



A show-quality sliding stop takes time to cultivate and requires higher-level horsemanship skills to obtain.

# Higher-Level Horsemanship

Using four basic exercises, **Richard Winters** offers advice on how to improve three advanced maneuvers.

Story by KATE BRADLEY • Photography by DARRELL DODDS

**C**ALIFORNIA COW HORSE TRAINER Richard Winters teaches his horses four basic exercises before beginning to train for faster, more advanced maneuvers, such as those needed in a show arena.

Winters breaks down the horse's body into four parts: hindquarters, rib cage, shoulders, and head and neck. To achieve higher levels of horsemanship,

or to compete successfully in Western performance events, those parts of the horse's body must move in harmony.

"Really, anybody that is competing at higher levels of horsemanship is controlling the parts of the horse's body," he says.

After mastering the following four basic exercises, Winters can achieve controlled spins, cleaner lead changes and stronger sliding stops.

**1 SOFTEN THE HEAD AND NECK** A young horse's natural tendency is to brace against the bridle when it is asked to yield its face, says Winters. But when the rider picks up the reins, the desired response is for a horse to soften through the head and neck, whether yielding vertically or laterally.

"When a horse braces its neck, that [resistance] travels down the body and the horse drops its back," Winters explains. "I would never ask it to yield vertically unless it can do so laterally."

To achieve both lateral and vertical softness, Winters uses a "train-track circle" exercise. The rider visualizes a 10- to 15-foot circular track that he or she must keep moving forward along while asking the horse to yield to bridle pressure. Simply walking in a circle is not the end result; walking a circle with the correct body position is key.

"The horse's hind feet are stepping up in the tracks of the front feet, and its

body is like a crescent moon—it has a lot of bend to it," Winters says. "It is bending laterally, toward the inside of the circle, and vertically, by yielding to pressure."

Winters sits straight in the saddle during this exercise. His outside leg encourages forward motion, and his inside leg steadies the horse when it drifts inward, or the direction of the nose.

"If you need help keeping the same circle, set a cone or a pole-bending pole in the middle of the arena," suggests Winters. "Then, you can use that to judge your distance and to see how well your horse is learning to follow its nose and yield laterally while staying on the 'train track.'"

Forward motion is important in not only the train-track exercise, but in all exercises Winters uses. To move forward correctly, the horse must soften its head and neck, yielding to bridle pressure, which translates into a rounded back and collected hindquarters.

"It is not enough to get a horse's nose down and to slow it down," he explains. "You have to have vertical flexion [through the back] and impulsion from behind. Then your horse will be in an athletic frame. It will be easier for the horse to change leads, to stop. But, if the horse's back is hollow when you say 'whoa,' it is going to slam those shoulders into the ground."

Winters says that vertical flexion can be confusing for a horse because it seems as though the rider is simultaneously pushing the gas pedal with the legs and the brake pedal with the hands. He cautions riders to start slow when working to achieve vertical flexion and to not get greedy—two correct steps are worth more than 10 steps in a tug-of-war.

"It would be hard for me to achieve vertical flexion without using my leg," he explains. "I would emphasize leg use, thus the term 'driving them into the bridle.'"



**"It is not walking a circle, but how you are walking in that circle," says Winters. Here, the gelding yields laterally, allowing Winters to see the corner of the eye, and breaking at the poll vertically, thus exhibiting the correct form for a train-track circle.**

"Depending on where the horse is in his training or mentality, get one or two steps yielding, then let go. Remember, when you let go, that is the teaching moment. Learn to release when the horse gets soft only," he reiterates.

Winters cautions that while the train-track circle exercise teaches the horse to move forward while breaking and flexing at the poll and yielding laterally, it does not mean the horse should rubber-neck around.

"I am not just asking for lateral flexion," he says. "I want to make sure the horse is breaking at the poll."

