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Barby's Dream Horse

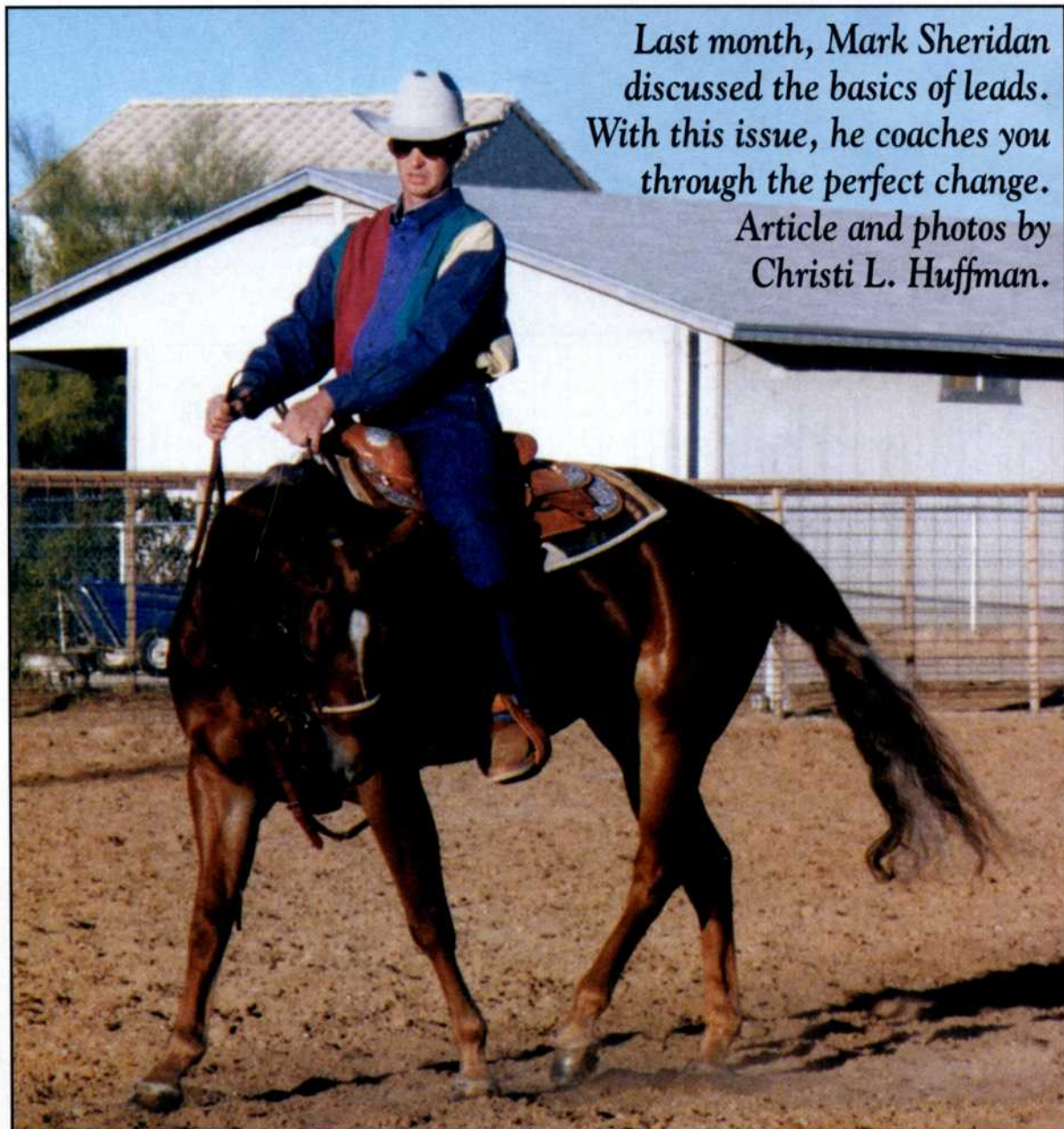
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Lead Changes Made Easier

Last month, Mark Sheridan discussed the basics of leads. With this issue, he coaches you through the perfect change. Article and photos by Christi L. Huffman.



Using his legs to keep the horse in the circle, Sheridan uses his reins to move the horse's shoulders inside and outside the circle. He does this going in each direction.

Running in the pasture, horses change leads as naturally as they breathe. Put a rider on them, though, and the task is more challenging. Still, all horses should be physically able to change leads, even if they aren't "naturals." There are ways you can make those changes easier.

"The key is to have control over all the different body parts," says Arizona trainer Mark Sheridan. "Once you have that control, you'll

find that your horse will turn around better, stop better, back up better, all because you wanted a better lead change. He will become more responsive to your hands and legs."

The best place to start is with the basics. In addition to two-tracking and sidepassing his horses (lateral movements that teach them to move away from leg pressure), Sheridan practices a circling exercise at the walk, trot and lope that gains control of the shoulders.

