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# Know the Lead and Take It

*An elementary approach to correct leads.  
Article and photos by Christi L. Huffman.*



*Before a horse can ever take a lead, he must understand the concept of moving away from pressure. The lateral side pass and two-track exercises teach the horse to move away.*

**Y**ou will become a better rider, even if your horse never sets hoof in a competitive arena, if you learn to feel what lead your horse is on.

Now that you've thought about that a second, this is why it is important: When you can tell what lead your horse is on, without looking down, you are more in tune with the horse and can better control him in all aspects of riding.

The lope is a three-beat gait. When a horse is at the lope, he is on one of two leads — left or right. The front leg that finishes the stride determines the lead.

## **Your first ride**

Arizona trainer Mark Sheridan, who tutors amateur and youth riders, says it's alright to look down to see the lead when you first start learning about them. "But you want to wean yourself from looking for the lead because it can become a real problem," Sheridan said. "Let your body feel what lead the horse is on. Learn to trust the way your body feels in each lead."

Graduate from leaning over to see the horse's legs to watching his shoulders. Whichever lead he's on, that corresponding shoulder will roll a little bit farther forward. Quickly glancing down at his shoulders keeps you in better position than leaning over, but this is a habit you should lose. If you ride competitively, it will hurt your scores to look down for your leads.

As soon as you know the lead, pay close attention to the position of your body in the saddle, particularly from the waist down. If the horse is on the left lead, your left leg will swing a little bit farther forward than the right. The same is true for the right lead.

"A more advanced rider will be able to feel

the lead before the horse takes it," Sheridan continued. "That is what you need to strive for, because it will only help you to be able to take the correct lead. If you don't ever let the horse take the wrong lead, he's less likely to miss it when you ask for it. Remember, horses are creatures of habit."

### Helpful exercises

"I have my beginning riders look straight up, then depart at a lope and tell me what lead the horse is on," Sheridan said. "This exercise doesn't let vision tell you the lead, but forces your body to tell you what lead you're on. This is a way to teach your body to sense the right and wrong feel."

Another way to practice feel is to have an experienced person longe your horse, with you aboard, in a safe, confined area. (To longe a horse is to ask him to travel in a wide circle at the end of a long lead-line, not just a lead rope, with the handler in the center of the circle. Typically the horse is worked at a trot and a lope in both directions. Longeing is a good way to exercise the horse, and also to warm him up before a ride or competition.) Tie the reins up

around the saddle horn and hold your arms out to the sides. Have your helper longe you at a jog and lope in each direction. Not only will this make you a better rider, but at the same time it teaches you to feel the leads.

### Taking the lead

Once you can tell what lead the horse is on, you can teach the horse to take the lead you want. If the horse understands the concept of moving away from pressure, he is able to take the desired lead.

To see if the horse understands to move away from pressure, ask him to sidepass and two-track. Both of these lateral movements supple the horse and teach him to move off the rider's leg. Sidepassing is, as its name suggests, a sideways movement where the horse crosses one leg over the other; two-tracking is virtually the same thing, except the horse has forward motion and moves diagonally.

For the beginning rider, it doesn't matter whether the horse departs from a walk or a trot. From a trot, it is vital the horse is willing to lope off and not just trot faster.

"To take the left lead, you'll apply pressure with the right leg," Sheridan explained. "I want a slight movement to the inside with the head, neck, shoulder and hip. Everything is slightly moving to the left so that when the horse departs, he stays in that forward, left mode."

Sit straight in the saddle, with a slight tip forward to tell the horse you want forward movement. Sitting back is more of a cue telling the horse to slow down or stop. Keep your weight evenly distributed so the horse doesn't overcompensate to balance himself and pick up the wrong lead.

"A lot of times, beginning riders pull on the left rein when they want a left lead," he continued. "The horse's head does come to the left and the inside, but he keeps taking the right lead. That is because the rest of his body is falling off to the right. Even

**A**n AQHA-approved judge and member of the Professional Horseman's Association, Mark Sheridan trains horses and riders for all-around competition. He judged the 1996 AQHYA World Show and 1997 Quarterama. He has trained and coached three AQHYA reserve world champions and trained several Congress winners.

A native of Nebraska, Sheridan earned a bachelor of science degree from the University of Findlay in Findlay, Ohio. He is a director for the Arizona Quarter Horse Breeder's Association, and also holds a National Snaffle Bit Association judges card. Sheridan has two sons, Steven, seven, and Hayden, two.



**Mark Sheridan**

though the rider has control of the horse's head, his other body parts are going elsewhere."

Sheridan says to apply leg pressure wherever your leg is comfortable on the horse's side. If he doesn't react to the initial squeeze, give him a light bump, then squeeze again. The horse should respond to feeling the cue, not how hard the cue is applied. Every horse and rider is different, though, so give enough pressure that he will understand and respond.

If you are practicing lead departures in an arena, Sheridan suggests riding off the rail rather than right on the rail. Horses will generally take the correct lead when they are on the arena rail, especially if they've been ridden a lot in the arena. They come to rely less on the rider's cues and steering, and instead follow the fence.