## **2 LIFT THE SHOULDERS**

"So many problems stem from the shoulders," says Winters. "You have to control the shoulders to do all major maneuvers: turnarounds, lead changes and sliding stops.

"Shoulder exercises segue off the train-track circle and are predicated on the idea that our horse be able to do a simple leg yield."

To begin this exercise, walk the horse forward along the 10- to 15-foot train-track circle with forward momentum. Lift with the outside rein and ask the horse to counter-bend while continu-

ing to move forward, Winters says. A horse counter-bends by arcing its nose and neck to the outside of the circle, which then shifts its body weight to the inside.

"There are very few exercises where I want to see more than the outside edge of the horse's eye, but here I want the horse counter-bent and to see its whole eye," Winters explains.

To cue, the rider's outside leg is closer to the cinch, thus pushing the shoulder to the inside. The inside leg is off of the horse, only adding pressure if the horse begins to fall into the circle.

"I don't want this to turn into a funky spin, so I keep the horse moving forward," says Winters. "Its outside foot is now stepping over and across the inside foot. This is not a natural way for the horse to move. If I can achieve this, I will have those shoulders up and straight."

This exercise applies whenever the horse drops its shoulder; the rider is able to pick up a rein and add leg pressure to lift the shoulder.

The counter-bent train-track circle is not only beneficial for lifting the horse's shoulders, it also teaches cadence, which is needed in a faster turnaround, also called a spin.

"In this exercise, the horse goes step-step, step-step," Winters says. "I start at the walk and [later] do it at the trot and lope. One of the first pitfalls people fall into with this is they lose forward motion. So envision the train-track in a circle, not a spin.

"If I am losing forward motion, I may need to put both legs on the horse to encourage it," he suggests. "The train-track circle keeps the forward motion and the counter-bent exercise keeps the horse cadenced."

## **3 CONTROL THE RIB CAGE**

Winters defines control of the rib cage—the third part of the horse's body

that must be controlled for advanced maneuvers—as being able to side-pass with straightness.

“A leg yield involves the head and neck being bent,” Winters explains. “I want to be able to move the rib cage left and right while keeping the head and neck straight. Doing this, we gain the control that is important in lope departures and lead changes.”

Often, riders will counter-bend the horse to encourage sideways movement. But Winters disagrees, saying that counter-bending the horse does not encourage forward motion, which is more desirable in a side-pass than allowing the horse to move backward.

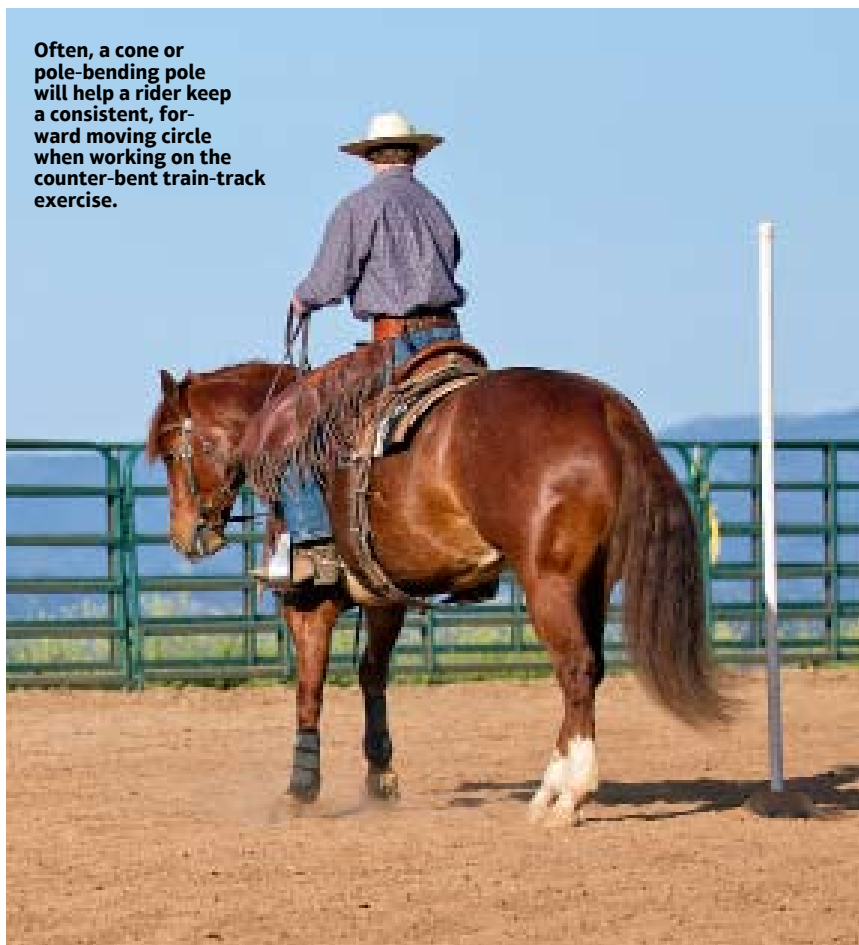
“Get out in the middle of the arena and start by walking forward,” Winters says. “If side-passing left, lift your rein hand up and toward the horse’s shoulder with the left hand and open up your left leg. The right leg is in the middle of the horse’s belly, pressuring it in the ribs. I want to just barely see the corner of the horse’s left eye and have the horse marching to the left.”

