

When “Nuts!” Isn’t Such a Bad Response

You’ve probably noticed I’m always admonishing riders to “do something,” not to be passive. Now when you read this, you may be thinking, “Why doesn’t he make up his mind?” But there will be—I promise—a consistency here if you take a few moments to look for it.

Let’s begin with the premise that there’s no single correct way to warm up a horse. It definitely varies from horse to horse, and in many cases, it also varies with the same horse from day to day. In common, all warm ups must give a horse time to acclimate to his surroundings, to loosen his muscles, and to dial in to his rider to continue thereafter with the work at hand.

Some will go best with a long and low start (but probably not if their tendency is to rush and hang.) Some with no attention span or work ethic need to be gathered and shaped early on and then be permitted to stretch and reach as soon as they can do so while remaining on the aids. We could create a long list of “If this, then that” scenarios, but by and large the dictum, *see what he offers and fill in the blanks* is a smart way to approach things.

The issue is: At what rate does one go about doing this?

I am not the first to remind riders that you can’t carry water in a sieve. You can ride around off contact endlessly pushing your horse forward and it won’t make him accept the bit. You have to meet him with the contact and send him forward into *something*.

On the other hand, plenty of well-meaning Type A personalities, while trying to be pro-active and get things done, plunge into their horses with such intensity that the horses end up retreating from the aids. The image that I see which I’m hoping to counsel against is the rider who, realizing that her horse is supposed to be round, overwhelms him with a discouraging blocking hand, set wrists, and locked elbows.

Yes, there are occasions when the old fashioned “hold and drive” cliché applies, but the rein contact should never stop in your wrists. The contact should feel that it flows from the horse’s mouth, up the reins, through soft wrists and hollow forearms to connect to your elastic elbows, and into your shoulder blades and lower back. More desirably, when you’re riding the horse TO your hand, it should follow that same route in reverse.

I encounter various horses that would come to the bridle and seek the bit if their riders would only let them! Such horses remind me of squirrels in the park—the ones that play those approach-avoidance routines with the guy on the bench with his bag of peanuts. He entices them, entices them, draws them in to take the kernel from his fingertips. BUT one sudden wrong move, and he’s back to square one!

Truly, you can’t wait forever, and certain horses will teach you pretty quickly that if you don’t make the first move, nothing will ever change. But if you have a horse that’s low on confidence and worried about what the bit is saying to him, don’t try to trap him. Offer him the possibility of a soft, receiving, following hand that he can take a few minutes (or more) to come and look for. If his head happens to be too high until then, don’t panic. Don’t let peer pressure make you try to wrestle his head into place. A brief time where he might use his neck and back incorrectly can be far less harmful than his concluding that contact and roundness are going to be achieved under duress and against his will.

