



MYTH

By Micaela Myers

Champion trainer Sandy Collier reveals the truth behind the most misguided western riding advice.

BUSTERS

"You need a stronger bit." "Lean into it!" "Work your horse on his bad side twice as much as his good side." "Lower your hands; it will keep his head down." "You're going to ruin that horse if you pull on his mouth." We've all heard comments like these, but are any of them worth listening to? American Quarter Horse Association, National Reined Cow Horse Association and National Reining Horse Association champion Sandy Collier busts these myths and more in her book *Reining Essentials: How to Excel in Western's Hottest Sport*. Here, she shares her thoughts on the most common misconceptions in western riding and training.

PHOTOS FROM REINING ESSENTIALS, COURTESY OF TRAFALGAR SQUARE BOOKS



STEPS TO DOUBLING: Sit deep in your saddle; bring your outside rein back toward your belt loop. Support with the inside rein while allowing your horse's head to come around. Apply pressure with your inside leg once your horse is turning and pull him around on his hind end. Move off in the opposite direction and repeat the exercise the other way.

For a horse that gets strong, Sandy recommends circling or "doubling"—turning the horse into the fence 180 degrees—to regain control.

► **MYTH NO. 1**
Horses that are strong in the mouth need a stronger bit.

"If a horse is strong in a bit, it's usually because he hasn't been taught to respect the rider and/or whatever equipment the rider is using," Collier explains. "Our first inclination is to get a stronger bridle for a horse instead of spending the time to train him to respect our aids and cues."

Imagine that whenever you're training a horse, you're putting him in a box. You are teaching him to respect the front, back and sides of that box.

"When a horse is green, he's in a really big box," Collier says. "When you pull your right rein, it may take half the arena to negotiate the turn." However, as training progresses, the box gets smaller, until you can move your hand just an inch and get the desired response from your horse to turn, flex at the poll, roll back or do whatever you've requested.

"It's a question of getting your horse to respect the front of that box and not pushing on the bit or going forward, forward, forward," Collier explains. "And it's also not stringing your horse's body out and hitting the back of the imaginary box."

"It's more about taking the time to train your horse than just grabbing a bigger piece of equipment," she continues. "That's the shortcut, and it never really works. Soon you need a stronger bit because your horse never learned to be respectful."

Of course, there are appropriate reasons to switch bits. "It is legitimate [to change bits] when you have a good training program, and you're moving through the basics and want to refine

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your horse more," Collier says. "That's what more bridle is for—not the horse that runs through it."

One example is graduating a young horse from the snaffle. "When you're trying to teach your horse collection, the snaffle bit doesn't really do that," Collier explains. "It's designed to allow a horse to move freely forward. There are times in the training process when a leverage bit is needed to help put a horse in a frame and collect him. You can graduate to more bridle, but it's because your horse is progressing in his training and becoming more refined and sensitive."

► **MYTH NO. 2** **It's best to use body language to direct your horse under saddle.**

Collier says that many riders cue their horses to turn or switch leads by leaning. "When you lean, you cause your horse to lean and drop his shoulder, so he moves through a change of direction shoulder first. This is never the well-balanced way to do it," she explains. "When you want to maneuver your horse, it's always better if he comes back onto his hind end, and you

guide him nose first, whether you're changing direction, gaits, et cetera."

Although it's a common inclination, using too much body language is counterproductive. "You'll see cutters lean toward the cow instead of sitting down into the stop, or reiners who want to lean back to stop their horse," Collier says. But leaning to the side when you change direction throws your horse off balance, and leaning back to stop a horse actually makes him go forward. Riders who lean to change leads may find that the horse changes in front but not behind. "Anything that you do to influence your horse's movement by leaning isn't going to be the best way for the horse to move," Collier says. "The best thing you can do is to direct your horse with your reins and legs, not by using your weight."

That's not to say that professionals don't use any body language, but when they do, it's subtle. "We do let our air out to sit down and help our horses stop," Collier says. "Those slight movements that an educated horse responds to are huge. Just a little movement of your hand or shift of your body weight means a tremendous amount to an educated horse."



Keep body language subtle. Obvious leaning or collapsing is more likely to throw your horse off balance. Sandy demonstrates correct rider position in the stop, remaining in correct alignment.

