



Figure 1



Figure 2

Neck Reining - Are You Naughty or Nice?

by Kenda Lenseigne, CMSA World and National Champion

Saddle up and grab your bridle because we are adding another building block to the foundation of Better Balance (WSH Article Jan/Feb 2012).

Neck Reining. Seems so elementary and simple, doesn't it? As I contemplated potential subjects for this issue of Western Shooting Horse, I decided to go back to this basic fundamental and hopefully provoke some thought as you go about your daily training program and competition strategy. So often, I observe a serious unfairness to our horses in their turns as we interfere, counter-pull and throw our weight around in the saddle instead of letting form and momentum take over and allow the horse to do his job effectively.

Let's start by spotlighting something as plain as neck reining.

Fact: *Mounted Shooting is a one-handed sport with many of our courses having multiple direction changes.*

Fact: *Our only way to navigate our horses is by single handed or neck reining.*

Fact: *There is a correct and incorrect (naughty and nice) way to neck rein.*

Have you ever seen photos of our mounted shooters in a turn where you can almost count the teeth in the horse's mouth? The rider is asking the horse to turn right, but the horse's head is in the air, pointing left, mouth open and white eyed. This style of horsemanship is very common in mounted shooting and we do our horses serious injustice, and it's most often caused by naughty neck reining.

Let's first define Naughty (incorrect): It starts by holding the rein like an ice cream cone, or in a fist position. By holding the rein in a fist position, pressure is applied to the neck and opposite side shank of the bit.

This pulls the horse's nose in the opposite direction you wish to turn, causing his head and neck to become unbalanced, and

his shoulder to drop into the turn. With up to a pound or more of steel in our horse's mouth, it's important to guide the horse's nose instead of counter steering at the neck and interfering with the horse's momentum.

In other words, a ripple effect happens by pulling the poll the opposite direction, the neck stiffens, the shoulder drops, and the hip disengages.

This also causes the horse to become strung out in his turn as he's no longer collected and holding form. The likely result is crashed barrels or target stands, lost time, or at worst, a fall.

Falls can occur for many reasons, but this form of neck reining can directly influence one of them. Next time you're watching your favorite old western, where a horse on screen will perform a fall, take notice of where the rein and bit shank pressure is when the horse is about to go down. A frightening thought, isn't it? (**fig. 1, 3**)

Let's now move on to a happier place by defining Nice (correct).

Naughty or Nice?

Figure 1; opposite page:
Naughty: Rein is held in a fist position.

Pressure is applied on the opposite shank, horse's mouth is open, and he's wide-eyed and unable to effectively see where he is going.

Horse is not rounded. He is shouldering in, dropping in the front end, unbalanced and unable to efficiently use himself in the turn.

Figure 2; opposite page:
Nice neck reining: Rein is held palm down with equal pressure on the nose and neck.

Pressure is applied on the inside shank causing a balanced poll and rounded neck. Horse is shaped to circle.

Shoulders and hip are working together, enabling the horse to cross over in the front while the back feet engage at the same time.

Figure 3; right: Naughty neck reining: Applying only neck pressure engages the opposite shank. This disengages the poll, neck and hip.

The nose is tipped to the outside, horse is not rounded in the turn.

Shoulders, hip and feet are not working together.

Rein is held in a fist position. This is an unhappy horse!

Figure 4; far right: Nice: Rein is held palm down, as the fingers slide down the rein to guide the nose and neck with equal pressure.

The inside shank is engaged allowing the horse to remain rounded in the turn and balanced from poll to hip.

Horse is powering off his hind end, all feet are working together to create an efficient and smooth turn.

Figure 3



Figure 4



By holding the rein palm down and walking your fingers on either side to guide the horse's nose, this light but effective steering power allows equal pressure of the nose and neck on the correct shank side of the bit (the inside).

I like to compare it to the way you would ride with two hands, bumping the rein on the side you wish to turn. In two handed reining, you would never attempt to turn the horse to the right by using the left rein,

so the same concept should be considered while neck reining.

With this correct style, the proper ripple effect will occur; from poll to hip the horse is rounded, engaged and balanced. This will result in efficient turns, trimmed time and a smooth ride which ultimately makes accurate shooting more achievable. (fig. 2, 4)

Simply put, the less we interfere, the more power we give our horses to perform. 🐾

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