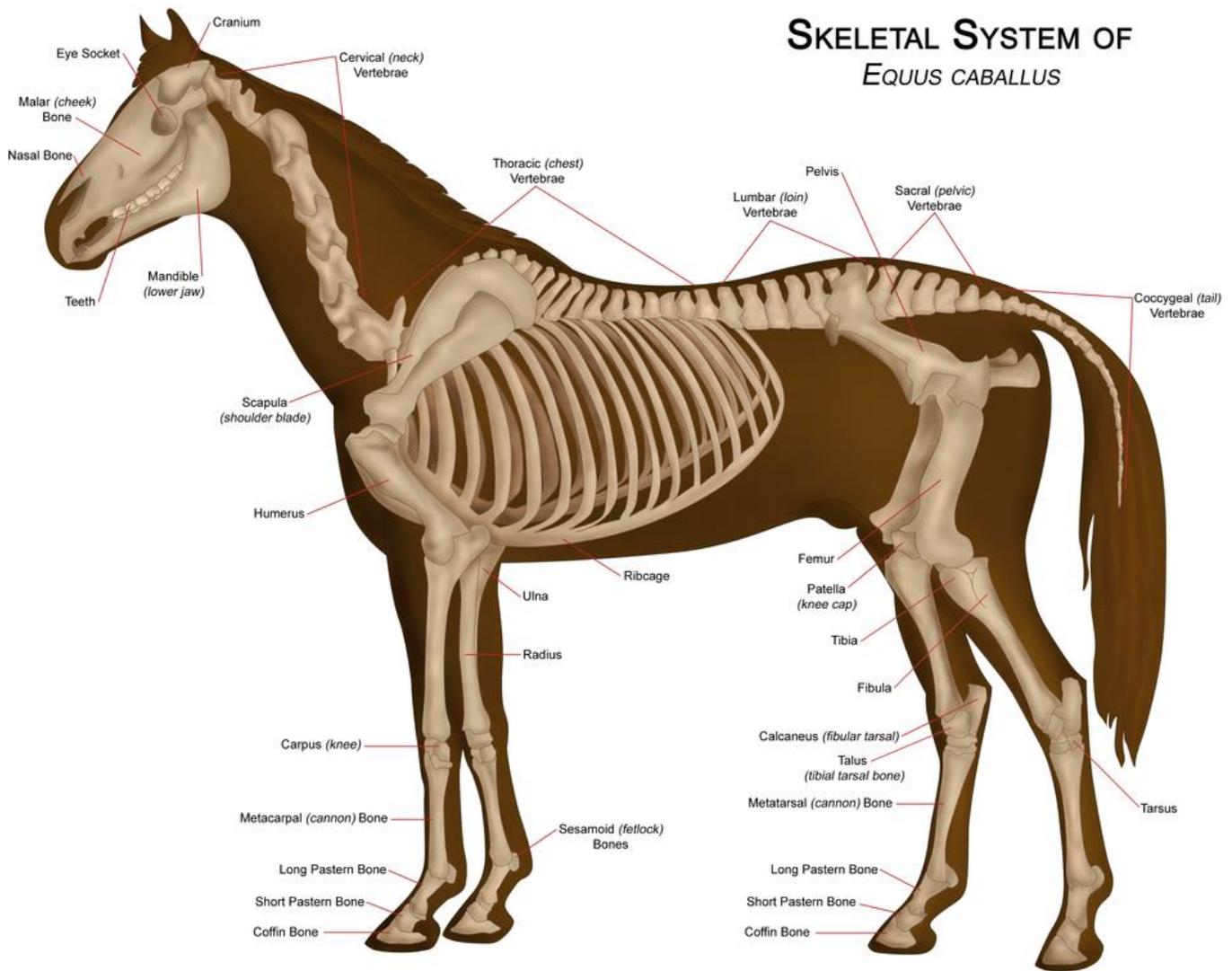


THE MISPERCEPTION OF 'THE PULLING HORSE'

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The Misperception of 'the Pulling Horse'

I recently read something about horses that pull. The article went on at some length about why they pull, how they pull and how to make them stop pulling, but the quick truth of the matter is that horses do not pull, at least not on the bit.

A quick look at definitions:

Pull: Exert force on (someone or something) in order to move or try to move them toward oneself or the origin of the force.

Push: Exert force on (someone or something) in order to move them away from oneself or the origin of the force.

Horses cannot pull on the bit. They can only push forward against the bit. When endurance riders 'tail' up a hill, they get off and hang onto the tail and are towed up the hill. That is pulling. Horses do not even pull carts – they push them, as the pressure is pushing forward against the neck collar or breast collar.

