

ÜBERSTREICHEN – RELEASING THE REINS

Definition

Überstreichen is a German word that has no easy English translation. It is pronounced “oover shtry khen,” and should be included in your equestrian vocabulary. It means “releasing the reins – giving and retaking the rein.”

Gymnastic Purpose

“Überstreichen is used by riders to find out if their horse is correctly on the aids and balanced at trot and canter.”

If this test reveals that the horse is “engaged, straight, and working without resistance, we can progress to more demanding work in the session. However, if you überstreichen and your horse’s response is not correct, it is time to analyze what precisely is wrong and to remedy the problem before trying to advance to more difficult work.” [*Dressage & CT*, June 1998, p 24]

“As the horse becomes more advanced in his education, he should gradually begin to carry more weight on the haunches. A horse that is forced into a frame or elevated chiefly with the rider’s hands is still on the forehand since he uses the contact on the bit as a fifth leg. Such a horse is not classically collected, because the weight is not on the haunches but in the rider’s hands, however seemingly up-hill the outline.

An excellent way to show that the horse is not leaning on the bit is to release the reins (Überstreichen). It is also advisable to practice this frequently when training the horse to teach him to go in relative self-carriage. (Not absolute self-carriage!) [Gerhard Politz]

Aids

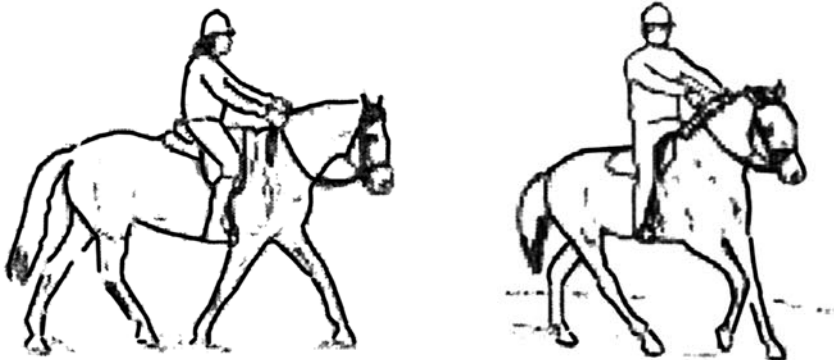
“The rider simply interrupts the contact momentarily with the horse’s mouth by stretching his hands forward. It is essential to maintain the driving leg and seat aids and not to alter the upper body position. Only the arms and hands should move forward in the direction of the horse’s mouth. The contact should be broken for two or three strides and then resumed without snatching at the reins but simply bringing the hands back to their usual position.

There are two different types of Überstreichen – one where both hands are stretched forward simultaneously, and the second, where only the inside hand is pushed forward while the outside hand maintains the contact.” [*Dressage & CT*, June 1998, p 24]

“When used with one hand, it is a test if the horse is correctly accepting the outside rein. The technique is similar to the two-hand Überstreichen. The rider simply stretches his inside hand in the direction of the horse’s mouth to interrupt the contact for two to three strides – at the same time he maintains the contact with the outside rein in conjunction with the forward driving aids. The horse’s body position should not alter.

It is best to use the inside Überstreichen on the circle or curved line, such as serpentines or corners. First, flex your horse correctly with the right amount of bending appropriate to the diameter of the curve you are riding. When you Überstreichen with the inside rein, the horse should maintain the bending. If he turns his head to the outside and loses the bending, you have proof that he is not accepting the outside rein. To overcome the problem, you must engage his inside leg and push him into the outside rein.

Source: *Dressage & CT*



Make the horse accept the contact. Then, try Überstreichen again. If he maintains the bending then you have overcome the problem. If not, try and apply precise aids, correct half-halts, until the horse does accept the outside rein.” [Dressage & CT, June 1998, p 24]

Two Techniques for Überstreichen

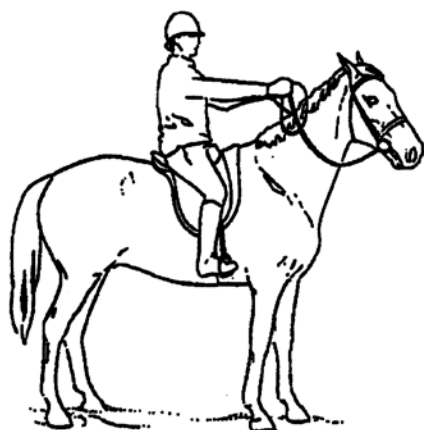
One is with the inside rein only, the other with both reins. Both methods are carried out for only a few strides and then the contact is softly re-established.

