

BORRQW A TRAINER

Backing in a straight line.

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BACKING UP IS SOMETHING YOU HAVE TO TEACH A HORSE. You'll see a foal back up to kick its mother or a horse back up to kick another horse to defend itself. But it's not naturally a common maneuver for horses – they go forward.

Backing well on his own indicates a horse's athleticism. If a horse doesn't back well, he usually can't do anything else well, either.

In the show ring, a backup is used to show your horse's obedience. When you can back your horse correctly, you have control of your horse.

It's a hard maneuver to do correctly. The elements that you need for a backup are the same elements that you need to do other maneuvers correctly: A horse has to be straight in his body, he has to give through the poll, the shoulders have to be up, and you want him on his hocks with his haunches

Working on a backup from the ground is a good way to teach a horse to give in the poll, keep his body straight and rock back on his hocks for a proper backup.



underneath him – he needs to have collection.

A backup is a diagonal gait, just like a trot. If a horse is doing it correctly, his legs should be moving in diagonal pairs.

Common Problems

1. PULLING. MOST PEOPLE THINK YOU PULL A HORSE BACKWARD but you really guide a horse to back. If you pull on your horse to back up, his poll goes up, his shoulders drop down and all his weight goes to the forehand, making the maneuver more difficult.

A backup that's done correctly actually has "forward" motion and collection, and if you pull, you take those aspects away.

A clue as to whether or not you've lost your collection in a backup is what happens when you stop cuing for the back and

NOSEBANDS

When you work on a backup to perfect it, you should use a snaffle bit.

I normally ride with a noseband with a snaffle bit because it keeps the bit stable in the horse's mouth. Most horses have no problem backing with a noseband on.

However, sometimes I'll have a young horse that backs up fine on the ground but sulls up when I ask him to back while riding. In that case, I'll step off, undo the noseband, get back on and usually he'll back up easier. I think when the noseband restricts the mouth it can cause them to panic a little.

CHECK THE TEETH

If you ask a horse to back and he rears, it might not be disobedience; it could be pain.

You need to make sure that your horse has a good dental program. The teeth are the first thing I check on a horse when he comes to me for training.

If you're finding resistance to backing, check the teeth to make sure there are no sharp edges or that the bit fits correctly or that you're not asking a young horse to back up with wolf teeth.

Horses go into pressure. If their faces are sore, they will push on the bit.

I have my younger horses' teeth floated twice a year and the older horses once a year unless they have problems. Then I'll have them done twice, too.

ask the horse to go forward again. In an incorrect backup, when you ask the horse to go forward again, he will often continue to back and evade your aids.

But the horse that backs correctly will willingly go forward because he still has collection even while backing.

2. *Crooked.* When a horse backs crooked, most riders want to use their leg to push the hips back over in line with the front end. But what you should do is move the shoulders over in line with the hips.

So if you are backing and your horse drifts to the right, try taking your reins and guide his shoulders to the right to get him straight again. Don't use your right leg to kick the hips back over to the left.

When he starts to go crooked, his weight transfers to the front end. When you take his shoulders over, you're lightening the front end, putting him back onto his haunches.

3. *Release.* Remember that horses are trained by reward, and

you always want the horse looking for the reward. In this case it's the release in the pressure to back up, whether you're on the ground or riding him.

You have to outthink your horse and feel what he can do. You don't want to back him to the point where he sulls up and you get into a fight. You want him to look for the reward – the release in pressure – as opposed to looking to quit.

When you start working on a backup, especially with a young horse, don't ask for more than four or five steps at first. You don't want to teach your horse to quit. You want him to back when it's your idea and to stop backing when it's your idea.

You also don't want your horse to see backing as a punishment.

What to Do

1. *UNDERSTAND A CORRECT BACKUP.* USE YOUR VOICE AID FIRST and tell the horse to "back."

Then you want to put pressure on the reins, asking the horse to give at the poll. You want his shoulders and back to come up and you want him to lighten his front end, transferring his weight to the haunches.

Your leg should encourage your horse to collect; your calf is on your horse, supporting collection.

Your seat should be light but not on the horse's shoulders. It often depends on the horse; with some horses, you can sit down on your seat when you ask them to back, but with others, especially younger horses, you might need to be lighter on their backs.

You should sit straight and look forward, using your peripheral vision to back straight.

