

Getting Started On the Right Track In Western Riding

By Mark Sheridan with Kathy McCraine

Mark Sheridan explains how to get your horse broke before teaching lead changes by gaining control of the head, shoulders, hips and rib cage.



Mark Sheridan started showing Quarter Horses 20 years ago as a youth. At the University of Findlay he rode with noted veterans Dale Wilkinson and Clark Bradley, earning a bachelor of science in equestrian studies. Following college, Mark began an apprenticeship with Troy Green Quarter Horses and later moved to Arizona to work with Doug Lilly for several years.

Mark has trained and coached students to numerous top honors at such prestigious shows as the Congress, the AQHA World Show, AQHA World Show, and several top futurities across the country. Along with his wife, Tricia, who was also a very successful exhibitor as a youth, he now operates a training stable at Diamond Tree Ranch in Cave Creek, Ariz. They specialize in training youth and amateur exhibitors in various all-around events.

Mark is an AQHA and NSBA approved judge, and has operated Mark Sheridan Stables, Inc. since 1982.

Western riding is probably one of the most complex of all horse show events. The problem with most western riders is that they get started in the wrong direction. If you don't get your horse properly broke before you start changing leads, problems are bound to arise. You've got to have all the body parts working and have total control of the head, shoulders, hips and rib cage before you even begin to ask the horse to change leads.

I'm going to go step by step through the fundamental preparatory work of getting the horse properly broke, but first let's talk about western riding prospects. Is your horse even a candidate for this complex event?

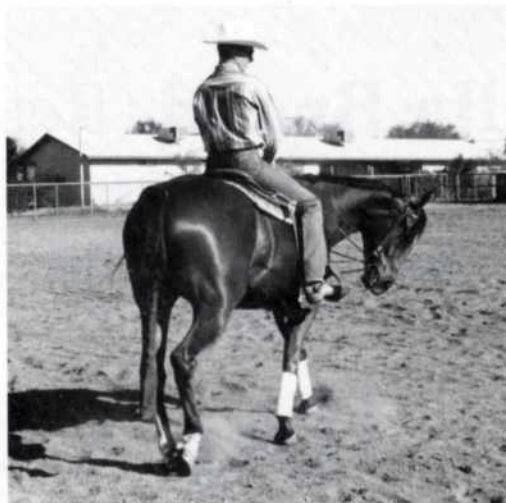
The best lead changers are usually the best movers as a rule. By good mover I mean a real sweepy looper that moves up real deep behind and is flat in the knees. The better the looper, the better the lead changer, so that is really an essential. The event has become so competitive now that a good changing, poor mover has a problem beating a better moving

horse that maybe doesn't change quite as well.

Some horses pick up lead changes sooner than others, and it's pretty natural for them, while with others you have to repeat it and repeat it for months before it soaks in. Once they understand what they're supposed to do, it becomes second nature to them, but the first 30 days can be pretty traumatic to some horses.

The best way to find out if your horse has any potential is to turn him out in an arena or round pen without the saddle and run him around. If you've got one that changes leads every other stride, or runs up to the fence and changes when he comes around the other direction, that's a pretty good indication that he can be trained for western riding. But if he drags leads, or counter canters, or refuses to change when he changes directions, then you might have problems with him, and western riding might not be his forte. However, all horses, to be properly broke, should be able to change leads to some extent.

Going back to the fundamentals, with most horses it is best to start out using a



Using right rein pressure, Mark moves the horse's shoulder to the left in the first suppling exercise to gain control of all the body parts.



Here Mark uses his left leg to move the horse's hip to the right. Draw reins allow better positioning, but should only be used on more advanced horses.

smooth or twisted wire snaffle and a running martingale. Stay away from the bridle until the horse is fully broke. After the horse is further along, you may switch to draw reins, which enable you to hold the shoulders and position the horse better, but you can get yourself in trouble with draw reins if you don't really know how to use them, or if the horse isn't ready to accept them yet.

