

A WAY WITH HORSES

Let's Get This Straight

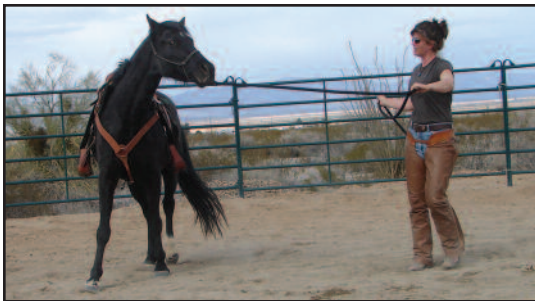
by Shea Stewart

When I work with a horse, it seems like most of my time is spent centering his mind to the task at hand. Most horses who come to me are braced in their bodies and minds, as if their bodies and minds are separate. They will walk in one direction while looking in another, having no sense of where their hind ends are. Many of these “crooked” horses seem to be “escaping” mentally and physically. Helping a horse achieve straightness contributes greatly to his emotional well-being. Many popular training methods will use mechanics to straighten a “crooked” horse, such as side reins and heavy bits. In these methods, the horse will give the appearance of carrying himself straight, but in truth he’s tight and braced.

When a horse is truly straight, his sternum (breast-

the outside of the circle, with the horse looking strongly to the outside, trying to escape, and his hind end pushing to line up to where he is looking. If a horse is allowed to travel like this, he is essentially being taught to disconnect his feet from his mind or, in other words, being taught to travel crookedly.

After working with the Quarter Horse gelding, I was presented with a two-year-old Mustang who had very little handling. This young mare had a difficult time being present with humans and always seemed to be on the brink of fleeing when a human was present. Working her at liberty, I stood in the middle of the round pen, the goal being to bring her thought in to me when I made noise with a flag. The flag was not meant to drive her, or



The gelding in the first image is looking hard to the outside of the circle, and his body and mind are braced and tight. He appears to be fleeing. The next image shows a horse being lunged who is looking to the outside of the circle, with his hind end falling to the inside. Both are examples of a crooked horse and illustrate how such a horse tries to line up to where he is thinking. The last image depicts a horse who is straight and soft on her circle. Her hind end is following the line of the circle, her neck is relaxed, and she is focused on where she is going. Straightness can be achieved whether you are mounted, doing ground work alongside your horse, or lunging from the middle.

bone) is centered between his shoulders, his topline is soft and round, and he has impulsion. The most basic way to achieve this is to encourage the horse to get interested in what is out in front of him. Often that means letting go of an agenda with the horse, and taking the time to get him centered. Once the horse’s thought is lined up to what he is being asked to do, his body will follow.

At a recent horsemanship clinic, I worked with a Western-trained Quarter Horse gelding who was suffering from mechanical training. I could just imagine someone pulling the rein to his hip, over-bending his head, and spurring his hind end over. His thoughts were going one way, his front end was going another way, and his hind end was dragging behind him all crooked. I dedicated the session to helping him achieve straightness. I began by picking up a rein and just waiting for him to let go of looking everywhere else but where I was asking him to look with the rein. When he would look in the direction the rein was lifted, I would release the rein. The next step was to ask him to move in that direction. This horse was so used to looking in the opposite direction of where his body was lined up that this took a while. Horses will naturally line their hind ends up to where they are thinking. Just watch them when they are out in a herd: something gets their attention, they look, and pretty soon their hind ends will step over to line up to where they are looking—an excellent example of straightness.

Straightness can also be identified when a horse is traveling on a circle. When a horse is traveling correctly (straight) on a circle, his eye will be looking forward on the line of the circle, and his body will yield in a soft bend as he moves, his inside hind reaching toward the center line of his belly, his outside hind tracking straight along the same path as his thought. When a horse is crooked, his hind end foot falls are too much to the inside of the circle. His eye will most likely be rolled to

to punish her; it was simply meant to remind her that I was still there, and to encourage her to search for a better place to be inside of herself while in my presence. Here was a clean slate, a horse who knew how to travel straight. You could see every thought that went through her head when she would stop and face up to me. Her thoughts bounced around pretty quickly. She would center up to me, then she would just think off to her left, and her hind end would start to swing right with one step, but then she would think to the right, and her hind end would start to move to the left. This went on for a few minutes, with the mare trying to figure out the best way to escape me. What I marveled at was how connected and supple she was in her body. She had not been taught to disconnect her feet from her thoughts, she was not crooked and braced; she had none of the issues I see in so many trained, domestic horses. Although this mare came into the pen tight in her neck and back, by the end of the session, she had let down emotionally so much that her eyes were soft, and her top line was full. Observing this mare made me realize just how simple a concept straightness is. We humans spend too much time pounding away at our horses’ bodies and not enough time tapping into their minds and simply directing their thoughts.

There are so many books on how to get a horse straight, how to collect a horse, how to build impulsion, etc. But left to their own devices, they have these abilities in them naturally. I believe we take it out of them with our mechanical ways. Then we spend a lifetime trying to get them back. Horses are begging for us to make things clear to them—clarity though feel and energy, through timing, through communication, not through physical mechanics. True straightness is crucial to a horse’s mental, emotional and physical well-being, and we owe it to our equine partners to help them carry themselves as naturally as possible.

Learn more about
Shea Stewart at
www.stewartranch.net.