

## Collection: Meeting in the Middle

By bringing your horse's front end and hindquarters together, you'll find him becoming more balanced, agile, fluid and responsive.

The term "collection" gets thrown around by lots of riders, but if you pinned them down, a surprising number would have a hard time explaining exactly what collection looks or feels like. Some folks see a horse who's traveling with nice neck flexion and head elevation and declare him to be collected, even though he isn't using the rest of his body properly. Others talk about the horse's "frame," as though achieving some static, stiffly composed posture is the goal.



But collection is, well, a collection itself—a combination of engaged hindquarters, a light forehand, elevated withers, a shortened, rounded back, an arched neck, and softness on the bridle. That sounds like a tall order...and it is.

**With consistent training, John can collect his horse to the point that they're virtually trotting in place. Although John and Preacher are in western tack, dressage enthusiasts would recognize this movement as a piaffe.**

Achieving collection takes plenty of work. It involves training correct body position one piece at a time. It's physically demanding for the horse, because it's not his natural way of going, so he will need to develop muscles to support the right positions and movement. Collection offers many advantages, improving your horse's balance, athleticism, responsiveness, and grace, making him a joy to watch and to ride. In fact, it's so important, you should ask for collection in everything you work on with your horse, including starts, stops and transitions.

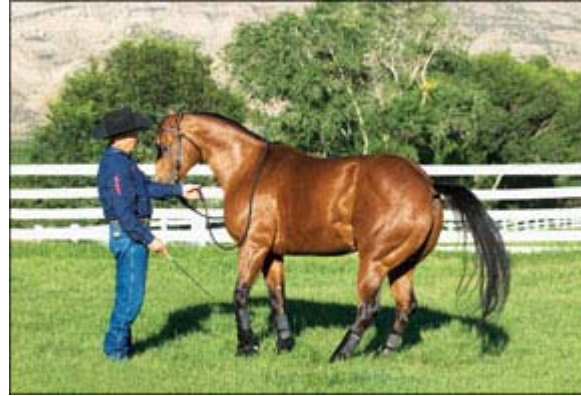
You can begin to lay the foundation for collection the minute you start working with (or retraining) a horse. The process starts on the ground, but remember—everything you work on from the ground transfers directly to your work in the saddle. The rein cues you teach from the ground will be the same when you're on your horse's back. The training whip that helps develop the go-forward cue is a stand-in for the leg cue you'll use when you ride him.

Let's look at the basic building blocks of collection. For these exercises, you'll want to have your horse bridled, preferably with a full-cheek snaffle bit, and you should be working in a safe, quiet location. We're going to use the rein to have a conversation with four parts of the horse's body: his nose, his ear, his hip, and his shoulder.

### Building Block #1: Get Him to Give

The starting point will be teaching your horse to give to the bit by bringing his nose toward you when you apply rein pressure. Position yourself on the left side of your horse near his shoulder, facing his side. Pick up the left rein about six to 12 inches from the bit with your left hand. Take the slack out of the rein so that you're putting a small amount of pressure on the bit (maybe a pound of pressure). Remember that you always want to start with the lightest cue possible. When you see your horse thinking about moving his nose in the direction of the rein you're holding, or if he actually moves his nose toward you, immediately release the pressure.

Depending on how well he's accustomed to the bit, you may encounter a variety of other reactions at first. For instance, he might just stay in neutral, not budging, possibly opening his mouth in response to the bit pressure. Or he might throw his head up and away and maybe move his feet as well. Your challenge is to try to maintain that consistent, mild pressure that lets him know he hasn't offered the right answer. If he moves away, try to stay with him without increasing the rein pressure or throwing it away. The instant you feel even a fractional give, release the rein.



The name of the game here is repetition. Wait two to five seconds and then repeat the process. Praise him and occasionally reward him with a rub or a hug. Once you can see that he understands what you want, move to the other side and start over. When he's responding fairly well on that side, switch back. You want to alternate sides often, working through maybe five or so repetitions on each side. Eventually, your horse will give with very little pressure—maybe as soon as you pick up the rein. If he gives as you reach for the rein, don't keep reaching; reward him immediately.

**One secret to achieving collection is connecting the rein to the horse's hips and shoulders. You'll ask your horse to bring his nose toward the base of his neck, move his shoulders and bring his hips forward. This is hard work, so work on it in short increments.**

Ultimately, you want him to leave his head off to the side (at least four inches) once he gives to the bit. He'll start to do that after you've asked for "gives" over and over again.