Remember to reward the slightest try and not get greedy, he adds. Advanced exercises are physically and mentally fatiguing on a horse, Winters says. The horse can handle more steps over time, and he suggests riders start slow and work up to a solid 10 steps in a straight side-pass.

“This helps if I have a horse that is ‘Coke-bottling’ a spin,” says Winters. “I want the horse to spin around and hold its hind end, not swing it. The horse is disrespecting my leg if its rib cage and hip are pushing against me, so I side-pass eight or nine steps in the direction of the spin to remind it that my leg means move away.”

After achieving a solid side-pass with straightness, Winters suggests working the cue at a trot and then incorporating it when loping circles. Loping a counter-canter circle—where the horse is in the opposite lead as the direction it is circling—incorporates the second exercise—counter-bending to lift the shoulders—and also controls the rib cage.

“A counter-canter circle will put the rib cage in the right position, lift the shoulder and straighten the hind end,” Winters says. “If I am trying to get a



**Often, a cone or pole-bending pole will help a rider keep a consistent, forward moving circle when working on the counter-bent train-track exercise.**



**A side-pass differs from a simple leg yield and requires a higher level of communication with the horse. Student Chris Colson displays proper body position and cues to use when asking for this exercise to control the rib cage.**



In what looks like a reverse spin, Winters's horse's hind end revolves around the front feet in a forehand turn. This exercise lifts the shoulders and increases hindquarter control.

to keep its body as straight as possible. When you attempt this, you are liable to feel a green or confused horse try to do a simple leg yield. But with this, you don't want the horse to move forward, but rotate the hind end."

Begin the exercise in the middle of the arena, but if your horse continues to walk off, use the arena fence. Face the fence and work the horse side-to-side until it understands the concept, then move back to the middle of the arena.

"Pick up both reins and get softness through the horse's head and neck," Winters says. "Open your leg in the direction you want the horse's hindquarter to go, and move the opposite leg toward the back cinch."

If the side-pass exercise has been mastered, the horse will understand that it should move sideways when the rider's leg moves farther back on the horse's belly to cue movement. The pressure will direct the horse to pivot only on the forehand.

"Move the hind end around without being able to see the outside eye," says Winters. "If I actually have a little inside curl [to the horse's body], that shows the shoulders are up nice and straight and the horse is really moving. However, first work on straightness."

*Controlling the horse's body parts allows the rider to complete higher-level maneuvers. Here, Winters describes how to apply the exercises.*

horse show-ready, I will counter-canter to practice proper body position. When I counter-canter, I keep the horse's head and hip tipped into the lead I am on, which would be the outside of my circle."

