

CHEWING THE REINS OUT OF THE RIDER'S HANDS

Definition

Allowing the horse to chew the reins out of the rider's hands or in German, "Zügel aus der Hand kauen lassen." Also called, 'stretching the frame,' "the horse gradually takes the reins, stretching forward and downward with light contact, while maintaining balance, rhythm and tempo and quality of the gait." [USEF Rule Book DR110]

This is a testing exercise of yielding the reins. The horse should be ridden forward and then allowed to champ (chew) the reins out of the rider's hands. His nose should move forwards/downwards, his neck should be rounded, and he should be relaxed, he must neither hurry nor slow down.

Gymnastic Purpose

If the exercise is performed correctly, it offers several benefits.

Mental and Physical Relaxation

"The first and most often mentioned is that it aids relaxation of both the horse's body and mind. The importance of relaxation cannot be overstressed, for only a relaxed horse is able to develop athletically in its entirety, improving the suppleness and coordination of his joints and muscles." [Dressage & CT, June 1998, p 21]

Regularity of the Rhythm

"The concept of relaxation and regularity of rhythm and tempo is the foundation of the pyramid of training from which all subsequent correct training of the horse develops. It is very important in the early training of the horse that he is taught to stretch his entire top line forward and down and to search his entire top line forward and down and to search for and maintain light contact with the bit without fleeing from the forward driving aids. This will help him to find regularity of rhythm and tempo which can be so vulnerable in the early training stages. It is a benefit even for advanced training if problems arise which have their origins in these first building blocks of the pyramid." [Dressage & CT, June 1998, p 21]

"If the horse is able to do this exercise correctly, it is proof that he is going in relaxation and in acceptance of the bit and the forward driving aids – the true meaning of Losgelassenheit." [Gerhard Politz]

Suppleness of the Topline

"It is also an exercise that helps increase the suppleness of the topline by freeing it of restraint. Remember that horses were not structurally designed to carry the burden of a rider and, under stress of being constantly asked to perform demanding movements, a horse will tend to flatten and stiffen his back. When the horse chews the bit toward the ground, we encourage him to relax his back and swing his hindquarters, thereby making it easier for him to step underneath himself and work in a rounded outline." [Dressage & CT, June 1998, p 21]

Test of the Horse's Progress

"It is the most valuable to test the horse's progress, because this exercise can accompany a horse from his basic introductory training through to the most advanced levels. As the horse becomes more advanced, only the expectation of how precisely the horse should perform the exercise and the requirements it tests will change. For example, at the lower levels, it can be used to assess the degree of relaxation and acceptance of the bit, whereas at an advanced level it measures balance and self-carriage and can highlight hidden rhythm faults." [Dressage & CT, June 1998, p 21]

Test of the Rider's Hand

"It is a test to see if the rider has a calm hand and the horse has the confidence to seek the contact offered by the rider, and if the rider can coordinate and come through with the aids." [Dressage & CT, June 1998, p 21]

Reward

"The exercise can also be used as a reward after a brief period of intensive work." [Gerhard Politz] "It can be used

especially after a period of demanding work as relaxation and reward, or if the horse becomes tense, and at the end of a session to ensure that the horse returns to the stable in a relaxed and happy mental and physical state.” [*Dressage & CT*, June 1998, p 21]

“If these benefits are still not enough to convince you of the value of the exercise, there is one extra advantage. A horse that can be shown the way to the ground correctly will be a master of the extended walk, for he will have the confidence and ability to march rhythmically forward into a steady contact with maximum length of stride and energy. Gone will be the days of shuffled, running steps and contracted neck or dropped contact.” [*Dressage & CT*, June 1998, p 21]

Qualities Desired

“Rhythm and tempo have to remain the same, before, during and after the exercise.” [*Dressage & CT*, June 1998, p 21]

“Ten qualities to look for:

1. The horse stretches his neck forward and down. It is acceptable for the nose to be either in front of or behind the vertical.
2. This happens smoothly and gradually without any jerking or tossing of the head.
3. The contact is maintained.
4. The rider’s hands stay close to either side of the withers.
5. There is no see-sawing on the bit.
6. The horse maintains regularity of the footfalls.
7. The horse maintains the tempo – neither hurrying nor slowing down.
8. The horse doesn’t stiffen in the back.
9. The horse continues on the designated track without any loss of lateral balance.
10. The horse doesn’t show any resistance when the reins are shortened to finish the exercise.

