

The Horse's Head Position by Ken Smith, Sunrise West Quarter Horses, LLC

The position of the horse's head can reveal problems that need fixing. The horse should always be looking forward on the ideal track through the pattern, **looking where it needs to go**, looking where the rider wants it to go. And a horse will naturally want to **carry its head vertically**, when viewed from the front. This is the shape the horse wants for itself. Any other head position is an indication that the rider is interfering with the horse. Let me show you examples of correct head position, and then we can look at some problems.



I am riding Tommy here in a competition run. This is a video frame. He has just crossed the mid-point between the poles and will land beside the next pole at the key spot. Note his head position – he is looking where he is going, and his face is vertical – ears on top, muzzle on the bottom. This is the shape he wants to be in; I am guiding him, but I am not disturbing him.



Here is Pat competing on her great horse, Perky. Note Perky's head position. She is looking around the pole, looking where she is going, and looking where Pat wants her to go. And Perky's face is vertical, indicating that although she is being guided, her position is not being disturbed.

I am going to show you some problems now, and the photos will all be video frames. If you are interested to see if you have any of these problems, then watch your own videos, and watch them in slow motion. Most of the time the rider is unaware that these handling mistakes are happening, but the video camera is like your best friend - it shows you the brutal, honest truth, even if you don't want to see it!



Here is a really good example of the rider trying to hold the horse out by using the outside rein. You can see the horse is no longer looking where it is going, but look at its left shoulder – when the head is pulled out, the shoulder drops down and in. More on this later.



Why might a horse carry its head this way? Because it hurts! She is trying to hold the horse away from the pole, but the pressure on the outside rein is so strong, the horse cannot obey. The fault lies primarily with the rider's rough hands and horsemanship, but contributing to the problem might be a pinching curb strap, a sore in the mouth, or an inappropriate bit.



Here the rider seems to be looking where she wants to go, but she is holding the horse's head off course. She is using the outside rein in an attempt to hold the horse away from the next pole, but it is not working. She is holding the head, but not the shoulder, so you should be able to see here, if you pull the head out, she left shoulder drops down and in toward the pole – the exact opposite effect from what the rider wants. And see how high her hands are? 'High hands rein the ears; low hands rein the shoulders'. If you want to move the head left or right, then go ahead and rein the ears, but if you want to move the whole horse left or right, then rein the shoulders.

Here's what she needs to do: Use the inside leg, and use the inside rein low on the shoulder to hold the shoulder up and out, and ease off the outside rein so the horse can look where it needs to go.

This is basic horsemanship. When a rider is 5 years old on a Shetland pony, what do Mom and Dad say about using the reins? "If you want to go left, pull on the left rein, if you want to go right, pull on the right rein, if you want to stop, pull on both reins." Then they grow up and are competing with the best, but their horsemanship is still at the Shetland pony level! They need the horsemanship that allows them to effectively control the five body parts of the horse: head, neck, shoulders, ribs, and hindquarters.



Here the horse has thrown its head up to very effectively escape the reins. Here's the principle: **'If the nose gets above the withers, the reins do not work.'** This horse is out of control of the rider for the next stride of two. A horse could do this because of pain, so that needs to be checked, but it is usually caused by one of two things:

- * Rough hands. I tell people, **"Your body, your legs, your head, all belong to you, but your hands belong to your horse. They need to float with the horse's mouth, not bounce on the bit."**

- * It is likely the horse has never been taught to put its head down to avoid pressure. That is a training issue.

A tie down can be very helpful for these horses. I prefer to call them a **'head flipper preventer'**. We are not tying the head down, we are trying to prevent the horse from getting its head so far out of position that it is stealing control from the rider.

I address these horsemanship issues in more detail on my video, available on DVD and now on a flash drive. You can find it here:

<https://www.sunrisewest.com/videosales.html>