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## PROBLEM SOLVERS

# Head Too Low At Lope; Won't Stand For Farrier

Robin Gollehon assists with a Western pleasure problem; Clinton Anderson offers a solution for the hard-to-shoe horse.

PRODUCED BY ALANA HARRISON

### LOW-HEADED LOPER

**Q** I've been training my 3-year-old Quarter Horse gelding for Western pleasure in a smooth snaffle bit. He's coming along well, but when I reward him at the lope by giving him a loose rein, he drops his head to his knees. This causes him to drop his shoulders and fall into an inconsistent four-beat gait, which leaves me no choice but to pick up contact with his face again. I want to start showing him in the Quarter Horse circuit, but I'm concerned about doing so with his lope as it is. Should I try switching to a curb bit, or stay in a snaffle? Any other advice?

JESSICA ROTSCHAFFER, MINNESOTA

**A** Your horse is likely dropping his head so dramatically because he hasn't yet learned self-carriage, which is an imperative skill for Western pleasure. He's come to rely on you to hold him together, and therefore hasn't learned to work off his hindquarters while keeping his shoulders lifted to maintain carriage on his own. His cadence at the lope is naturally going to suffer when he drops his head so low, because his shoulders will follow, pulling much of his weight onto his front end. And in all likelihood, he's lost respect for the smooth-mouth snaffle—meaning he's become dull to it, which renders its effectiveness at correcting him useless.

To teach your horse how to achieve and maintain self-carriage, you need to make the "right" thing comfortable for him and the "wrong" thing uncomfortable. After awhile, he'll choose the right way on his own. Here, I'll give you a few hindquarter-strengthening exercises de-



signed to make self-carriage easier and more natural for your horse. I'll also give you a fix to immediately correct him from the saddle when he drops his head at the lope. You must, however, utilize both the exercises and the immediate correction for best long-term results.

**The bit:** At this level in your horse's training, I suggest you switch to a mild curb bit with medium shanks. He's probably going to respect this bit more than

**LEFT:** To immediately correct your horse when he drops his head, give him a quick, but meaningful, bump by pulling straight up on one rein. **BELOW:** When your horse holds himself correctly, as this horse is, reward him by giving him a loose rein and removing all pressure from his mouth.





**As your horse begins to understand self-carriage and gains the balance and hind-quarters musculing necessary to maintain it, you can use a lighter bump to correct him.**

he would the snaffle you've been using. (*Note:* While I'll assume you're using the leverage bit for the work I'm about to explain, you can also do the exercises using a snaffle, and may prefer to do so in the beginning. But, I suggest you try a snaffle your gelding will respect more than a smooth-mouth, such as one with a twisted or square-edged mouthpiece.)

No matter which new bit you try, you need to introduce it slowly, so your horse can get used to it before you start the problem-specific exercises. Start by asking him to back up from the ground. Standing next to him, gently wiggle the reins back, as you would when mounted. Once he backs a few steps, cease cueing with the reins, which will reward him by releasing pressure. When you're confident your horse will give to the curb, you can mount up. Then, work through the walk, jog, and lope several times in both directions, followed by wide rollbacks, stops, and back-ups—all to further get your gelding accustomed to the feel of the new bit.

**The immediate fix:** After the above preparation, you're ready to focus on the problem. (*Note:* Here, I'm going to describe the fix at the lope, but I suggest you practice this at the walk and jog before trying it at the lope.) Establish a cadenced lope on a straight line. Once you have your horse in the correct position (your ultimate goal is for a nice, level topline), gently "let go" and give him a loose rein. The moment he drops his head below level, give him a stern bump by quickly pulling straight up on one rein, with your hand extended out in front of you. He'll quickly pop his head back up.

Repeat this action each time he drops his head and collapses in front. Then, it's critical that when he holds himself correctly, even if just for a few strides, you reward him by releasing all pressure on his mouth. After a few times, the intensity of your correction will depend on

your horse's sensitivity. If he's responsive to a lighter bump, then you don't need to make as sharp a correction. He'll eventually learn that the correct position is more comfortable than the nose-diving position he prefers.

**Self-carriage exercises:** In conjunction with the above, you must teach your horse to start working off his hindquarters more consistently. The more balance and strength he gains, the easier and more natural self-carriage will be for him.

*Exercise 1: Jog a box.* Establish a rhythmic jog and move forward on a straight line for 10 to 20 steps, then stop (somewhat abruptly to encourage your horse to rock back on his hind end), back a few steps, pivot a quarter turn on the hindquarters, then push off from the pivot right back into a straight, steady jog. Then repeat, until you've completed the "box" (each quarter turn). Give your horse a break, then work the exercise again. (*Note:* As you repeat the exercise, vary it up slightly by taking more or less jog steps, so your horse doesn't begin to anticipate what's coming next. And, it isn't imperative that you pivot an entire quarter turn each time. You can vary it up by pivoting just a few degrees in the direction you're aiming for, then drive him forward off his hindquarters.)

*Exercise 2: Loping rollback.* This exercise is similar to the first, except you'll be working at a lope. Establish a cadenced lope on a straight line; lope for several strides; stop, attempting to get your horse on his back end; then start a quarter-turn pivot (in either direction) and cue for the lope *as* you're coming out of the turn, so your horse must use his hind end to drive himself forward. If you have trouble with the "slow-motion rollbacks," as I call them, work along a fence line to help provide you with visual barriers.

Over time, you'll see marked improvement in your gelding's hindquarters strength and his overall balance. When you return to your pleasure practice and try to establish a balanced, cadenced lope, you should find it much easier for your horse to maintain a proper position. However, if he has a momentary lapse and dives down with his head, use the fix described above to remind him where his body needs to be.

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**ROBIN GOLLEHON**, Versailles, Kentucky; as a multiple world and national champion Western pleasure competitor and trainer, Robin has proven skills at teaching self-carriage. For more information on Robin, her training programs, and Gollehon Quarter Horses, go to **HorseandRider.com**, and click on our Team H&R page.