It is our perception that makes us call that heavy or hard feeling in the reins 'pulling'; when, in fact, it is WE who do the pulling - as an automatic defense mechanism.

Irrespective of push or pull, the bottom line is that this kind of rein contact, heaviness or rigidity is problematic for several reasons:

- It feels very unpleasant and wearing.

- It puts both horse and rider on the defensive. Usually the horse freezes/clenches the muscles of the neck and back, limiting the range of motion of the legs; and the rider pulls on the reins out of defense, without realizing what they are doing.
- It ‘blocks’ the horse –causing sustained clenching of the muscles, limiting easy forward movement, the rider’s ability to influence the horse easily and impairs harmony between rider and horse.

Pressure on the rein is necessary. However, it must be applied proactively, for a specific purpose and in a specific and considered way. The direction of pressure on the reins is also important – it should not be down, with locked elbows or open-ended. It must be limited, brief and intermittent – and sometimes only on one rein. The hands should go toward the rider’s torso/belly, not just back beside the body - which leads to open-ended pulling.

Ideally, when things are working well, the amount of contact or pressure can be fantasized as “a butterfly on a string” – light, but soft, not brittle. It should not feel like you are trying to contain or block an avalanche.

Contact or action on the reins that is too strong, too rigid or with the wrong direction of pressure impairs the rider’s ability to influence the horse easily and impairs the harmony between horse and rider. Aids (even if the ‘right’ aids) applied too strongly set up a confrontation between horse and rider, making both of them defensive, and the rider becomes contorted with the effort, often making the horse lose the inclination to move forward.

So what is it that horses do and do not do that makes us talk about ‘pulling’?

Several things:

1. They lack ‘self-carriage.’ Self-carriage merely means that they arrange their posture and adjust their body dynamic (the way in which they are moving) in such a way that they carry their own neck and balance themselves over their four feet. Self-carriage does not necessarily always mean ‘good’ carriage, though that is the long-term goal.
2. They may let the unsupported weight of the head and neck hang limply down. The neck is an unsupported weight that can dump over a hundred pounds of weight into our hands if it is not carried by the horse. Many horses are more than willing to let us do that work!
3. They may freeze/paralyze/brace the neck. This is unfortunately called ‘resistance,’ whereas it is much likelier to be defensiveness, habit or lack of understanding.
4. They can actively push/lever the rigid neck down, out or up.

Horses may resort to holding their neck inflexibly when WE pull against the sensitive bars of the mouth (the gums) as a way to defend themselves. They may also choose to do this when we take more feel in the reins and immediately go into defense mode, rather than rise and lighten.

That magical and ubiquitous panacea – the “Half Halt” often ends up being a trigger for defensive neck paralysis as unrelenting steel presses persistently against the gums as we drive the horse against the steel. In general, a horse that is said to be ‘pulling’ will not be very susceptible to the ‘classical’ Half Halt– until we get him up in his carriage and balance.

Once we understand that what is often termed pulling is more accurately a horse pushing on the bit by sagging or bracing through the neck, we can set out to improve the situation.

This begins with the awareness of the horse’s skeletal structure, muscular function and balance. Most people think that the cervical spine (neck vertebrae) follow the crest of the neck/mane. In fact, the neck spine makes an S-curve. There are 7 cervical/neck vertebrae (starting with #1 at the head end, and #7 where the neck joins the chest – **lower than we think!**).

At rest, or in a state of physical relaxation, the Thorax tends to hang down between the shoulders/front legs. The Thoracic Sling Muscles are the muscles that pull the ribcage up. When they are engaged, the Pectoral Muscles (found between the front legs) engage to KEEP the thorax up. If we can figure out how to raise the bottom of the S-curve and the thorax and thereby narrow the horse's base of support, we would be well on our way to make the horse lighter and softer in the contact and dispel the myth of 'pulling.'

[Editor's Note: I could not find an open source/free image of high quality to include that shows musculature anatomy, but if you look image by following this link, muscles 17, 18 and 44 are the ones being discussed: <http://www.inkymousestudios.com/portfolio/medical-illustration/veterinary/equine-superficial-muscle-anatomy-diagram.php>]

Narrowing and shortening the base of support puts the horse into better balance – balance that makes the horse more susceptible to external influence (the rider). Think of a balance-beam gymnast (whom one can dislodge with a poke of a finger) compared to a Sumo wrestler on hands and knees (very hard to dislodge). Self-carriage includes the sustained lifting of the thorax, associated with narrowing and shortening of the base of support not just the head/neck carriage.

How do we make use of this information?

