

Flexion: STEP 1 to Balance

When you watch your horse in the field, do you see lack of balance? Well, maybe once in a while when the babies are playing and the fields are wet! The horse inherently knows how to use their body and can change their center of balance instantly. They can engage their hind ends in a heartbeat! Carrying a rider, however changes all of those mechanics. We need to learn what's required for them to do what comes naturally with rider + saddle + bridle.

Softness and balance begin with the horse releasing the withers. If your horse locks there, you have no "give" through the entire body of the horse. Your horse will not respond to leg or seat well. Softness cannot be accomplished through use of the reins alone. Your horse does need to know how to give to the bridle, whether with a bit or without. In other words, they must learn to release through their entire body and back. Traditionally, most of you probably are already aware of the basic flexion exercise to help develop softness. The process is to pick up one rein asking the horse to bring his head around. Most often I find this exercise to be misunderstood. Many riders try to bring the nose all the way to the stirrup. When you do that, take note of the position of your horse's head. Is it twisted a bit and sideways? Is the cheek approaching parallel to the ground? Does it feel as if you're pulling the whole horse? If it is, then your horse is giving to the bit pressure only and gives you his nose in order to release the pressure. This is not true flexion and indicates that your horse has not truly released at the withers and is twisting at the poll instead. This is the result of pulling your horse's head around to its midsection. The fact that your horse turns when you pick up the rein is not sufficient. Instead, only ask your horse initially to turn her head so you can see most of the eye, then, hold the rein steady. You're looking for your horse to drop her head and bend the neck to release the pressure. Your horse may actually move around a bit at first, trying to find release. Let her move, she'll stop when she figures out how to respond. The instant you feel give in the rein, release. That instant is the time your horse released the withers. Remember, in order for your horse to find balance in motion, they must release at the withers first, allowing a change in their center of gravity.



Fig A

Fig B

Fig A – Incorrect flexion. Note the neck tension, twist at the poll, tipped nose, and bulge in front of the withers. You can easily see the amount of pull on the bit. She's resisting, even though she is doing the exercise.

Fig B – Almost perfect flexion. Note the smooth muscle line in her neck, appropriate for the bend. Her poll is not twisted here, is much softer, and the bit is well seated, no longer pulling through her mouth. Her resistance is minimal now and bends with just light pressure.

These photos were taken 5 minutes apart, after repeating the exercise only about 5 times on each side. When she learned the release, she kept her neck bent and head low for about 30 seconds more before returning to midline. The next step is to start walking and remind her where that release is while in motion. This first step is crucial to her understanding.

If you're not sure whether your horse is engaged behind or soft throughout, your horse will tell you if you take a look at muscular conformation. Is the neck hollowed out in the middle? Is there a muscle bulge in front of the withers? Is the muscle under the hip sunken in? Is there a ewe neck appearance to the underside of the neck? Any of these are indications that your horse is not truly engaging behind and is locking up at the withers. He is the so-called, heavy on the forehand horse.

How do you feel when you're done riding? Do your arms hurt? Do you feel like you just dragged a heavy hay bale around the farm three times? Are your legs heavy? Did most of your ride feel like an argument? Or, do you feel exhilarated and energized, as if you were riding the clouds? I probably don't need to explain which feeling demonstrates that your horse was soft and balanced.

Please do try this at home.