#### Building Block #2: Keep the Give and Lower the Head

Before we ask the horse to move his feet while maintaining that give, we want to make sure we can control the elevation of his head. The goal will be to have your horse give to the bit and lower his head at the same time. Although you can teach the head lowering as a separate step, we're going to merge it into the give exercise here. It works like this.

Standing at your horse's left side, take the slack out of the rein and ask for the give. As soon as he gives to the bit and turns his nose toward you, offer a short "mini-release" to reward him. Take the slack out of the rein again. Now you're looking for the tip of his ear to go down. He'll probably give to the bit again or move his head around in different directions at first. Just hold that same rein pressure. When the ear goes down even a fraction, release the rein. Then, repeat the routine.



**John asks Preacher to trot, but has not yet contained the horse's energy, so Preacher motors ahead with his nose jutting out and his back end trailing. Forward motion is essential to collection, and John will soon put it to better use.**

Think of this as a two-phase process: First, get him to give to the bit and give him a brief release; then, take the slack out of the rein, wait for his ear to drop, and give him a real release. After you've repeated this many times on each side, you'll begin to see a new pattern develop: Your horse will consistently drop his

head as he moves his nose to the side. It will

become a single motion. Along with this give, you'll begin to notice that he's relaxing the long muscle in the side of his neck. This is exactly what you want.

How low should his head be? As a general rule, you want the tip of his ears to be more or less even with his withers. If he lowers his head too far, you can teach him to raise it using the same cue you used to lower it. Just maintain steady pressure on the rein until you see the tip of his ear come up and then immediately release the rein.

### Building Block #3: Connect the Rein to the Hip

The first two building blocks are really just preparatory. They teach your horse that when you put pressure on the rein, you want something, and that you'll release the rein when he does the right thing. It's also good training for you, because coordinating your movements and releasing pressure at the right moment take practice. But once you have the hang of it, and your horse understands you, you can begin to ask him to move a major body part—shoulder or hip—while staying soft on the bridle.

We'll start by connecting the rein to the hip—which is also known as "disengaging" his hip—asking him to take a big step over and move his hindquarters to the side. This maneuver is extremely handy, and we've talked before about its usefulness in all sorts of situations. Among other things, disengaging the hindquarters allows you to turn, slow, or stop a horse or to give him a job to do when he's jiggling or thinking about bolting. In the case of collection, it will help teach him to reach under himself with his hind feet as he stops moving his front feet forward. This will bring his hind end and front end together, shortening his back, allowing his hindquarters to accept more weight and lightening his forehead.

Let's take a little inventory: You're standing at your horse's left side and taking slack out of the left rein. He responds by giving to the bit (optimally, about four inches toward you) and lowering his head. To move on to the next step, you'll give him a mini-release and then take up the slack once more. This time, you need to be concentrating on having him move his hips to the right. Look at the left hind foot and watch for it to step sideways. Initially, you want any movement to the side with the left leg, no matter how subtle. In fact, if he even leans his hindquarters away from you, release the rein. (His hips will always move before his feet, so this leaning is actually the first part of the movement.)



**When John gathers Preacher up, see how the horse's frame changes. Preacher is soft in the bridle and driving from behind. He now looks like he'd fit in a square box, rather than in a rectangular one.**

When you introduce this lesson, your horse may move his shoulders to the side as well as his hips. That's okay at first, but eventually you'll want him to keep the front foot closest to you in place and pivot on it. To get the correct response, you can work through the lesson by following this sequence:

- First, release the rein pressure when you see any movement to the side. Repeat this several times.
- Second, release the pressure when you see the closest hind leg (left, in this case) step over and in front of his other hind leg. Repeat this several times.

- Third, release the pressure when his left front foot stays in place as the left hind leg steps over and in front of the right hind leg.

Practice on the left side until you start getting consistent results. After about 10 successful requests, you can switch to the other side. Make sure you pause and praise your horse each time you get the correct response. He needs to wait for your next cue before moving his hips.

Although we've focused on teaching this lesson from a standstill, it's actually easier for the horse when he's already moving forward. The next step will be to make sure your horse understands your cue to go forward. Before long, you'll be connecting the rein to the hip to start bringing him to a collected halt.

#### Building Block #4: Go Forward

Teaching your horse to move forward on cue is a fundamental and crucial lesson, both on the ground and from the saddle. You can probably think of dozens of situations where forward motion is the key to executing a particular maneuver, like trailer loading, crossing a creek—or even backing up, odd as that may seem. At first, we'll settle for the horse simply moving forward when we ask. But the eventual goal will be for him to give to the bit and soften his neck as he moves forward. This is where collection really starts.

