

SEVEN ESSENTIALS

Sandy Collier explains the seven essential skills that every western horse should know.

By Micaela Myers

Before the western horse can become adept in the skill set unique to his particular sport, such as reining's spins and sliding stops, there are a number of basic skills he needs to master. Here, trainer and reining champion Sandy Collier outlines the seven essentials that she believes every western horse should know, regardless of which sport he goes on to pursue.



1. Giving of the Face

A horse that constantly resists rein pressure can be downright dangerous. "If his jaw isn't soft, or he tips his head upside down or braces in his neck, then he knows, and you know, that you don't have any control," Collier says.

"When a horse gives you his face and he's soft in the jaw, then he's telling you that he's there with you in total compliance," she continues. "It's very important that you're able to keep his jaw soft no matter what you're doing."

Of course, teaching a horse to give his face to you at all speeds and in all circumstances takes time. Collier recommends beginning with the basics.

Starting on the ground next to your horse, use your fingers to gently bump the reins. The moment your horse gives his face and becomes soft in the jaw, release all pressure. Once he understands the request from the ground, you can try it from the saddle.

When mounted at the walk, ask your horse to give his face by

Ask your horse to give his face by squeezing with both legs and gently bumping the reins with your fingers until he becomes soft.



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squeezing with both of your legs to drive his rear end up underneath him. Then, take a soft hold of the reins with your fingers and gently bump them until your horse becomes soft in the jaw. "If you can do that at a walk, then you should try it at a jog and then at a lope," Collier says. "When your horse gives his face, you release. Horses learn from the release of pressure, not the application of it. If you bump with your fingers, he gives his face and you leave him alone, then next time he will want to give his face again."

2. A Perfect Circle

While walking on a circle may seem simple, keeping that circle perfectly symmetrical is harder than it sounds. To succeed, you have to overcome your horse's "magnets." These are things that he wants to drift toward, such as the barn or the arena gate.

"When you try to walk a perfect circle, you find out how much your horse wants to go to the barn or the gate," Collier explains. "He will move out of the circle toward the magnet as he passes it, and then on the other side of the circle, he'll pull into the center of it toward the magnet."

By walking a perfect circle, you are teaching your horse to allow you to position him. "It teaches you to move your horse to the inside or outside of a circle when he wants to do just the opposite," Collier says. "Have in mind exactly where your perfect circle is, and don't allow your horse to bow out toward the magnet as he passes it," she explains. "To do that, gently pull your outside rein back toward your belly button and use your outside leg." Your inside rein keeps your horse's nose on the arc of the circle.

When you get to the other side of the circle and your horse wants to move inward, you have to push him out. "Move both of your hands to the outside and use your inside leg to stand your horse's shoulder up," Collier says. "Keep his nose tipped to the inside of the circle and move him out and away from the center of the circle."

Throughout the exercise, maintain an even speed, keep your horse soft in the jaw and stay on the arc of the circle. You can work on small and large circles—the important part is the symmetry. It can help to work on

freshly dragged footing that allows you to see your horse's path. Once you master the exercise at the walk, you can try it at the jog and lope.

3. The Counter-Arc Circle

As with the perfect circle, the counter-arc circle should be symmetrical. However, your horse's nose will be tipped to the outside. This gives you control over his shoulders and prepares him to learn how to turn on his hind end.

"Your outside hand comes a little more palm up and in line with your belly button," Collier says. This will tip your horse's nose to the outside. "Your direct rein moves to the inside of the circle. The inside hand is coming away from your horse a little bit and is drawing him to the inside of the circle," she explains. "Your horse's front legs kind of cross over as he walks the counter-arc circle. It's like sidepassing on a circle. Your outside leg is the one that is active and should lightly bump your horse."

Start with a large 30-foot circle and work on smaller circles later, remembering to always keep them symmetrical.

"Walking the counter-arc circle teaches your horse to move his shoulders and cross over with his front feet, which is necessary when you work on turning him on the hind end in a turn on the haunches," Collier explains. "It allows you to isolate his shoulders and bring them around. And it teaches him to move off your outside leg."

4. Backing Up

"Any time you teach a horse to do something, you should teach him the correction first, so be sure he can back well before you work on the stop," Collier says. "Go slow and easy in the beginning, as you want your horse to want to do it first, and then tell him how you want him to do it."

To ask your horse to back, take the slack out of the reins and create a "wall" with your hands. "Your fingers can bump the reins lightly, but don't 'bicycle pedal' with your hands," says Collier. To create some momentum, bump with your legs.

"At first, your horse may [be confused] and try to walk through the



When your horse leans in on a circle, move your hands to the outside and push him back out on the circle with your inside leg, keeping his nose tipped inward.

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bit or wiggle around,” Collier explains. “Your hands have created this wall, and your legs are still telling him to go. The back-up is a forward motion that you’ve redirected backward. As soon as your horse takes a step back, reward him because that’s how he will learn.”