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WORK BOTH SIDES OF THE HORSE

On a horse's hollow side, he may bend too much. On his stiff side, he may resist bending. Use a circle to address these issues, staying focused on the correct bend. For the horse that resists bending, use Sandy's "key in the ignition" technique to pick up the inside shoulder: Twist your inside hand to a "palm up" position (similar to turning a car key in the ignition) while keeping it close to the horse's neck; support him with pressure from the outside rein. Your outside leg should be just behind the cinch to keep the hindquarters aligned while the horse bends around your inside leg at the cinch.

► MYTH NO. 3
Every horse has a good side and a bad side.

We've all heard that horses have a good side and a bad side, or are "left- or right-handed" just like people. While Collier agrees that most horses have a preferred direction, she says that each side poses a different challenge.

"To me, they are both bad sides; they are just bad in different ways," Collier explains. "I believe that a horse has a hollow side, which is usually going to the right, and his left side is stiff. The hollow side—although it feels better in the beginning—is really no better as far as trying to get a horse to be precise and move well."

While a horse may feel as if he bends easier to the right, he will often push his shoulder out rather than drive it up underneath himself, which is necessary for turns and spins. Meanwhile, a horse is usually quicker in turns and spins on his stiffer side.

You can see this in many cow or



To keep your horse in correct alignment on a circle, apply light pressure to your inside rein, tipping your horse's nose to the inside. Bend him on the arc of the circle with pressure from your inside leg at the cinch, encouraging your horse to bend around it.

barrel horses. "I think more barrels are knocked down on the left lead than on the right lead, where a horse loses more time because that right turn on the barrel is not as tight," Collier comments.

"It's the same thing with a cow going down a fence," continues Collier. "The horse wants to drop his left shoulder and speed through the turn

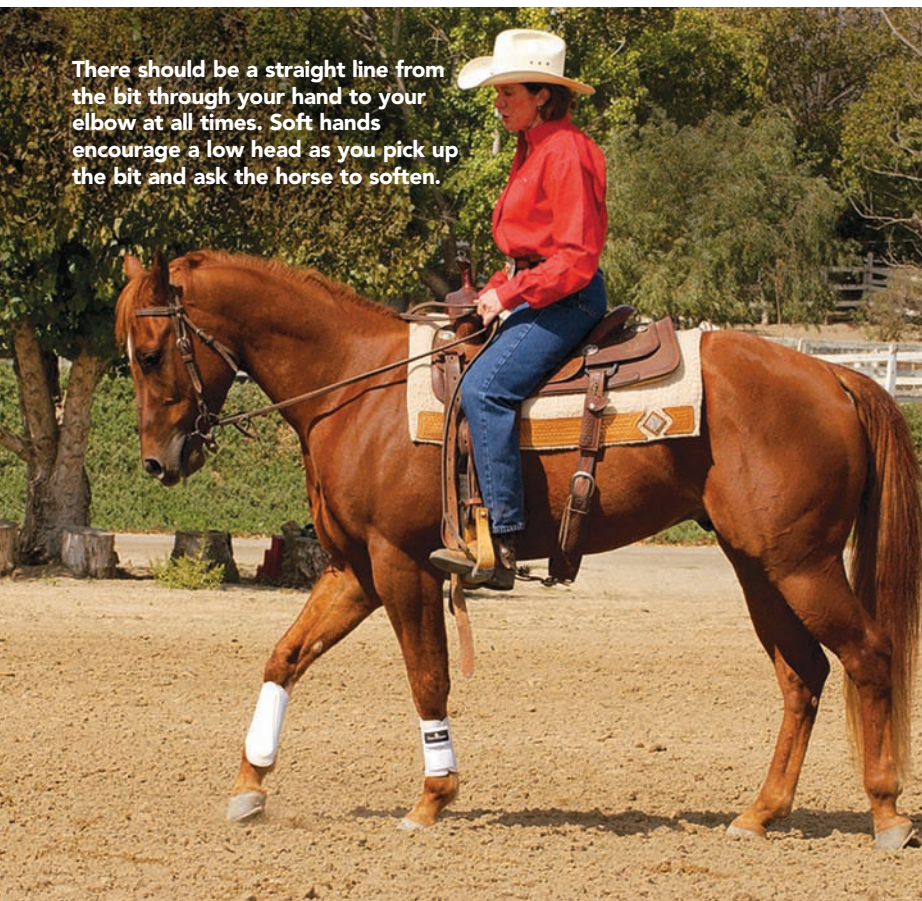
too rapidly. To the right, he's a little slower and later. Neither really works."