The rib cage position is essential to achieving straightness in a lead change, as described in "Change the Lead, Not the Direction" on page XX.

#### 4 STRAIGHTEN THE HINDQUARTERS

Hindquarter control is important in preparing for a lead change and to control a rundown leading up to a sliding stop. For more on straightness in the stop, read "Speed Up to Stop" on page XX.

"In a basic colt-starting clinic, we talk about disengaging the hindquarters, and that is the beginning of control," Winters says. "I want to advance to hindquarter control with straightness, where I can [pivot] the horse's hindquarter around with the body, neck and head straight."

Winters achieves hindquarter control by working on forehand turns. In a forehand turn, the object is to have the hindquarter revolve around the front legs, which remain in the same position. It is essentially the reverse of a spin.

"Envision your horse trying to turn around with hobbles on the front end," explains Winters. "We want the horse

#### 1 SPEED-UP THE SPIN

Winters uses the train-track exercises to initiate and correct the turnaround, or spin.

"In the spin, loss of forward momentum and trying to pull the horse into the spin, which results in counter-bending, are problems," says Winters. "Some people ride one-handed and some two-handed, but regardless, the spin is still a forward motion, so the key is to get the horse to move its feet."

Riders can gain speed and momentum before beginning the spin by trotting the circles like the train-track exercise, Winters says. The horse's body position is crucial in the spin. The foundation laid in the train-track circle exercise ensures

the horse is not rubbernecking, but is flexing vertically.

"I don't want to see that outside eye, so I am not working on the counter-bent train-track exercise," Winters explains. "I would rather the horse be straight than too laterally bent. If you bend the horse too much, it will take away from the momentum of the turnaround. Our horse's eye reveals how it is shaped up."

Pulling a horse into the spin using the neck rein often results in counter-bending, which inhibits momentum and cadence.

"If you have worked on counter-bent circles, then the horse understands the cadence of stepping around, moving the front end but holding the back still," Winters says. "I can come in with my neck rein, but I can't come hard to bring them around without using some direct rein [inside rein] to keep the eye to the inside."

Winters suggests thinking about the following sequence to set up the spin: direct rein to direct the nose into the spin, neck rein across the neck to bring the shoulders, shift your weight forward slightly and then apply the outside leg. If the horse does not increase speed with more leg and rein cues, often a verbal cue is added.

"When I cluck to my horse, that means do whatever we are doing right now, but faster," explains Winters. "If the horse doesn't respond, I will reinforce my cluck with a spur. When I ask for speed, I use an intermittent cluck."

Winters cautions riders not to let their body weight fall to the inside when spinning.

"Open the inside leg to allow the horse to move in that direction, but do not lean into the spin," he says. "The best way to achieve a show-quality spin is to practice exercises and constantly work to advance [the technique] each ride."

## 2 CHANGE THE LEAD, NOT THE DIRECTION

"I never want my horse to assume a lead change means a change in direction," Winters explains. "A novice rider will envision a figure-eight, like how the [reining] pattern is drawn. Rather, think about a figure-D."

Moving along a pattern that's shaped like two back-to-back D's sets up the horse to change leads along a straight line. To complete a show-quality lead change, the horse must be collected from head to toe,



The front outside leg crosses over the inside leg, indicating that the horse is moving forward in the spin, and the head and neck are slightly to the inside, not counter-bent at all.



Winters's body position—sitting straight and using leg cues—enables the horse to keep its body in a straight line when changing leads.



When fencing, the horse should be perpendicular to the fence and moving forward with momentum prior to the stop.

with the shoulders lifted and the hindquarters straight. When changing leads, the hindquarter will shift from one side to the other when the cue is given, and if the horse is not in the correct body position, it can drag a hind leg or “cross-fire,” which means changing leads in only the front end and not the hind.