At first, only ask for one or two steps at a time before releasing the pressure and rewarding your horse. Once he gets the hang of it, you can ask for more steps and use your legs to straighten him as he backs.

If you’re working with a green horse or one that’s resistant to backing, start on the ground. “Put one hand over the bridge of your horse’s nose and pull on the reins to help him understand the concept first,” Collier says. There should be more give and take with the reins rather than solid pressure. When you mount up, your horse should be able to make the connection between your cues on the ground and your aids in the saddle. If not, have someone stand on the ground and place a hand on the bridge of your horse’s nose while you apply rein pressure from the saddle.

5. Stopping

It’s very difficult to teach a horse how to stop correctly, with his hind end up underneath him, until he has learned to give his chin and to back. This is why Collier teaches those essentials first.

To ask your horse to stop, sit down, exhaling as you sit, then say “whoa” and pick up the reins to connect with your horse’s mouth. Once he has stopped, immediately ask him to take a step back to reinforce it, and then relax and pat him as a reward.

“In the beginning, it might take quite a bit of pulling to get your horse to stop, but you’ve given him several pre-signals by relaxing, exhaling and saying whoa, so it won’t be long before you sit down, relax and say whoa, and he stops.

6. Moving off the Leg

Getting your horse to move off your leg is crucial to sidepassing, turning on the haunches, opening and closing a gate, spinning, changing leads and more. Teaching a horse to move away from leg pressure starts on the ground.

“It starts when you’re grooming,” Collier explains. “When you put pressure on the side of your horse with



Introduce your horse to the idea of moving off your leg on the ground by bumping his side until he moves away.



The sidepass can hone your horse's ability to move off your leg and help prepare him for other maneuvers, such as spins.

a hoof pick, sweat scraper or your thumb, he will lean into you first. You have to bump, bump, bump until he moves away from it, and then you stop bumping. I try to make sure I'm really diligent about that at the hitch rack and the wash rack. That way, when I do get on the horse, it's pretty simple to bump with my legs, move my hands over and get him to take a step or two over."

Once your horse has a basic understanding of moving away from pressure, try opening and closing a gate. "Opening and shutting a gate is a really good place to start because it makes sense to a horse," says Collier. "If he's not really getting it, I will have someone help me from the ground so I can use both hands and my foot to get the horse to move the way he needs to in order to stay parallel to the gate."

Next, try sidepassing on the fence line. "Get perpendicular to the fence line and ask your horse to take a step or two sideways, crossing his legs over," Collier says. If your horse is having issues with moving his entire body over at once, break it down: Move the front end over a step and then the hind end.

"All you're trying to do is get your horse to move away from pressure, cross over and gain control of his shoulders and ribs while staying soft in the face," Collier explains. As with the other exercises, reward your horse for small tries and build on that over time.

"You want to move toward keeping your horse's head straight as he sidepasses, but in the beginning, you usually have to flex his head away from the direction he's moving and bump

with that off foot to get him to move in the direction you want," she says.

7. Pivoting on the Hind End

Successfully completing a 360-degree turn on the hind end requires control of the shoulders. For reining horses, this turn is the beginning of teaching the spin. The goal is to get your horse to turn as if he's keeping his hind feet in a tire while his front end moves around it. You will do this by tipping his nose slightly in the direction of travel and bumping with your outside leg.

To get started, divide the turn into 90- and 180-degree increments. Walk

parallel to the fence far enough away that there's room to turn. "I turn the horse into the fence 180 degrees—say to the right first—and then I just try the best I can to get the next 180 so he's parallel to the fence again, facing the same way we started," Collier says. "Then I ask for one more quarter turn so we're facing the fence and are perpendicular to it.

"Next, I sidepass along the fence, moving the horse away from my left rein and leg," adds Collier. "Then I walk the opposite way parallel to the fence, and this time I'll turn left toward the fence one and a quarter turn, and then sidepass down it off my right rein and leg. Now I'll be set up the way I originally started and can do it all over again. The pivot starts to take shape because you're always reinforcing your turn with moving off the outside leg and rein in the sidepass. Pretty soon, you're going around two and a quarter turns, and it's not that big of a deal."

With these seven essentials mastered, your horse will be well on his way to having a solid foundation to build on. If things get shaky, you can revisit these basics throughout his career. Whatever your discipline, these skills give your horse the building blocks he needs to succeed.

Thanks to Melissa Schoedlbauer and her American Quarter Horse, Chromed Out Pistol, for assistance with photos.

MEET THE TRAINER

▶ Sandy Collier of Buellton, Calif., is the first and only female horse trainer to win the prestigious National Reined Cow Horse Association World Champion Snaffle Bit Futurity. She is also an American Quarter Horse Association World Champion and is being inducted into the Cowgirl Hall of Fame this year. Her book *Reining Essentials: How to Excel in Western's Hottest Sport* explains the seven essentials she believes every horse should know, and more.



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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