



Poll-Suppling

Many horses that I judge are still stuck or lacking suppleness in the poll. I used to wait until the horse was a bit more mature before working on this issue, until I was coached by Bodo Hangen from Tempel Farms (see p. 138). He gave me several great exercises that I would like to share with you. I also encourage you to work on this area of stiffness sooner rather than later.

The horse needs to be able to stretch or lengthen his short side (the side he likes to bend toward) and shorten his long

side. If the horse likes to bend left, we call this horse “*left-side-short and right-side-long*,” or “Hollow to the left.” A horse that likes to bend left is like a person who is left-handed. The left side will be more coordinated and the right side will be stronger.

I am right-handed. I do the delicate work with my right hand, and when I need strength I use my left hand. Think of peeling potatoes. I hold the potato firmly in my left hand and use delicate wrist movements with the peeler in my right hand to get the job

done. Try doing this the other way around! It will give you an idea of how hard it can be to change your strong or coordinated side. Remember, however, we keep insisting that the horse be equally supple in both directions. I believe as riders we should be able to use either side of our bodies equally as well (see chapter 1, p. 5).

If the horse is *right-side-short*, he will bend well to the right, but want to fall a bit left into his strong side. To the left, it will be difficult to bend him left or shorten the left side of his body. Make sure you have worked on the choo-choo train exercise and can get your three-car train aligned on a 20-meter circle (see p. 16). This will help with the following poll-suppling exercises.

Poll Suppling Exercises *On the Ground*

From the ground, stand in front of your horse and take the bit near the reins into your hands. First ask the horse to yield to the left, then the right. The lower you can get his neck right now, the easier this exercise will be.

Try to supple him slightly first in one direction and then move him slowly into the other. In the beginning, he will lift his head

3.3 A & B
Willow supples her poll to the left (A) and to the right (B).





and neck up when you move him toward the stiff direction. Be careful you do not put your chin over his poll—in the event that he raises his head, he might hit you in the chin.

Eventually, you will be able to loosen the big muscles over the top of his neck and actually see them “roll” back and forth over the crest of the neck. As the horse becomes more supple the large muscles in the neck will be able to quickly lengthen or shorten as the horse changes his bending.

Success is when your horse’s mane starts to stand straight up and bounce a bit rather than lie flat on one side. The horse by nature will wear his mane on one side or the other of the neck. Just observing this characteristic in a young horse will tell you which side is his stiff side—he will “wear his hair” to the supple or hollow side of the neck.

On the Horse

Once your horse will loosen his poll a bit on the ground, try the same exercise at halt while mounted. If you just pull the neck back and forth, he will only get supple at the base of the neck, not the poll. I see a lot of riders pulling the horse’s nose to their knee with only one rein. That is not what this exercise is about.

Both reins must work together. The outside rein will keep the neck attached to the shoulders, and the inside rein will bend and flex the poll to the inside.

Remember this: the use of the reins in a tactful and elastic way creates this last bit of suppleness through the neck and poll. The rider must keep the contact playful without being too busy and should never have a stiff or resistant hand.

Use the inside rein low and toward the direction of your inside knee to turn the head and neck. Do not lift your hand and do not pull back as this will only shorten the neck. Remember you are working here to *stretch the outside of the neck*. The outside rein acts as a supporting rein to keep the neck attached to the shoulders. Think about your choo-choo train (see p. 16): you do not want the horse to learn to separate the “neck car” from the “shoulder car.” The shoulders and neck must remain one piece.

Also, note your horse’s ears. If your horse always carries his inside ear higher than the outside ear one direction, you have a poll-suppleness issue. The inside ear should be level with the outside ear. It is also okay to have the inside ear a slightly bit lower than the outside ear.

Stretch Circle

Use this exercise in your warm-up to supple the poll. Remember, it is easier for the horse to let go of the poll when the neck is down (low). While on your circle, put the horse’s stiff (or long) side to the inside. Use your inside rein balanced by the outside rein to loosen the poll. He must stretch the outside of the poll area and you should see a hollow right behind his inside cheek bone. Try to hold this for a few strides to get a really good stretch. Then release as it will be a bit uncomfortable for the horse, at first.

Bring Your Horse’s Frame Up

When you return to your working frame, you can use a few counterflexing half-halts to still work the stiff side of the poll when it is to the outside. Think a little renvers (haunches-out) and you will have the idea, but don’t ask for too much angle.

When your horse is in his working frame and you are feeling stiffness again in the poll area, then repeat the stretch circle again. Don’t be afraid to use the stretch circle several times during your work to regain the suppleness you need. Eventually your horse will be able to “flip” his mane in the working frame.