

Supple Your Stiff Horse

There are lots of exercises you can do to supple a stiff horse. But one of my favorites is one I call "+7/+1".

Here are the aids to supple your horse with that exercise.

THE ACTIVE AIDS

The Inside Rein

The action of the inside rein is the same as it is for loosening the poll (indirect rein). However, in this case, ask for a bigger bend. Turn the key in the lock to bend his neck until his face is 7 inches (+7) to the inside of a neutral position (neutral means his chin is directly in line with the crease in the middle of his chest.).

To use an indirect rein, turn your wrist so that:

Your thumb points toward the center of a circle.

Your fingernails point up toward your face

Your baby finger "scoops" up toward your opposite shoulder

Your entire fist stays forward in the "work area" but moves over toward the withers. (Come very close to the withers, but don't cross over.)

As soon as you've turned your hand in that position, return to a normal position with the thumb as the highest point of your hand

Bend and straighten your horse's neck to a +7 three times.

Do the "three bends" one right after the other. Do them very quickly but very smoothly.

Make sure to keep a contact with your horse's mouth before, during, and after you bend him. Don't let the rein get loopy.

The Inside Leg

It's very important to use your leg at the same time you use your inside rein.

For example, bend your horse's neck with your right wrist to a +7, and squeeze with your right calf at the same time.

By doing so, you're telling his right hind leg to go forward into your right hand.

In this way, you put your horse "through" the right side of his body.

THE PASSIVE AIDS

The Outside Rein

Keep your outside rein steady and supporting to limit the amount of bend in your horse's neck to a +7.

Don't let your outside hand go forward toward your horse's mouth. Keep your hands side by side.

As soon as you've bent your horse's neck to a +7, use your outside rein to straighten it and bring your horse back to a +1 flexion.

Important: Don't keep him bent to a +7 until he "gives". That's the wrong kind of "giving". He's just giving in the jaw, and that's not what you want! You want him to come over his back as he connects his hind leg to your hand)

The Outside Leg

If your horse is very stiff, you'll need to support him with your outside leg to prevent him from swinging his hindquarters out when you bend him with your inside leg and rein.

Make sure all four of his legs stay on the original line of travel. Your horse's neck is the only part of his body that comes off the line of travel.

The Sequence of Aids Is

Go on a circle, and supple your horse three times in a row. Then leave him alone for 6-8 strides to give him time to react to the suppling. During those 6-8 strides, make sure your contact is elastic depending on whichever gait you're in.

Elastic contact means:

In the walk and canter, your elbows open and close as if you're rowing a boat.

In the trot, your elbows open and close like a hinge or like you're washing clothes on an old-fashioned scrub board.

Keep alternating between suppling your stiff horse three times and then being quiet for 6-8 strides. If you've been effective, with each set of "three supples", your horse will lengthen and lower his head and neck. He'll also feel looser and softer in his body and more mentally relaxed.

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