### Troubleshooting

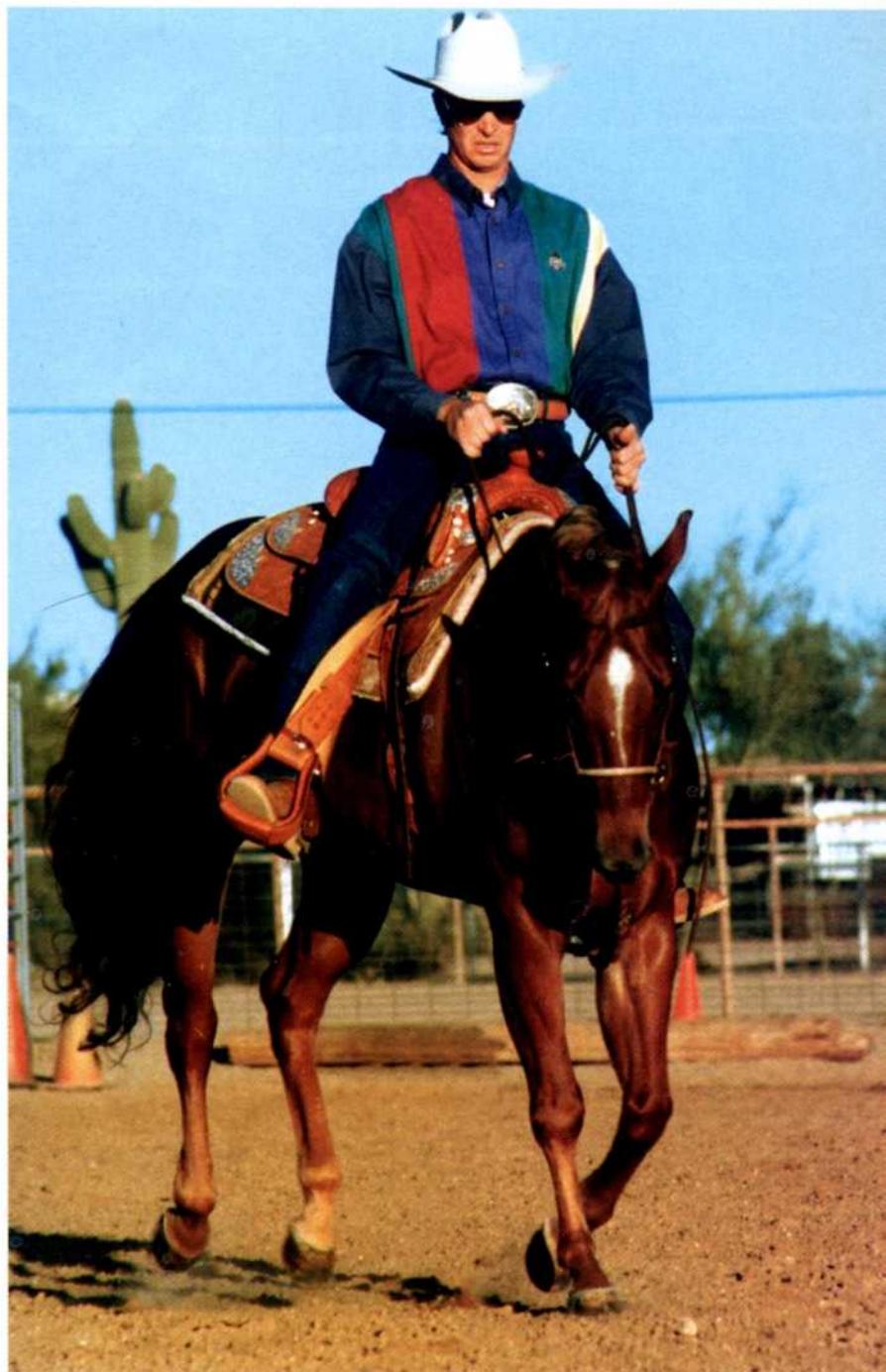
A horse that doesn't understand the concept of moving away from pressure will lean into your leg and probably take the wrong lead. When this happens, you need to return to sidepassing and two-tracking. Start slowly, just two or three steps at a time. When the horse moves away, even a little bit, take away the pressure to reward him. Soon he will understand that the correct thing is to move away from the pressure.

"For whatever event or discipline you do, even if it's just trail riding, your horse should be able to take the left and right lead, and he should be comfortable with both," Sheridan said. "When someone comes to me for help, saying their horse is uncomfortable taking a particular lead, I tell them the only way the horse becomes comfortable is to spend a lot of time on that lead.

"When someone brings me a horse that won't take one lead or the other, I lope the horse on that problem lead for 20 straight days. If you have a problem lead, work harder on that lead. Spend more time on that lead and finish each riding session with it."

Be sure that the horse moves away from the same amount of pressure on each side. If you find he will move away from one leg better than the other, that is a big sign of a future lead problem.

To avoid other problems, beginning riders



***The shoulder that corresponds with your horse's lead will roll a bit farther forward than the other shoulder while he lopes. That, and the fact that your same leg will swing farther forward, are major clues to determining the lead.***

should enlist the help of a trainer or other experienced horseman. Having someone watch will keep you from becoming frustrated and from unknowingly creating bad habits.

"It's also helpful to take riding lessons, watch riding lessons and just watch other experienced people ride," Sheridan continued. "Try to understand what's happening and why it is happening. Watch someone who is doing things the right way and see how the horse is responding. Then try to apply those same techniques." ➤