You shouldn't back your horse in a curb bit unless he is backing freely in a snaffle first. With a curb bit, you lift the reins and don't pull back. When you lift, he should break at the poll, raise his shoulders and come back on to your leg, which brings him back onto his haunches. By the time he's in a curb bit, he should understand that he must stay straight between the reins. If not, keep working in the snaffle until your horse backs softly and correctly.



I use an "alley" of poles going across the diagonal of the arena to work on straightness, going forward or backing up. (See No. 4. Practice with poles.) Working on straightness going forward will also help you stay straight in your backup.

2. *Work on the ground.* I teach all my young horses to back up on the ground, starting as babies. From the ground I can teach them how to give through their polls and keep their bodies straight and rock back on their hocks, and they understand what the word “back” means. Then, when I get on their backs, they understand all that, and it’s just a matter of them learning to adjust to the rider’s weight.

If I get an older horse in for training that doesn’t back well, he usually doesn’t back well on the ground either and often isn’t very obedient. Usually, if you can gain control on the ground, a horse will become more obedient all around.

Put the horse against the arena wall or rail. Position yourself facing the horse just as you would in a showmanship backup, your hand at the side ring of the horse’s halter.

It’s your responsibility to make sure your horse stays straight from the poll through the withers to the hip. Don’t get so focused on what’s happening from the shoulders back that the horse’s head curls in toward you.

If he doesn’t back straight, then stop him and pull his shoulders over in front of his hips, don’t try to move the hips to line up with the shoulders.

When you start him, start slow and ask him to back just a couple of steps and then give him release before he thinks about sulling up.

If you use a chain, put it over the horse’s nose because that encourages him to give at the poll. With a chain, a light touch and the release are really important.

3. *Sulling or stalling.* If your horse wants to sully up or stall, remember that he backs in diagonal pairs.

As he backs up, when he goes to pick up the right front foot you can tap him a little on the right shoulder with your right foot in the stirrup. As he moves his left foot, tap him on the left shoulder with your left stirrup. You can also lightly tap him with a crop or the rein. It lightens up the front end and puts him back on his haunches.

When you first start to work on the backup, try backing your horse then walk him forward to unlock him and ask him to back again, and repeat. That will help loosen him up.

4. *Practice with poles.* Try practicing your backup between two poles on the ground, 6 feet apart. It will give you a guideline. Your horse will see the poles in his peripheral vision and that will help develop his straightness, which will help you learn to feel being straight.

You can also build an “alley” of poles going across the diagonal of the arena, again, 6 feet apart. Try different exercises through and over the alley, working on straightness. Jog down it, stop, back, turn and lope off. Or jog down and do a serpentine over the poles to change direction. Then practice doing a simple lead change through the alley, keeping your horse straight between the poles.

Working on straightness going forward will also help you stay straight in your backup. It helps your horse understand the straight concept and helps you to feel it.

5. *Increasing speed.* When you add speed to a maneuver, you’re adding a degree of difficulty and telling your horse to take the backup to the next level. Your horse can only handle that increased pressure if you have slowly built him up to understand what he’s supposed to be doing.

Again, you must have forward motion in your backup, and



Try practicing your backup between two poles on the ground, to give you a guideline. Your horse will see the poles in his peripheral vision and that will help develop his straightness. Be sure to look up as you back up.

that comes from your leg. You increase the pressure through your reins, but it’s also through your leg as you would to send your horse forward. You sit down and bump him off your leg.

The backup is really an extension of a collected stop. If the stop is good, the backup is going to be good and vice versa.

In the reining, you have controlled speed to a stop. That same forward motion in the run down through the stop takes you back in the backup.

But in trail, you want a slower motion in the stop and backup. The horse must learn how to keep his feet together and be really careful in the backup. ❏

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BIO

AQHA Professional Horseman **PATTI CARTER** owns and operates Patti Carter Performance Horses in St. George, Ontario. A respected trainer and judge, she holds cards with AQHA, National Reining Horse Association, National Reined Cow Horse Association, National Snaffle Bit Association, American Paint Horse Association and Palomino Horse Breeders of America.

Patti’s fellow Pro Horsemen honored her as the 2005 AQHA/Professional’s Choice Professional Horsewoman of the Year. A national director from Canada, Patti is also the Canadian chair for the 2008 Youth World Cup.

Daughter of AQHA Judge Joe Carter and his wife, Pat, Patti has shown and/or trained American Quarter Horses her entire life. An active competitor, she often shows alongside her daughter, Paige.