and some other gaits, there will be an easy self-carriage which will extend in all gaits. This element should be taught and maintained as much as possible. The goal is not to teach the foal or horse how to brace. It is important to avoid resistance to aids as much as possible. Resistance creates the brace and it becomes a protective reaction from the student, but not a defiant reaction in most cases.

The vertical poll release is a flexing at the point where the skull and cervical vertebrae C-1 attach. There may be some lowering of the head when the foal understands and gives you the poll release. This is not the head down exercise many folks are more familiar with. The head down exercise comes later after this poll release is learned.

Goals achieved through this exercise are about starting the correct shaping of the entire body and top line of the foal which will help teach collection. Never teach them to back up in hand or rein back under saddle with their head up. A correct poll release is important in keeping the Temporomandibular Joint (TMJ) and jaws soft and relaxed. Any clamping and tension in this joint creates a tightening and stiffening from the front of the body all the way through the hind quarters, in turn inhibiting that free movement in the legs. This negatively affects all qualities of movement.

To apply the aid to the foal, gently place your right hand on top of the poll between the ears when standing on the left side (near side) of the foal. Then place the left hand on the front of the face on the nasal bone about 2-3 inches above the highest point of the nostrils. On a horse, it would be no less than 4 inches from the highest point of the nostrils. The reason for this position placement is to avoid any pressure of the soft cartilage area found lower on the nasal bone. The hand applied to the poll is to help the foal not lift its head during the poll release.

The hand placed on the front of the face should work in small fluid vibrations forward and back. It helps to think of our hands being full of water and creating a

*continued page 34*

# Educating the Gaited Horse

*continued from page 33*



*Lateral poll release hand position*

*Lateral poll release executed*

wave motion with our palm and fingers to the face; not a ridged, mechanical motion. Think fluid motion.

This is the same motion we will use in applying aids from hand to lead, hand to rein, and legs to side aids in communicating with the foal or horse. Our body posture during this should be a soft bend in our knees keeping our own joints open and soft with a slightly rounded posture to our spine—not a rigid braced posture in our back, shoulders or neck. If we desire our foal/horse to move fluidly and freely in exercises, we need to transmit the same posture in our own bodies when working with them.

As the foal responds with a small vertical flexing at the poll, let the hand on the nasal bone become still and give them a verbal reward; and then a soft rub to the neck. Try to get this release 3 times and reward each time when given. Notice with this poll release the foal will also subtly raise the base of its neck. This brings the foal off the forehead in a very small way. This opens up the shoulders so the legs will be freed up for quality steps forward or backward when asked for.

Now it is time to transfer the hand at the poll to the front of the chest. With the same fluid wave motion of both hands at the same time ask for the poll release and the back up slowly and quietly from the hand on the chest. When you get one front hoof to move backward, let both hands get quiet and reward verbally; then ask again and get the next hoof to step backward. Proceed slowly and teach this one hoof step at a time so they don't rush back in a reactive manner. When the left fore hoof steps back the right hind will also step backward, and when the right fore hoof steps back, the left hind will also move backward. Repeat this exercise a few times each session, but don't ask for a lot of steps at one time, so they actually learn what we are asking and how to do it in good form.

The goal is to help them feel and be balanced in the back up with no fear of losing their balance. Imbalance creates insecurity or fear. With practice, the foal will become confident and will soon be moving hooves in the backup consecutively in a faster response. It works well to teach the back up in this manner for three days in a row if possible so the lesson is better retained.

Once they understand the vertical poll release and moving away from the hand on the chest, then ask for the poll release with the hand to the lead rope for application of the signal to the nasal bone; and the hand to the chest. When this is achieved, the handler can remove the hand from the chest and work from the halter only. It is important to receive the poll release before the steps backward occur. If at times we need to support with a direct hand contact to the foal, do so, and then, back to the lead rope. Work only at a progression where the foal/horse can feel comfortable—not necessarily where you think the foal should be performing.

The vertical poll release is also the first step in teaching the lateral poll release. This lateral poll release represents the first basic move when teaching the foal a correct and healthy balanced form while making a turn in hand.

When teaching a lateral poll release, stand on the left side (near) of the foal, place your left hand to the nasal bone on the face front and the right hand where the cheek bone and throat latch attach. In a soft fluid wave motion ask the foal to flex laterally just an inch or two toward to you. Keep the head as perpendicular to the ground as possible while avoiding the muzzle tipping upward. If the muzzle tips upward, this adds weight to the opposite side of the foal, unbalancing it and taking it away from learning and maintaining what we call straightness (refer to SA volume 13, issue 5, 2012) in the body. Work this exercise from both sides of the foal. Once the foal learns to give a simple lateral poll release added to the vertical poll release, we can start asking for more bend in the neck in placing the hand previously used at the jaw/throat latch area to the center of the neck, giving a soft vibration for a bend in the neck and release at the poll. Then ask for a larger lateral flexion through the neck.

Keep in mind, we are not pulling the head laterally in these moves but asking the foal to give them to us. This exercise also creates a nice supple move in the foal and

*continued page 43*

# Educating the Gaited Horse

*continued from page 34*

not a stiff bracing in bending the neck laterally. Teaching the foal how to bend correctly is also teaching them the proper muscles to use in these flexions. Once the foal works well in lateral flexion with hand application, we can now move the hand on the face to the lead rope and ask for the vertical poll release. And then ask for the lateral poll release with the lead rope, working on both sides of the foal.

With these basics now in place, it's time to ask for nice turns, starting from a walk with a couple of steps straight ahead, not asking for the turn from a stand still when leading in hand. If needed, the handler can in the early stages of leading and turning, place the free hand which is not on the lead onto the humerus area. Then give a soft vibration to move away from that hand to start the turn while the lead rope hand travels just under the neck with soft vibrations of the hand to the lead rope. This asks the foal to create the proper flexion and direction of turn away from us.

An added note for safety when handling a foal/horse, is that we try not to turn a foal/horse into us but make all turns away from us. Turning them into us also can create confusion in some horses about our human space boundaries. Be mindful that we can enter their

space but that they should not enter ours unless invited to do so and in a mannerly way each and every time.

In this installment, I have given much detailed application instructions of some very important flexion exercises that, learned at this age, are the building blocks for progressive work that will come later. To do this work early with a foal is a huge step forward in avoiding problems and fixes that might come later. In the next article I will cover simple light longeing at this age and how to tie the foal safely.



*Lateral flexion hand position*



*Lateral flexion executed*