If all of these criteria are fulfilled, the judge should not hesitate to give a “ten.” However, even if the technical execution is adequate, but points 1, 6, 7 and 8 are not satisfactory, the purpose of the exercise has not been achieved.” [Gerhard Politz]

Aids

Before one lets the horse ease the reins out of one’s hand, “make sure the horse is moving forward with rhythm and impulsion in the chosen gait and is on the bit.

Then, while maintaining the forward driving aids, the rider should begin by giving slightly with the outside rein by moving the hand forward. As the horse responds by stretching his neck downward and seeking the bit, the rider should offer the inside rein and again the horse should search to maintain the contact.

The rider can then begin to lengthen the reins slightly by allowing them to slip through the fingers. Providing the horse is still being driven correctly from behind, he will maintain the contact as he chews the bit toward the ground. The rider must keep a soft contact with the horse’s mouth throughout the exercise and never just throw the reins away!

If the horse is established (in his training), he will maintain the rhythm, engagement and roundness of the pace, altering only his outline, although the exercise itself will affect the horse’s entire body. It is a little like a chain reaction, for as the horse lowers his neck, he stretches and relaxes those muscles, and as the neck muscles are connected to the back muscles, he also stretches and relaxes this set, and through them, the muscles in his hindquarters. As the muscles become free of tension and lengthen, the horse is able to move with a soft, swinging back and rounded outline. With this, the essential requirements for correct gymnastic work have been established.” [*Dressage & CT*, June 1998, pp 19-20]

Length of rein: “In this exercise the rein should only be yielded to the length of a “long rein” (not given altogether), at which point the horse should again feel contact with the rider’s hand. Generally speaking, this would be when the horse’s mouth is level with the point of his shoulder.” [*Dressage & CT*, June 1998, pp 19-20]

Common Mistakes

“Often one sees poorly educated riders endlessly trotting on long reins, the horse’s nose somewhere in the air, the poor animal on the forehand to the extent that it is about to fall over.

Many riders seem confused over the angle the front of their horse’s face should take when he lowers his neck. Some seem to think the horse’s nose should be poked way out front, although when the horse is working with his neck at a normal level they would never accept this as being correct – and the same rule applies for showing the horse the way towards the ground. Although the horse is now moving with a lowered neck, he should still maintain a quiet contact with the rider’s hand and remain engaged and moving forward from behind – in other words, the horse should remain on the bit.

To be correct, the angle of the head to the neck should remain the same as when the horse was working with his neck in the more elevated position. This means that when the horse lowers his neck toward the ground, his face line will have to become behind the vertical to maintain the angle.

The horse is not overbent in this position as he maintains an even contact with his bit. It is not a forced position, as the angle of the poll is not restricted and the flexion between the poll and the first vertebra remains similar to what it was before. Only at this angle can the rider continue to influence the horse and gain the full benefits of the exercise.

If the horse’s head and nose are allowed to poke (too far) forward, everything is lost – the horse will fall on his forehand, flatten and stiffen his back muscles and lose the rhythm.” [*Dressage & CT*, June 1998, pp 20-21]

Training Advice

“Analyze your horse’s performance during the exercise so you can use any resistances that show up as evidence that there are weaknesses in his training program. Add extra exercises to help overcome weaknesses. The following show a lack of acceptance of the bit, or confidence in the rider’s hands and lack of relaxation:

- tossing the neck;
- throwing the head up and down;
- snatching the reins from the rider’s hands;
- tensing or hollowing the back.

The following show that the rider is failing to come through with his aids to adequately engage the horse from behind, or possibly that the horse lacks confidence in the rider’s aids through confusion or lack of coordination on the rider’s part.

- loss of rhythm;
- falling on the forehand;
- running away/increasing the speed;
- jiggling at the walk;
- mincing the steps at the trot.”

[*Dressage & CT*, June 1998, p 22]

Source; Dressage & CT

