

RIDER+HORSE=1

How to Achieve the Fluid Dialogue that
Leads to Harmonious Performance



Includes
60
Exercises for
Rider & Horse

From the author of *Rider Fitness: Body & Brain*

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Half-Halts—The Technique

“Half-halt” is the term that describes a finely coordinated interplay of weight, leg, and rein aids. The half-halt is a method to change gait, tempo, and the horse’s shape (degree of collection). Furthermore, during the horse’s ongoing schooling, the half-halt serves to ensure the horse’s ability to shift the balance point from his forehand toward the hindquarters (and, therefore, his ability to be collected). This is the goal that the rider strives for during the horse’s schooling. She can only achieve it when she is able to apply the fundamental riding technique of high-quality half-halts. Therefore, the half-halt virtually plays the “key role” in the horse’s schooling: Only the application of half-halts makes advanced schooling (and, therefore, increased performance) altogether possible.

First of all, however, the horse requires a certain amount of basic training in order to be able to entirely implement the operating principle of the half-halt. Among other things, it must be possible to be able to ask for a small amount of flexion and bend from the horse, and the horse must already have begun to straighten.

Nevertheless, half-halts are incorporated into more or less every movement of the horse under the rider, right from the beginning of the horse’s schooling. This applies to changes of direction and changes of speed—even if the quality will not be the same as it will be at an advanced schooling level. Once again, this circumstance illustrates how important it is that one of the two beings that carry on this riding conversation have a developmental edge: either the rider or the horse. Due to the fact that she masters the half-halt technique, an experienced rider is able to make the young horse understand from the start that there is an interplay between all aids.

The term “half-halt” is an equestrian definition that causes much confusion, especially for inexperienced riders. Many interpret it to merely be the rein aid part of it. This is wrong. A half-halt is always a synergy of all three aids available to the rider, even though the driving aids are the predominant ones.

In order to be able to correctly carry out half-halts, it is absolutely necessary to be on a schooled horse so the rider can learn to “feel” the process: when to drive, when to keep the hands still, and when to

The horse needs a certain amount of schooling in order for the rider to be able to apply the half-halt technique effectively.



push the hands forward a bit. It is almost impossible to teach a rider how riding with half-halts works just by giving rational instructions. It is, rather, a matter of constant practice and trial and error, whereby an outside observer can give the rider feedback while she carries out the technique with sensitivity (ideas for an effective dialogue between instructor and riding student can be found on p. 117). Furthermore, it makes sense to first try the interplay between aids on the longe line, then later, during free riding.

Conclusion: The interplay of aids must be very exact so that you can achieve the desired effect in the horse at the moment of the half-halt, meaning the change in gait, tempo, or shape. This concept is not new. The book *The Rider Forms the Horse* (First Edition, 1939) points out that only by means of half-halts—described in the exact same way—can the rider develop the so-called “flexion of the haunches” (see collection on p. 176) and that it is impossible to create high-quality collection without the application of half-halts.

What Does the Rider “Feel” When She Should Apply a Half-Halt?

It is always a risky undertaking to try and describe “feel.” Just as it is impossible to dispute matters of taste, each rider would probably describe her riding “feel” a bit differently when she applies a half-halt. An attempt to describe the feel could be something like this: The horse determines the right moment, which is when all of the horse’s joints are flexing during movement. This is when the rider “gathers” the horse’s impulsion into a slightly more closed body frame (shape). To explain further, the horse flexes his large joints from the hip through the stifle to the hock, and farther on down. Thus, his pelvis is tilted, his croup lowers, and his muscles cause his back to arch slightly upward. As a prerequisite, the rider needs to be very supple on the horse’s back since her pelvis must “receive” the movement of the horse’s arching back and follow it, meaning she slightly tilts backward and her pelvis gets “sucked” into the horse’s back movement. As a result, she will feel how her lower leg softly and automatically “clings” to the horse’s body, since her backward-tilted pelvis initiates the driving impulse in her lower leg. At the same time, her hands follow the movement of her pelvis.

Half-Halts

In equestrian sports, half-halts have played a key role since they allow the rider to influence the horse’s gait, tempo, and shape. Only when this is successfully accomplished is it possible to achieve constant improvement in performance.

During the moment of suspension in the horse's trot or canter, the rider's pelvis tilts slightly forward again, and as a result, her lower leg somewhat disconnects from the horse's body and her hands move slightly and elastically forward. This is the moment when the rider "lets the horse's forward impulsion out." When the horse's hooves make contact with the ground and the joints flex once more (see impulsion on p. 148), the rider can utilize the next half-halt in the rhythm that is predetermined by the horse. This way, the rider can influence the horse with many consecutive half-halts that accompany the horse's every movement—sometimes more, sometimes less

During every one of the horse's movements the rider has the opportunity to influence the horse through half-halts.



pronounced. The functional principle is similar to a perpetual motion machine, since all of the horse's movements, whether at the walk, trot, or canter, give the rider the recurring opportunity to use the half-halt technique to influence the horse.

Since describing how and to what extent half-halts are applied is so complex, consider this thought: "The horse 'collects' the half-halt from the rider." This means that through the rhythm and sequence of his movement, the horse determines how and to what extent the rider applies the half-halt; however, this should not mean that the half-halt is ridden in a *reactive* manner: Being able to *actively* utilize the half-halt requires a great deal of coordination on part of the rider.

The following example is a fitting comparison: Take a ball and keep bouncing it on the floor with one hand. When the ball jumps up toward your hand, you first receive the ball's movement, meaning you act *reactively*. Then, however, you can influence the ball's direction and dynamics by lifting and lowering your wrist. You are, therefore using your own activity to bring energy into the "conversation" between a human hand and the ball. Just like when bouncing a ball, the rider must use her proprioception and skills in order to find the correct moment for the half-halt. Those who have developed proprioception during their riding education can "feel" the point in time when they must collect the horse's impulsion, retain it, then with a yielding rein aid, immediately allow the horse to swing forward.

Conclusion: Half-halts can only be used effectively when the principles of flexing and bending can be applied. They are used to influence gait, tempo, and the shape of the horse and are necessary when riding any kind of transitions. (In order to feel the correct moment to apply the half-halt aids, the rider must have a well-developed sense of proprioception.)

Coordination of Aids During Half-Halts

The rider must be prepared to coordinate her aids during the half-halt, a big test of her riding skills and coordination. But she cannot learn this simply by "being moved" passively ("reacting" rather than "acting") on a schoolmaster. Furthermore, since there are no comparable skills that a rider can fall back on that would allow her to transfer the



It is not possible to achieve the full effectiveness of half-halts with a young horse, unless you are an experienced rider who can apply the sequences of the half-halt from the beginning and during the course of schooling with the result that the horse will increasingly be affected by them.

skill to riding, this transfer must occur by using a rider's various abilities (see p. 17).

Just as it is part of training for other sports, the rider should be able to fulfill intricate, complex tasks, which must occur simultaneously, consecutively, and under time pressure. As a consequence the rider becomes more sensitive to her coordination abilities. She can then *act* and *react* during situational changes without any difficulty.

Various cross-coordination exercises turning around the longitudinal axis provide the best preparation since they involve using both sides of the body via the brain. Since all riding situations must constantly occur in the so-called "spiral" seat, these exercises assist with the interplay of aids—especially across the diagonals of our body (see "diagonal application of aids" on p. 87).