

Exercises: Under Saddle – Soft Feel

The Soft-Feel is more than an exercise, it should become a habit whenever you ride, like a reflex. This is the key to help your horse to get soft, light and all in one hand!

That Soft-Feel is the first step to collection, which is the body position that is looked for in Dressage, Academical, Military and many other types of riding...



Positions

You should start from a stop, in position 3. Hands are wide and equally spread out. Later, you can get the soft feel on a walk, on a trot and eventually on a canter. Hands will get closer to each other step by step until you can get a soft feel simply by contacting the horse's mouth with one hand.

Process – getting the soft feel

The first step of this exercise is to get the Soft-Feel for the very first time. From the position described here above, you should pull lightly on both reins and wait... you will wait until your horse understands what you look for, that is to give to the pressure by bringing its chin to its breast, pivoting vertically on its Atlas/Axis joint. At the very moment when your horse gives, even if it is only a matter of millimeters, release pressure and reward.

That was the hard part. Then, it all depends on your consistency, feeling and timing. Consistency as it is something you should repeat thousands of times in the coming sessions of work, feeling because you will really have to be aware of your horse and sense this change of weight right at the poll, and timing because once you have felt this flexion it is time to reward _ that is to release.

Tip: Prepare the position...

Keep in mind that horses learn on the release part of the exercise. Not being well prepared may make you release pressure to readjust your grip or to shorten the reins, which would ruin your efforts. So, make sure you are well prepared, ready to keep the position and pressure for a long period of time if necessary, BEFORE you even start to contact your horse's mouth.

Process – backing up from the saddle

After a few repetitions, as soon as your horse gives automatically when you make contact, you will be able to carry the soft feel and to back your horse up.

- First, get the soft feel and hold it, adding a little more pressure.
- Next, wait for your horse to make one step back.
- Then, release pressure.

It is that easy! Later, you can repeat the process quicker until you release very shortly between each step, everytime the front foot goes down to the ground. Your horse should carry the soft-feel all the time.

Tip: ... for the transition!

The Soft-Feel is bringing the poll slightly above the withers, the back raises up a little bit and the hind legs reach under the belly. The horse is prepared to pull itself from the hindquarters instead of pushing with the front.

Once your horse can hold that Soft-Feel for a few steps backward, it is time to carry it forward on a walk, later on a trot and eventually on a canter. There is a moment when you will not even be able to make a transition or to back up without your horse to get that Soft-Feel, this is when you start to ride light and soft...

Q&A – Soft-Feel

What if my horse does not give its head when I ask for a vertical flexion?

Since the question is about the same as for lateral flexion, the answer is quite alike too: "Horses do not know in advance what you ask for, so let them some time to process your cue, to think and find the response by themselves."

Make sure you pull equally on both reins, hands wide spread at the beginning and wait... wait as long as necessary. That is an exercise that you can not force anyway, so just wait. "As soon as your horse gives its head, maybe just a couple of millimeters the first time, release COMPLETELY your reins and give your horse peace for a minute.

Releasing the reins means you should act as if the reins are red hot and burn your hands, let them go."

What if my horse jerks its head high and low and right and left?

That is why your hands are widely spread, to keep your horse centered, make sure you release only when your horse has the good position: straight, poll right above the withers, chin tucked in.

What if my horse starts to back up but does not give?

Well, wait! It will not be able to back up all the time, it will find a place where to stop. Even then, you will keep the same amount of pressure as we look for the good position, not a step back initially.

Q&A – Back up

What if my horse does not move its feet?

Some horses _ spoiled ones most of the time _ have been so used to be ridden with short reins that pulling gently will not make them move. Remember that after the good deal comes the firm deal. Then, pull more, do the necessary to get a change and build on this. Pretty soon, it will lose these bad habits to get new good ones.