“Trainers rarely practice changing leads in a figure-eight pattern because it teaches the horse to anticipate,” Winters says. “The

horse anticipates, leans into the change, and that makes the horse drop its shoulder and then the hind end is hung out.”

Winters envisions the middle of his arena—the line between the two D’s—in three sections: the first third, middle third and last third. He straightens the horse’s body in the first third, changes leads in the middle, and lopes one or two strides in a straight line in the last third before changing directions.

If the horse does begin anticipating lead changes, Winters suggests coming through the middle and changing direction, but not changing leads.

“Counter-canter a circle to obtain better body control,” he says. “I think about the lead change having two components: the shoulders and the hindquarters. Counter-cantering a circle will lift the shoulders up and out of the way.”

In the counter-bent train-track exercise, the horse’s body position relates to the position needed in a counter-canter circle: nose tipped out slightly, shoulders up, rib cage underneath the back and not leaning, and the hip is pushed in the direction of the horse’s lead. The hindquarter control exercise heightens the horse’s sensitivity to maneuvering with its hind end.

Winters describes the sequence of cues for a lead change from the left lead to the right: As you move into the first third of the middle, lift the rein hand; if two-handed, lift only the right rein. Next, apply right leg pressure, which cues the horse to straighten its body.

As you ride into the middle, change body posture by putting your left leg on the horse and removing your right, causing the horse to shift its hip to the inside and change leads. Lope a couple of strides straight through the last third before changing directions.

“The cue with my legs is what the horse should rely on,” Winters says. “There is no way I can get a subtle change without first controlling the body parts. It all comes back to body control.”

### **3** SPEED UP TO STOP

Regardless of natural ability, ground conditions or training, two factors weigh heavily on completing a successful sliding stop: speed and straightness. Using a fencing exercise, Winters can train and practice both elements.

“Like an arrow from a bow or a bullet from a gun, we want the horse to fire straight,” he says. “There is no way a horse can stop well if it is not straight. This is hard to do, especially when we are traveling fast. That is why you see riders fencing horses.”

Fencing a horse sounds simple: Begin at one end of the arena and lope down to the other, building speed along the way, then stop straight at the fence.

“What the rider is trying to do is get the horse to stop straight,” explains Winters. “Depending on how green your horse is, you may want to first try this at a trot. The object is to go from point A in a straight line to point B. After you stop, give your horse a break if they stayed straight. Release is the teaching moment.”

When going toward the fence, keep the horse’s face soft and yielding to the bridle; this way it will stop in collected manner. The horse should be willing to carry itself in this position if it has mastered the four exercises for body control.

“The horse that anticipates the stop, or scotches, will start slowing down before the stop,” Winters says. “This is an-

other reason we fence—we run all the way to the end.

“We want the horse to build momentum and stop true. Musicians would call this the crescendo—it gets bigger and bigger and bigger before the stop.”

The horse must drive from behind to stop true. The head and neck are soft, the poll is flexed, the back is rounded with lifted shoulders, and the back is in line with the hindquarters.

“When a horse is collected and driving with impulsion, then it is in a position to stop,” says Winters. “The run-down is crucial because the horse has to be running full-speed, collected, to stop.”

Practicing foundation exercises not only achieves softness and collection; it also prepares both horse and rider for more advanced maneuvers that are necessary in the show arena. 🐾

## RICHARD WINTERS

Winters lives in Ojai, California, with his wife, Cheryl. He conducts horsemanship clinics throughout the country and his horsemanship program is the centerpiece of the Thacher School’s riding program. The Thacher School is a private boarding school in Ojai, with a 117-year history of combining academics and horse activities. Winters hosts horsemanship clinics and camps on the campus in addition to his other instructor duties. For more information on the Thacher School, visit [thacher.org](http://thacher.org), and for information on Richard Winters’s horsemanship techniques visit [wintersranch.com](http://wintersranch.com).



**Winters (right) and Thacher School student Chris Colson, 18, of San Francisco, California.**