To teach the go-forward cue, begin in the same position as before, at your horse's left shoulder, holding the rein in your left hand about six inches from the bit. Hold your training whip in your right hand (a stiff dressage whip works well). You will be cueing the horse to move forward, although it doesn't have to be in a straight line. Begin to tap rhythmically on your horse's left hip with the training whip. Make it a light tap and be sure to keep it high on the hip. The idea is to bug him just enough to get him to lean forward, prepare for a step, or actually begin to step forward. As soon as he does one of those things, stop tapping.

As you practice this lesson, you may find that he begins to move forward with lighter and lighter cues—a kissing noise or the slight movement of the whip toward his hip might be all it takes. But whatever cue you use, make sure he understands it and responds to it 100 percent of the time before you move on. Because the next step is to keep him moving forward while you put pressure on the rein and that could be a little confusing at first.



Once you're confident that your horse will move forward when you ask, you can begin to teach him to give to the bit and soften his neck as he moves. To do this, start as before and cue him to go forward. With your left hand, take the slack out of the rein and ask him for that give—while he's still traveling forward. Keep the pressure until he gives. If he stops, get him moving forward again but don't let up on the rein. As soon as he gives his nose to the bit, release the pressure. If he keeps it there and remains soft, maintain the forward movement but leave slack in the rein.

**A horse who learns to travel with collection on a light rein is a pleasure to ride. John and Preacher lope through the pasture in perfect balance.**

Now you can connect the rein to the hip and stop his forward motion. Take the slack out of the rein, thinking "left hip over." If he gives to the bit with his nose, give him a mini-release and then

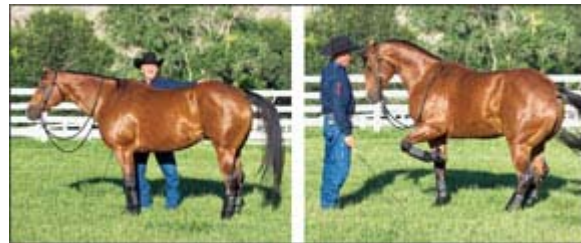
take up the slack again right away until he moves his hips over. Immediately release the rein and praise him. Then, repeat the exercise. Your goal is to maintain that softness and give throughout the entire sequence, including the stop. This will pave the way for a nice, collected halt (not one of those strung out, hollowed-back, rein-tugging stops where he never really brings his hindquarters underneath himself). As you practice this lesson, be sure to switch sides often.

#### Building Block #5:

#### Connect the Rein to the Shoulders

The final exercise we're going to look at builds on the previous steps, so it's important that your horse is consistently responding to your cues to give his nose to the bit, lower his head, relax his neck, move forward, and step his hips over. Now you'll be asking him to bring his nose over to the point of his shoulder, staying soft in his jaw and then stepping that shoulder away from you.

This exercise involves a deep engagement of neck and shoulder muscles, which will tire him out quickly at first. As you work through this lesson, be sure you change sides often—no more than two requests per side before switching—and don't practice for more than 15 minutes without giving him a break.



Before asking your horse to give his nose toward the base of his neck, you need to get all the other pieces working. So start by asking your horse to move forward, giving you his nose, lowering his head (if necessary; if the elevation is good, you don't have to ask), and relaxing his neck. When all those things are happening, you can begin to ask him to bring his nose (actually the bit) to the point of his shoulder.

This process is incremental—you should ask for maybe a quarter of an inch at a time. Take the slack out of the rein and guide his nose to the point of his shoulder. When he gives in that direction, even the slightest amount, release the rein. Now connect the rein to the hip to have him stop. Repeat the process, remembering to alternate sides. Make sure he's moving forward with a lot of energy as you practice this technique. If your horse is stiff in

the neck area, he may progress fairly slowly with this exercise. But as you continue working, he'll become more supple, softening his jaw and neck more and more as he begins to give deeper.

**Collection can be a hard concept to grasp, so John demonstrates the effect from the ground with his horse unsaddled to help you visualize the goal. When Preacher stands in a natural pose, notice how long his back appears to be, how his nose extends forward, and how his hindquarters are relaxed and in a neutral position. John then "collects" Preacher by asking the horse to give to the bit, soften his neck, flex at the poll and drive his hindquarters forward toward his forehead. Notice how the whole picture changes. Preacher's back rises and appears to shorten. This is often referred to as "rounding," although the back really looks more like a study table than a ball. Preacher's nose comes in toward his body and he elevates his shoulders as the muscles in his hindquarters flex or "engage." Preacher is now balancing more weight on his hindquarters than he is on his front end. This is exactly what you want.**