When only the inside rein is released, the exercise is usually done on a circle to prove that the horse is truly on the outside rein. The outline must be maintained and the horse must continue on the designated track while keeping the bend to the inside.

When releasing both reins, the horse must maintain the rhythm and tempo as well as his outline, but display a tendency to follow the contact without coming off the bit and hollowing his back. Ten items to look for:

- 1) the rider must keep the normal upright position,
- 2) the hands must go forward in the direction of the horse’s mouth,
- 3) the hands must stay close to either side of the withers,
- 4) the contact must be totally relinquished for a few strides,
- 5) the horse must keep a steady position of the head and neck,
- 6) the horse should keep his basic outline (self-carriage),
- 7) the nose line should display a tendency to follow the contact and move slightly more in front of the vertical,
- 8) the horse must keep the rhythm and tempo and not hurry,
- 9) the horse must continue on the designated track without any loss of lateral or longitudinal balance,
- 10) there must be no resistance when the contact is re-established.

Source: Dressage & CT
Incorrect Überstreichen, above the bit



INCORRECT TECHNIQUE: This rider has stretched his hands in the direction of the horse’s ears instead towards the mouth. The horse has come above the bit.



INCORRECT TECHNIQUE: The rider has stretched his hands too low and the contact has not been interrupted. The rider’s upper body has fallen forward and the horse has come above the bit.



INCORRECT TECHNIQUE: The horse has come above the bit during Überstreichen.

If all of these criteria are fulfilled, the judge should not hesitate to give a 10. However, if the technical execution is adequate, but points 5, 6, 7, and 8 are not satisfactory, the purpose of the exercise has not been achieved.” [Gerhard Politz]

Qualities Desired

This exercise will demonstrate if the horse is correctly on the aids. This is achieved when “the horse must be on the bit, engaged, working from behind, and straight, so that the impulsion can flow through his body without resistance into the hands by way of his mouth. This means that he is willingly accepting the bit.

If all requirements are fulfilled when you *Überstreichen* with both hands, the horse will stretch his face line in front of the vertical as he seeks to maintain the contact with the bit. He will show a tendency to momentarily lengthen his frame, but he will maintain the rhythm and takt of the trot or canter.” [Dressage & CT, June 1998, p 24]

Common Mistakes

Above the Bit

“One of the most common faults is when the horse comes above the bit, or tries to throw his neck up or down during the *Überstreichen*. This shows he is not correctly on the aids but has been *pulled together* from front to rear with too much hand and not enough leg and seat. The horse has been forced into an unnatural position which only provides a false impression of being on the bit. Unless he is driven from behind into the hand, all his work will suffer from a lack of impulsion and true acceptance of the bit.

Remedy

If this happens to you, you must use stronger leg and seat aids appropriate to the situation to drive the horse into the restraining hands. Check that you are correctly coordinating your half-halt with leg, seat, hand followed immediately by a slight momentary relaxation (give). Concentrate and visualize that you are pushing the horse from behind into the bit, not pulling him.

Sometimes the problem is aggravated because the horse doesn't understand or accept the leg aids. This is especially common with former racehorses which have been conditioned to flee from leg pressure instead of maintaining their rhythm and tempo and responding to the driving aids by generating more impulsion. If your horse does not accept the leg and becomes tense when it is applied, or does not respond at all, then you must overcome this very serious fault before you can make any progress.

No Stretching

Another fault is revealed when the horse does not alter his head position at all throughout the *Überstreichen*. He maintains his face line on the vertical instead of stretching it slightly forward and shows no tendency to lengthen his frame or seek the bit. This is very bad and an accurate alarm signal that your horse is restricted in himself, or worse still, is behind the bit.

