

Don't lean on me

Sort your leaning problems today with our behavioural expert



Our expert Ruth Mazet



Ruth has been working with problem horses for 35 years and

has experienced just about everything they can throw at us. By treating every horse as an individual, she uses his desire to co-operate to win him round to her way of thinking, building trust and confidence along the way. Her methods are simple and anyone, whatever discipline they ride in, can use them.

This is a case of 'equal and opposite reaction'. Your horse will only pull or snatch at the reins, or lean on the bit when there is something to lean on or pull against. It's rather like a tug-of-war – each side (horse and rider) pulls against the other in the hope of winning, or in this case, getting what they want. Here's what to do about it.

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the
page*

for ways to solve
the problem

From the horse's point of view

Usually, it's simply a case of having the reins too short or tight, which makes your horse uncomfortable in his mouth. Your horse responds by trying to pull his head away from this discomfort. In effect, he's asking: "Would you please let go of the reins? I know what I'm doing and you can trust me, I'm not going to run away or do anything stupid."

Mostly, this happens out hacking. Your horse is actually very well behaved, and walks along obediently and trots when asked. But something is bothering him – that something is the constant pressure in his mouth.

The reason for snatching or pulling against the reins, or leaning on the bit is that this horse knows what he's doing. He can be trusted to behave himself. In all

likelihood, he needs no reins at all to keep him on the straight and narrow. Leave him alone and he will just get on with the job.

All too often though, people ride in fear of what might happen rather than what is happening – this big, strong animal must be kept constantly under control and if he isn't, anything might go wrong.

This makes you ride defensively, hanging on tightly with everything you've got. But by acting like this, you're more likely to bring about the very thing you're trying to avoid.

All it does is tell your horse you're worried. When you're worried, he gets worried too, which is why leaning on or pulling against the bit can be accompanied by jogging. He's not a happy horse.

Your horse is actually well behaved, but something is bothering him

Don't pick up the reins, clamp your legs on and expect your horse to get on with it



Trust in him

Under normal circumstances, your horse can be trusted to do what he has been trained to do. It's only our intervention that makes his behaviour abnormal.

Thus you must always trust your horse, unless you have good reason not to. When you first take on a new horse, you're entitled to be cautious, but the more you get to know each other, the more you can relax your guard. And the quicker you do this, the better!

What you mustn't do is ride like a robot. Don't pick up the reins, clamp your legs to

his sides and expect your horse to get on with it. You must be sensitive to his personal preferences and the degree to which he accepts or tolerates leg and/or rein contact.

When you ride a horse for the first time, play around with both, to find out what keeps him happy and comfortable.

People often complain that their horse isn't listening to them – but are they listening to him? This is a two-way street.

Your horse is always alert and sensitive to you and, in return, you must be as alert and sensitive to him.

SOLVING THE PROBLEM

1 Hacking

Above all, you want the horse to be comfortable and relaxed. This can only happen when nothing is bothering him. So, loosen off the reins until you find the point where he stops leaning or pulling. Now you know when he's comfortable. As with shaking or throwing his head around, show trust, allowing him to get on with what he's supposed to be doing. As there is nothing at the other end to pull against, he will stop leaning on the bit or pulling at the reins immediately.

2 Schooling

In a schooling situation, your horse's message is the same. He's still saying: "The reins are too short/tight. I am uncomfortable in the mouth. Please give me my head."

What you do here depends on what you're trying to

Top Tip

Please remember that, from the horse's point of view, hacking and schooling are two separate activities. Schooling is for learning specific lessons and/or progressing training. Hacking should be for relaxation unless you don't have access to a school. In that case, have separate schooling and fun hacks.



Your horse may resort to throwing his head around to release the pressure of your hands



achieve. If you want to just walk, trot and canter round the arena to give your horse some exercise, then give him what he wants. Play around with your rein contact, until you find the place where he is comfortable.

If, on the other hand, you are aiming to progress his training in the higher disciplines, you probably need to strengthen your leg aids and ride him more strongly into the bridle. Riding 'between hand and leg' is a sensitive business. You need to get the balance just right.

It's so important to look at what your horse is doing and interpret the action. If your horse could talk, what would he say? Some actions are easier to interpret than others. This one couldn't be easier. He's saying: "Please leave my mouth alone. I know what I'm doing."

SUMMARY

- › Listen to what your horse is saying
- › Be sensitive to his personal preferences
- › Make him comfortable in the mouth
- › Trust him to do what he has been trained to do
- › When schooling, a stronger leg aid may be needed
- › Separate schooling and hacking when possible