



Refine Responsiveness to Leg Cues

An excerpt from *How to Fix a Wide Turn on the Barrels*

- Properly prepare your horse by teaching them to yield sideways on the ground first using gradually increasing steady or rhythmic pressure. Ask them to yield their front end and hind quarters as well, doing so will make these movements much easier under saddle. The concepts described below will be helpful whether teaching your horse to yield to pressure from the ground or on their back.
- Always start out with very light pressure. Your horse will never respond lighter than the degree of the pressure you first apply.
- Be patient when first teaching a horse to respond to leg pressure, they'll likely try several guesses at the correct answer before getting it right. Being too picky in the beginning will only discourage your horse, reward the slightest try. Capture any forward movement by positioning your horse in front of a wall or fence, where moving forward is not an option.
- Gradually increase the pressure you apply until you get the correct response. Instead of kicking harder, gradually bring up rhythmic life in your body and leg – think "fanning" instead of kicking.
- If your horse is not responding at all, STOP what you are doing and think of another way to get some kind of result (a light tap with a rein for example). If you keep asking in the same way, with no response (kick, kick, kick, etc.), you are actually teaching your horse to be dull and insensitive – don't go there! When you start over, remember, to *always* start with very light pressure.
- Be sure when you get the response you want in the teaching phase to RELEASE instantly. This is a critical part of gaining responsiveness to leg cues AND a critical part of horsemanship in general. The release is the reward your horse seeks out, it's you saying "YES, that's right!" The quicker you are able to deliver the reward (release), the *quicker he will learn* and the *better horse trainer* you will be!
- Start by asking your horse to respond to leg cues at a standstill. When that is well established, move up to a walk, and then trot, lope and so on. Experiment with moving their body parts around while traveling on a straight line or circle.
- If your horse already has a good understanding of leg cues, and is slow to respond, increase the rate (speed) at which you increase pressure. With advanced horses especially, don't be afraid to raise the degree of firmness to get results. Most riders are initially too firm and then aren't firm enough when necessary.
- When it's time to advance – let's say your horse responds OK to leg cues, but you want a quicker, snappier responsiveness – at this point, apply a light degree of pressure, and increase it until you get the responsiveness you desire, THEN GO BACK to the lighter amount of pressure you started with, instead of a complete release. Because you're beyond the teaching phase this offers more refinement and communicates that you "want that level of response from this level of pressure."

If your horse makes assumptions about going faster when leg pressure is applied, check out:

- [Use More Leg and Less Hands for Higher Education & Higher Performance](#)
- [Four Steps to Strengthen Your Barrel Racing Foundation with Flying Lead Changes](#)
- [Teach Your Barrel Horse to Maintain Body Shape for Better \(Faster\) Barrel Racing](#)

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