Here's what you should be seeing as you work through this lesson. Picture a line running from his withers to the point of his shoulder, along the base of his neck. Now imagine that line as a hinge. As your horse brings his nose toward his shoulder, his neck will fold along that hinge. You'll probably notice that the skin along the hinge wrinkles as he brings his nose in. And an interesting thing will begin to happen: The thin part of his neck along the crest of his mane will actually get thicker and the thick bottom part of his neck will get thinner. This tells you he's using his neck

muscles differently, developing his topline so that his withers elevate and his back comes up, lightening his forehead. When you begin to see these characteristics, you can proceed to connecting the rein to his shoulder and having him step away from you.

Standing at your horse's left shoulder, ask him to move forward and give to the bit with the proper head elevation. After a few steps, ask him to move his nose to the point of his shoulder as you've been practicing. When he does, give him a mini-release and then take up the slack again. This time, you're using the rein pressure to ask him to take a step away from you with his left front foot as he's moving forward.

The easiest way to picture what's going on is to imagine your horse's hoof as the face of a clock. Think of the top of his toe as 12:00 and the heel as 6:00. When you ask your horse to move that foot away from you, you'll focus on it traveling to a specific spot on the dial. Initially, that spot will be around 1:00 when you're working on the left. (On the right, it will be 11:00.) As your horse learns this maneuver, you'll work on getting him to step to different spots on the dial—2:00 will move him forward at a diagonal; 3:00 will move him sideways (laying the groundwork for a sidepass); and eventually, he'll move that foot to 4:00 or 6:00 and travel backward.

Moving his shoulder may be an unfamiliar move for your horse, and he could be resistant or confused about what you want. He might fall back on what he's already learned and move his hips over at first. If he does, try to maintain the rein pressure and gently move him forward again until he moves his shoulder. The better he's mastered a deep give to the point of his shoulder, the more natural it will be for him to step away with that foot.

### Into the Saddle

All along, we've said that our groundwork is directly transferable to the saddle and that you should picture yourself riding as you practice these exercises. When you take this work to the saddle, you'll have a giant head start because your horse will already be familiar with all your requests. In fact, the biggest hurdle may be your own ability to give light, clear signals from the saddle as you learned to do on the ground. Here are a few things to keep in mind.

Just like when you're working on the ground, you need to be aware of how much pressure you're putting on the rein, and you have to release it the instant your horse does what you ask. It's difficult for some riders to turn loose of the reins when they're on their horse's back. If that's sometimes a problem for you, you'll want to pay attention to keeping your hands quiet enough to send soft signals to your horse and reward him with prompt releases.

Always try to give the lightest possible cue when you make a request. Some riders tend to get antsy when they're asking their horse to do something, and they often get increasingly aggressive with their cues. They may also fall back on confusing (and often bothersome) ways to try to reinforce a request. Remember to bump or squeeze gently to get your horse to go forward or speed up—and then once he's going, take your legs off. Above all, give him time to respond to your cues. Slow your hands down so that he has a chance to process what you're asking and give you the right answer. That way, you can keep your cues light and reward him sooner.

Try to keep everything the same when you ask for transitions from the saddle. Remember the routine you followed on the ground: Ask your horse to give to the bit with his nose, adjust his head elevation if necessary, watch for his neck to soften, and have him bring his nose toward the point of his shoulder. When he's traveling in that manner, you can quietly cue for the transition. You don't want him to throw his nose out, raise his head, or pin his ears. Your goal is a soft change that maintains that nice position.

### Stick With It

Developing collection takes time. During the early going, keep your sessions short and give your horse plenty of breaks. This work is physically demanding and hard to sustain for too long. But it's rewarding work as well. The more practice you give him with starting, moving, and stopping in a collected manner, the more responsive he will become. *PH*

## Another Definition of Collection

Most of the time when we talk about collection, we're referring to a specific way that the horse is traveling—hindquarters engaged, light on the forehand, and so balanced he can move any foot in any direction when asked.

But there's another layer of meaning to the term "collection": *Your* collection—of knowledge and organized thoughts about what you want to accomplish before you even start working with your horse. This type of collection requires you to think about the desired results, so that you'll know what part of his body you need to talk to and control. You should always have a clear idea of what you want your horse to do before you ask him to do it.

You might be taking the slack out of one rein to ask for a give, a lowered head, hips over, or shoulders over—so you need to be sure what you're asking for if you want your horse to give you the correct answer. Well-thought-out requests from a deliberate, "collected" rider will help your horse learn to perform with consistency.