Shoulders

Sheridan first walks his horse in a circle and moves the horse's shoulders inside and outside that circle. For instance, in a left circle, keep the horse's left shoulder in by laying the right (outside) rein low on his neck and maintaining pressure with your right leg. Keep your leg pressure just behind the girth, telling the horse to maintain forward momentum.

After a few strides, release the right rein pressure and apply the left rein to move the right shoulder out. Keep pressure with your right leg so the horse knows to stay in the left circle.

"With the shoulder out, just tip the horse's chin to the inside," Sheridan said. "It's not necessarily important how far the head comes around, but how far the shoulder moves in or out. The head can remain pretty much straight because it's the front end that you want to control."

Progress to the trot and lope. At the lope, keep the horse in the lead for that same direction. Vary the size of your circles by pushing the shoulders in and out, which gives you that much more control. Overall, this exercise further emphasizes submitting to rein and leg pressure.

Hips

If you don't have control of your horse's hips, his lead changes won't be smooth and the chance he will drag the back lead is greater. (A horse drags the back lead when he doesn't change leads in the back end at the same time he changes the front. Some horses will catch up with the next stride. Others stay "disunited" or switch their front end back to the same lead as the back end.) However, if the horse properly moves away from your leg pressure and fully engages the hips to each side, he probably will not drag the lead.

In addition to two-tracking (which was explained in Sheridan's article last month), Sheridan uses another exercise to gain hip control. The trainer moves his horse's hips while walking in a straight line. Apply right leg pressure to move the horse's hip out to the left for 10 strides or so.

"After those 10 or so strides, let the horse walk naturally for a few strides," Sheridan explained. "His reward is for you to leave him alone. Then put your left leg on and move his hip off to the right."



Straight-line changing

"When I teach horses to change leads, I do it all in a straight line," he continued. "I never change leads and change directions. Many horses drag hind leads because of the direction change."

To put the theory into working terms — your horse is on the left lead and you change directions to the right. So, the horse changes and drops his front end to the right, but his hip often still falls off to the left. Now the horse has missed the hind lead.

Sheridan will sometimes change leads and directions with a seasoned horse. By then the horse completely understands how to engage the hip correctly and move it over along with his head and shoulders.

The release is the cue

Sheridan teaches the lead change in a basic three-step approach. Traveling in a right lead, the rider already is applying some pressure with his left leg. The first step of the lead change is to increase that pressure a couple of strides before

To get better control of his horses' hips, Sheridan moves the hips in each direction while walking in a straight line down the arena.



Sheridan always asks his young horses to change leads in a straight line. When a horse changes leads and directions simultaneously, it's easy for him to drop a shoulder and miss the hind lead.

you will ask for the change. This action alerts the horse that you are getting ready for a lead change, and also straightens his body for a smooth change.

Step two is asking for the change. You do this by entirely releasing pressure from the left leg and apply the right. This is where the horse changes leads.

"I like to see horses change leads not just off the cue to change, but off the release," Sheridan said. "I've found they change smoother and they stay quieter. Any time you can stay quiet on the horse's sides, he's going to change better. I want the horse to learn to change off

that release so that I don't always have to kick him into the lead change."

After a period of time, the horse will realize that when the rider increases pressure with a particular leg, then totally eliminates that pressure, he can change leads.

It's important here that you don't let the horse begin to anticipate and change before you release the leg pressure. Sometimes you might set the horse up for a lead change by increasing pressure and straightening his body, but not ask for the change. He must wait for you to release leg pressure before he actually changes leads.

Step three is to keep your horse moving in a straight line by holding the horse's shoulder up after the change and not allowing him to drop his shoulder into the direction of the change.

What happens after the change is just as important as what happens before the change.

A balanced act

For the horse to change easily in either direction, he must be equally responsive on both sides. He should move away from both right and left leg pressure and readily move his shoulders and hips as you ask.

You can often tell if your horse is more resistant on one side or another when you two-track and sidepass. Spend more time with any problem area until both sides are equal. If you've moved on to other maneuvers and notice resistance, return to the two-track and sidepass suppling exercises to work out those kinks.

In all the above maneuvers, remember two things to make the session easier. "First, keep good forward momentum. The horse needs to have enough forward motion so that it's easy for him to change leads," Sheridan explained. "If he's going too slow, there's no way he can possibly lift himself up and change leads in front and behind.

"The horse will probably be going too fast when he first starts changing leads," he continued. "If the speed needs to increase a little bit so that he will understand, that's alright. As soon as the horse understands, he will slow back down to a comfortable speed. Don't make it harder for him by drawing him back down."

The other thing is to keep your horse between your reins. Rely more on your legs and less on your hands to keep the horse between the reins and in proper position. When the horse stays straight between the reins, he is less likely to drop a shoulder and make a bad lead change or miss it entirely. 🐾



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Mark Sheridan, a Nebraska native now based in Cave Creek, Arizona, is a trainer of all-around horses. He has trained and coached three AQHYA reserve world champions and trained several Congress winners.

Sheridan holds his AQHA judge's card and is an approved judge of the National Snaffle Bit Association. He is also a member of the Professional Horseman's Association. Sheridan is the father of two sons, Steven and Hayden.

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