

'Hi, I've just backed my thoroughbred, he is ever so good and calm and relaxed, slight problem is in walk he has a very low head carriage, so low that his head is nearly on the floor. When he's trotting he holds his head up and goes in a beautiful outline, any advice on how to raise his head in walk? Thanks'

It's good to hear that a young horse has been allowed to have such a length of rein! Often riders are too quick to take hold and focus on getting their horse on the bit. Young horses need time to understand the aids and find their own balance. Pulling them into shape too quickly means they learn to rely on your hands for support. It's likely the problem doesn't show itself in trot or canter because A) he's naturally moving forward and B) you're probably more aware of your contact as there's more chance of a spook or upset.

It's very easy with a young horse to ride on too long a contact. It usually stems from opening your rein to the inside as you ask him to steer. What tends to happen is every time you ask him to turn or bend your rein slips another inch longer. Eventually your contact is so long he can reach to the floor. Also be aware of your own position. Many riders worry that they shouldn't sit on a young horse's back but it's far more detrimental to lean forward over their shoulders than it is to sit upright and stay balanced.

Your thumb position is important too. (Check this out - <http://www.schoolyourhorse.com/2012/02/25/thumbs-up-or-down/>) It needs to stay clamped on top of your reins to stop them sliding any longer and it should always be pointing towards the bit – not up towards your horse's ears. This keeps the line from your elbow through your wrist to the bit. If your thumb tips upwards it puts a backward pressure onto the bit which could make him tighten his back or jaw which will stop him moving freely forward.

It's important with any horse to teach him to go forward without constant nagging from your legs. *Walk large round the school and at each marker use your legs together. If he's slow to respond tap him up with your whip. Between markers keep your calf muscle against his side but don't push. You'll find he'll eventually move forward without you having to keep asking. This is a vital aid to establish – that way when you do use your legs it means try harder not just go forward/faster.

Allow your horse to stretch in walk for the first few circuits of the school. This gives him a chance to relax and stretch his back as well as find his own natural balance. Don't allow him to slop round the school sniffing at the ground – make sure he's stepping out with purpose. That should get him looking ahead rather than down.

When you do take up your reins always put your legs on first. If you've worked on the last exercise* your horse will understand that he needs to step further under his body not go faster. The further under his body his hind legs go the higher his shoulders and neck can come. If you pull him up before you've got his hocks in position he'll hollow his back to compensate.

Your horse has got used to carrying himself in a low head carriage so it might be necessary for you to bring him back up to a normal contact in stages. Try shortening your contact by a couple of inches per session rather than taking up six and taking him by surprise. Set yourself a target of two weeks to get him up to a 'normal' position. Ask too much too quickly and you run the risk of confusing him and creating unnecessary tension.

It's clear your horse is happy and moving well into a contact in trot. It would be a good idea to concentrate on your trot to walk transitions. Focus on holding the same contact as you walk – it's easy to let a few inches slip through your fingers because you're trying to stay soft on his mouth. If he tries to take the reins from you clamp your thumb down but keep your arms relaxed so you follow the movement of his head and neck. Move your 2nd and 3rd fingers on the reins as if you were texting someone or splashing in water. That way your hand can't set against him and he will feel a soft pressure not a solid one. If he slows down because you're keeping up the contact then tap him up with your whip. These are simple but important ground rules to establish now. Once they're in place everything else is easy.

Young horses can lose interest very quickly so perhaps ride one 20m circle in trot and one in walk. Then go off and ride a three loop serpentine or have a circuit in canter. Working for too long on one subject can demoralise a genuine horse and it's far better to do short bursts of intense work interspersed with things he finds fun or easy.

Practise out hacking too. Set some new rules where you only allow your horse to stretch when you give him the rein – not if he takes. Teach him to walk on into a steady contact – no outline required. Focus on keeping his poll at hand level initially. It will take time because he needs to readjust his balance.

If you lunge make sure you spend as much time in walk as you do trot and canter. By all means allow him to let off steam at the start of a session and work him in trot to get him settled but then walk and concentrate on getting him to step under his body with his hind legs so he learns to take his weight on his quarters not his shoulders.

The fact your horse has been stretching to the floor shows you haven't been too quick to get him into an outline. That's a really positive approach to riding a young horse. Keep reminding yourself "Ride forward and don't pull back" and you won't go far wrong.

If you have any further questions don't hesitate to get in touch at lorraine@schoolyourhorse.com or you can now upload a video on the forum under "Show and Tell".

<http://www.schoolyourhorse.com/forum/?mingleforumaction=viewforum&f=17.0> It doesn't have to be a perfect film – prop your mobile on the ménage fence and hit play – you'd be amazed what can be seen from a few minutes of film.