For a horse to accept contact without pushing/leaning on the bit, we need them to have the following abilities:

1. Raise-ability - of the bottom of the 'S-curve' and thorax.
2. Displace-ability-laterally with mid neck, narrowing the base of support. By thinking of displacing the mid-neck, we have a better chance of inducing the horse to adduct the inner foreleg (stepping toward midline). If we are not careful, we displace the shoulders/forelegs – 'falling thru the outside shoulder.'
3. Release-ability - self carriage demonstrated by maintenance of same balance, and same speed, when the reins are loosened for a few moments. A quick release of the outer rein (first) or both reins – abruptly, only an inch or two and only for a step or two, reassures the horse that it does not have to be defensive or that it cannot sag on the rein.

These attempts at raise-ability and displace-ability often cause the horse to slow down at first, so we add:

4. Stimulate-ability (as in 'Giddy-up') – as needed. Usually addressed separately from the above two points, in order to avoid 'conflicting aids.' Driving the horse into or against the rein cultivates blockage and paralysis. We need to start with 'giddy-up' with a giving rein.

How do we develop these abilities? It is hard to give precise prescriptions without being there to see the confirmation and ability of both horse and rider, but here are a few thoughts for you to experiment with.

Ride with your hands fairly close together, as a unit, with even contact on both reins. Most rein actions should be brief (half a second) and intermittent (every few seconds). Move your hands, as a unit, toward your belly button and then back to neutral. In general the direction of rein pressure should usually be slightly upward more than backward, but rarely higher than an inch or two above the belly button, with hands operating together as a unit – not one rein in one direction, and the other rein in a conflicting direction. This should eventually feel like a hot knife thru butter, but at first the horse may be brittle or braced, expecting a long mauling pull on his bars – leading to defensiveness. If you allow the horse (and yourself) to experiment

with this brief-and-intermittent increase in pressure, the will likely begin to try raising his neck to accommodate. Do not be alarmed if this initially means he raises the top of the neck and the poll, instead of the bottom (C-5). Recognize that he has the right idea (to raise part of the neck), but the wrong answer (he raised his poll, not the base – C-5). Be patient.

You may also aim your hands a couple of inches to the left or the right of the belly button – not hands apart, nor wildly to the side, nor too high. These rein functions should also serve to bring the horse up, over and centered under the rider's seat, and move the bent – usually inner – side of the neck away from the rein. This can also work in counter-flexion – a valuable tool with horses who go defensive when we ask for inward flexion.

When considering flexion, remember that the base of the neck should come straight out of the chest or thorax (alignment) – the 'bend' starts at about C-5. The muzzle (inner nostril) should usually not go sideways beyond the point of the shoulder.

Three things to avoid in order to do this work effectively and elastically are:

1. The standard Half Halt. Most dogmatic interpretations of the half halt involve the rider blocking/pulling the reins and simultaneously driving with the legs and seat –that is “conflicting aids.” This usually causes defensiveness in the horse. The rein aid and hand aid should be successive not simultaneous. That sort of simultaneous aid-giving leads to expressions like “Spank and Crank,” “Push and Resist,” “Drive and Hold,” etc.
2. Driving the horse aggressively from the inside leg to the strong outside rein. “Inside leg to outside rein” is often dogma that is used mindlessly and gruntingly as a panacea to many ills, and this generates unfortunate results. First we need to realize what is supposed to be accomplished, the good idea that the horse should adduct the inner fore or hind leg (or both) bringing them toward the midline, thus narrowing the base of support from inside to outside. This is while the horse is stepping forward with the outside legs (NOT sideways), thus stretching the outer side of the body and neck to create bend. What too often happens is that the horse is not stretched on the outside, but instead shortened or blocked by the rein, which must be used strongly to counter the ‘popped shoulder’ (outside foreleg stepping outward) and/or ‘haunches swinging wide’ (outside hind leg stepping outward). This outward movement is, in turn, caused by the aggressive driving from the inside leg.
3. Fussing or fighting to keep the horse “on the bit” during corrections or moments of rein influence. Getting “on the bit” should be the result of experimentation by the horse, a place he seeks for his own comfort and benefit. The horse arranges himself into the form and function that we want, we do not maul and force him there. For this to become a likely scenario, we must give the horse some leeway to experiment or explore, even if that includes temporarily going ‘above the bit,’ ‘behind the vertical,’ slowing down, etc. while he sorts things out.

So there are a few ideas to help us understand the idea and misconception of ‘pulling’ and a few things to try in order to help us address the actuality of what we mistakenly tend to call ‘pulling.’

Iconoclasm, experimentation, risk-taking, re-thinking and initial bewilderment are all part of the process.

Good luck!

(J. Moore 5/2015)