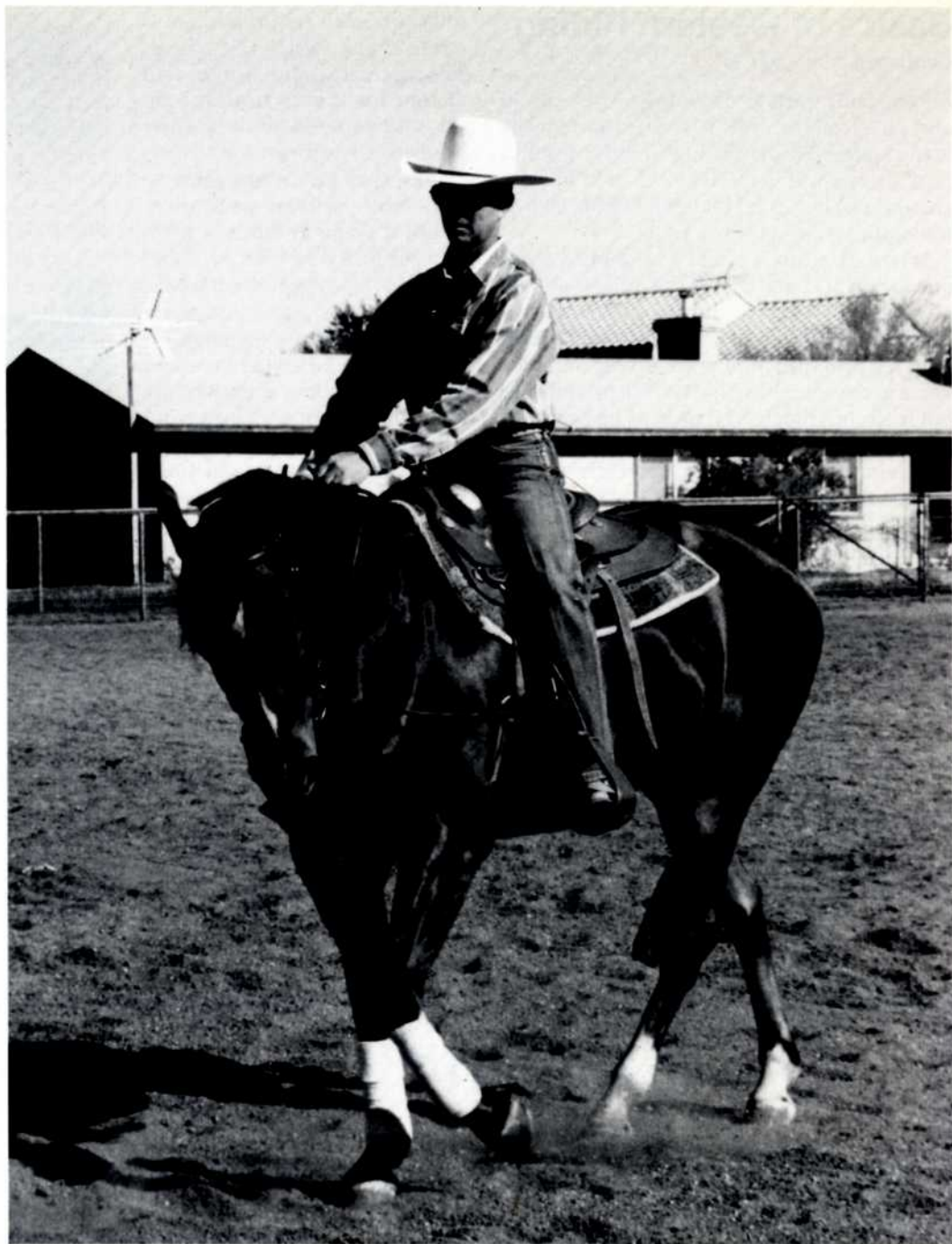
The first step is to gain control of the horse's head, shoulder and hip. The horse should already know his leads and how to cue off the outside leg, responding to leg pressure. We start with the shoulder, getting the horse to move away from rein pressure. The left rein on the neck moves the horse's shoulder to the right and the right rein moves it to the left. Once I have control of his shoulders off the outside rein, then I go to the hip, using the outside leg to move his hip.

Once I have control of the horse's shoulder and hip, I go one step further by two-tracking the horse. This refers to a side pass where the front end and back are not traveling in a straight line, so that actually you've got two sets of tracks. In a two-track, you use the right leg and left rein to keep the head and hip to the left, while the shoulder stays to the right. The same applies going the other direction, the left leg and right rein move the head and hip to the right while the shoulder is held to the outside.

This gets confusing, but if you can teach your horse to do this, you've got 80 percent of the battle won. The important thing is to always start at a walk and then proceed to the jog and finally the lope. If you can't move the hip and shoulder in either direction at a walk, don't try it at the jog, and if you can't do it at a jog, don't go to a lope.

Once you have all this down, you're ready to lope circles, moving the shoulder in and out. You can move the shoulder any way you want in either lead, but the hip must always stay to the inside of the circle. All we are doing here is gaining control over the

Continued on Next Page



Mark two-tracks the horse, using right leg pressure and the left rein.



Loping a circle to the left, Mark moves the horse's head to the outside and the shoulder in...



...and loping to the right, he moves the head in and the shoulder out.

Basics of Western Riding

Continued from page 17

horse's body parts and making him mentally and physically supple in preparation for the lead change. This suppling exercise teaches him to change only when I ask him to change, not because I take hold of his face or move him over with my reins.

When you are loping, you should keep one leg on and one leg off the horse's side at all times so as not to confuse your horse. In the right lead you should always maintain light leg pressure with your left leg and vice versa to reassure him that he is to do nothing but maintain that lead. Later, as he becomes more broke, he will be very sensitive to that leg pressure. A finished western riding horse should change leads more off your legs, and less off the reins.

For the actual lead change, I never change a lead and change directions. I always change going in a straight line, and this is probably the most important thing to remember about lead changes. If you start changing directions when you change leads, he will learn to always change when you change directions and you will end up with a horse that drops shoulders and misses hind leads.

The best exercise is to lope from one end of the arena to the other while two-tracking the horse. For example, with both hands on the reins, apply left rein and left leg pressure to start your two-track. When you feel your horse moving away from that pressure,

release the left rein and leg, and come back with the right. Theoretically the horse will change leads each time you do this and you will eliminate any hind lead hangups.

One very important thing to remember is take your time. There is no such thing as a 30-day western riding horse. It can take up to a year to make a finished horse, and if you really want a longterm western rider, it can take even longer. You can train them sooner if they really enjoy it and if they're quiet and if it's natural for them, but never get in a hurry or try to push them when they're not ready.

Also, if you're having problems and things aren't going right, seek help. Take a few lessons and get started on the right track.

Loping across the arena in a straight line, Mark prepares to change leads. The horse is moving away from the right leg and right rein in the left lead as Mark keeps his left leg out of the horse's side. He will reverse that to make the change.

