

I'm always getting yelled at to "make a half halt," but what should I actually DO, and if they're all different, how can I know what kind to make?
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Let me clue you in on our Secret Instructor Language: When your teacher is imploring you to “make a half halt,” what she’s really saying to you is, “For Dog’s sake, DO SOMETHING! DO ANYTHING!”

What she’s seeing is your horse being out of balance, out to lunch, or both. How much so and in which way will dictate what you need to do about it. In any case, effective half halts are how you restore equilibrium and order.

Beginning with the double premise that pulling on your horse’s face rarely helps and that real solutions originate in the driving aids (I’m not kidding!), the key is to figure what in the world this half halt thing is.

We’re told in the USEF rules that a half halt is a nearly simultaneous action of seat, leg, and a nanosecond later, the modifying hand. And that half halts can be unilateral (i.e.: leg then hand on the same side) or diagonal. And that the hand portion is a “non-allowing, a closing of the door for a brief moment, but not a backward pull. That half halts last only the duration of a footfall—that if the pressure is sustained, the horse finds a way to build a wall against their effect, thus they must often be repeated (and repeated).

And that there are as many different half halts as there are snowflakes. I used to draw graphic representations of them in the dirt with the butt end of a whip: a rapid rise with a gradual cessation, a slow building to a quick drop off of pressure, and so on.

The point is that when you’re learning (and we all keep learning this part *ad infinitum*), you’re constantly loading your mental hard drive with “when I do it this way, he responds *that way*” information. Ultimately, it’s not a crap shoot as to what you try because you recognize a feeling, a situation you’ve been in before, and you remember what worked to get you out of it.

Occasionally, I encounter the argument that it’s only those crude, unfeeling Germanic riders who use half halts, that people who extol “lightness” never need them. Nonsense! Half halts come in all sizes. If you’re riding a big warmblood very forward in the manner of a lower level test, sometimes the half halts may be fairly obvious. But even if you watch an old clip of Nuno Olivera riding a baroque horse slowly in collection, when he subtly conducts the rhythm with his body language, what you’re seeing are half halts.

How to know what kind of half halt is right in what circumstance? The answer is the same as the famous one given by a New York cab driver. An out-of-towner on 57th St. rolled down his window and shouted to him, “Hey, buddy, how do you get to Carnegie Hall?”

The cabbie’s reply, “PRACTICE!”