Remedy:

If the horse does not alter his head position in response to the *Überstreichen*, then it is important to take immediate action to try and remedy the situation. Both indications show the horse is not moving freely forward and accepting the contact. He is not engaging his hind legs and is avoiding the work, so ride him forward, urge him on with leg and seat. Make sure you use the flat of your calf when you apply your leg aids, and if your horse doesn't respond, touch his side slightly with the spur. If the response to the leg is still dead or delayed, remind him with a short sharp tap with the whip behind your boot – rather than further numbing his response with futile drumming of your legs.

Concentrate on getting your horse active, on sending him rhythmically forward and literally driving him up to the bit. Then, *Überstreichen* again. If he stretches and seeks the bit, it is a sign that all is well again. If not, continue to urge him forward to the bit, encourage him strongly to engage his hind legs. *Überstreichen* again to test and again and again if necessary, until you have reached your goal.

Don't become discouraged if your horse does not come right straight away because to correct a horse who comes behind the bit, or restricts himself, takes time, usually more than one lesson, sometimes weeks, even

months. However, Überstreichen, and exercises such as “showing your horse the way to the ground” (see previous chapter) will help monitor progress. Time spent now correctly establishing the basics will be amply repaid when advanced work starts.

Running Away or Leaning

If your horse is in self-carriage he will maintain the same trot or canter rhythm when you Überstreichen. If he alters his rhythm, hurries, or worse, still runs, he is not carrying himself or working in balance. In this case he will be on the forehand and have the tendency to lean on the rider’s hand. He will be using the bit like a fifth leg and will become heavier and heavier in your hands.

Let me clarify my explanation by using an example. Place a rope around your waist and have a friend hold the two ends behind you. Now, both walk forward with poise and balance. If your friend suddenly stretches his arms so the rope becomes slack, what will happen? Nothing! You are moving independently and with balance, so you will not be disturbed. But now try leaning on the rope so your friend has to support you. If he suddenly stretches his arms forward, you will fall on your nose. The only way you will be able to prevent this is to speed up, to run forward with short steps.

Remedy:

How can you regain your balance? Only by shifting your center of gravity back, by taking bigger steps and engaging your legs under your body. Although the situation is not exactly the same as when you are on your horse and he is leaning on the bit, the reaction is comparable. When you Überstreichen, your horse loses the support of the bit he was dependent on, and runs with choppy strides.

The only way the horse will be able to regain his balance is through engaging and carrying more weight on his hind legs to lighten the forehand. Effectively you must try to influence him to shift his center of gravity back. Use your legs and seat to encourage him. Take the horse on the circle and encourage him to bend his inside leg – push it more under his body. Prevent any falling out with your outside leg and rein, and your horse’s outside leg will easily be able to follow the inside hind.

Now, try the Überstreichen again. If your horse maintains his rhythm then everything is all right. If he still hurries or runs, repeat the whole procedure again. Überstreichen again to check the result and work, work, work until you achieve the desired result. Don’t give up. To perform correctly, your horse must be well-balanced.

Training Advice

The Überstreichen is especially useful in the last part of the working-in (warm-up) phase. Use it every day before you begin the fundamental stage of the session. The horse should be warmed up and his muscles relaxed. He will be at the stage where he is accepting the rider’s leg aids, so the rider will be able to drive and push the horse from behind into the bit. The horse will begin to engage better from behind. He should be moving forward rounded and with a good rhythm and full of elasticity. To the rider, he should feel light but powerful. The impulsion created from the hindquarters should flow unrestrained through his swinging back, neck, mouth, and into your hands.

Now the serious work of the session can begin. The straightening, the concentrated suppling exercises, transitions, extensions, and collection. But first check that your horse is 100% ready. Make sure he doesn’t need a few adjustments, some ‘fine tuning’ before you launch into the more demanding work. Now is the time to use the Überstreichen. Is your horse carrying himself? Is he engaging his hind legs? Or is he still on his forehand? Is he accepting the bit, or are you pulling him together with your hands? Is he stepping forward into the bit, or is he restricting himself, or worse, behind the vertical? Does he accept the outside rein, or only create the impression that he does?

The Überstreichen will answer these questions clearly for you. You will then be able to take action according to the circumstances and solve any problems. Then your horse will truly be ready to work correctly.” [*Dressage & CT*, June 1998, p 26]