Rather than trying to fix a horse's "bad side," riders can work on improving each side's weaknesses. "They both need equal attention," Collier says. "I like to think about getting my horse to be ambidextrous, where he feels even on both sides."

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There should be a straight line from the bit through your hand to your elbow at all times. Soft hands encourage a low head as you pick up the bit and ask the horse to soften.



Pulling down when turning promotes heaviness on the forehead. Your hand should never come below your thigh.

► **MYTH NO. 4**
Riding with low hands encourages your horse to lower his head.

Because of the way leverage bits are designed, it's more effective to pick up your hands ever so slightly. "When people pull the reins down toward their thighs, the horse's head often comes up," Collier explains. "People think low hands make a low head, but it's not true. Soft, educated hands encourage a low head, which demonstrates a horse's compliance—his jaw is soft and he is educated about the bit. When a rider picks up the bit, an educated horse softens his chin and gives his face. That's what makes a horse's head low. To do that, you have to pick up your hands to work on the corners of the horse's mouth. You don't achieve that when you pull down on the bars of the mouth."

► **MYTH NO. 5**
Pulling on your horse makes him hard-mouthed.

"It's not a question of pulling hard or not pulling at all," Collier says. "A horse gets softer in the mouth when he learns that pressure from the reins means he needs to soften his chin, drop his head, get off the bit and rock back on his hocks."

Exactly how much pressure you have to apply to get a response from a particular horse varies. "Every horse is different," Collier explains. "Some horses are so sensitive that you have to be soft and quiet with your hands, and they learn from repetition. Other horses may require a bit more pressure applied to the reins before they respond."

Rather than focusing on pulling, Collier works on releasing pressure as the horse's reward for responding to her requests. "A horse learns by the release of pressure, not the application of it," she explains. "If you're trying to get your horse to soften in the face, stop and back up, then the minute he starts to soften in the face or shift backward, you need to release him and then do it again. Pretty soon, the moment you pick up your hands, your horse will drop his chin and back off the pressure."

Not applying the release as a reward



MEET THE TRAINER

► **Sandy Collier** is the first and only female horse trainer to win the prestigious National Reined Cow Horse Association World Champion (NRCHA) Snaffle Bit Futurity. Collier's credits also include National Reining Horse Association Limited Open Champion and American Quarter Horse Association World Champion. In 2008, Collier won the NRCHA Hackamore Classic and was presented with the Western Lifetime Achievement Award by Monty Roberts. Collier is the author of *Reining Essentials: How to Excel in Western's Hottest Sport* (Trafalgar Square Publishing). www.sandycollier.com



is what causes a horse to be hard-mouthed. "You could pull softly and not release, and pretty soon you'd have a hard-mouthed horse," Collier says.

However, she does recommend using the least amount of pressure needed to achieve the desired reaction. "I don't ever advocate that you pull

harder than you have to in order to get your mission accomplished."

► **MYTH NO. 6**
I need a push-button horse.

Collier says there's no such thing as a push-button horse. "I think a horse

will always descend to the level of the rider," she says. "So even if a rider has a horse that's well-trained and has been ridden with a tremendous amount of consistency in the training process, as soon as someone gets on and doesn't ride the horse with an educated hand, the horse becomes less responsive. Then you don't have a push-button horse anymore."

The solution? Riders need to educate themselves on proper cues and training techniques. "Otherwise the horse can't possibly be expected to come up with the correct results," Collier says. "He needs a little help."

There are many myths about training and riding that lead to bad habits in both horse and rider. With proper instruction and the help of an experienced trainer if necessary, you and your horse can enjoy a positive, productive riding career. ■

MICAELA MYERS is the author of The Horse Illustrated Guide to Trail Riding (BowTie Press) and KNACK Leg and Hoof Care for Horses.

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