

Coventry Equestrian Center



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The Tibetan Half Halt



The Half Halt

There are basically two kinds of half halts, one is with the rein and the other is with the seat, or lower back.* Many explanations for the half halt make it seem like a rider can only accomplish this if you travel to Tibet and meditate on top of a mountain! Simply, the half halt is a way to “rebalance” the horse. That means to slow or engage the horse’s stride or way of moving. A rider uses a half halt if the horse is going too fast and/or to ask for more “collection,” meaning to ask the horse to carry more of its weight from the hind quarters. Half halts are also applied to change the horse from one gait to the other. Other good words to describe a half halt is to coil or gather the horse. The horse’s forward motion should not necessarily become slower with the half halt, but more gathered or coiled. Aha! Thus, “rebalanced.”

Half Halting with the Rein

The first most simple half halt is with the rein. And, there is no doubt that the two other aids (legs and seat) are combined with the rein aid for an effective half halt. A rider asks the horse to go more forward on the downward beat of the rising trot with the “active” inside leg and, when needed the rider then uses the outside rein to half halt or contain the more forward stride on the upward beat of the rising trot. As with all riding, it is a rhythm thing! Therefore, at all times, the rider’s aids should work in rhythm with the horse’s rhythm. Sounds easy, but learning how to time the aids to the horse’s movement requires what is termed “equestrian tact.”

Timing of the Aids & learning the half halt

Well known equine author Jane Savoie in her DVD *Demystifying the Half Halt* discusses conquering the half halt by asking the rider to count the strides of the horse and get the feel and timing of the half halt synchronized with the horse’s rhythm. In her DVD I guess she, too, agrees that one does not have to be a mystic to know how to do a half halt, such as the implication of meditating on top of a mountain in Tibet.

To learn the timing and simplicity of the half halt put your horse, that has an established good trot rhythm, on a twenty meter circle and ask the horse to go more forward with a precisely timed leg aid on the downward beat of the rising trot. (If the horse does not respond to your leg aid, use your dressage whip in timing with the leg aid.) When you feel the horse’s stride getting longer, you can then half halt, or take back slightly with the outside rein on the rising beat, until you feel the horse slow down, or coil its stride. Then you ask the horse to go forward again with your leg and then you

ask it to slow down or rebalance again with the rein. Keep practicing until you think you have it, or at least feel the horse respond to your half halting or rebalancing signals.

Unfortunately, a horse will not respond as well to a half halt if it is not soft and responsive to the aids. Horses that are round in the back and soft in the jaw and poll will respond much better to a half halt than a horse that is against the bit and/or the rider's aids. This only makes sense because a horse that is softly "on the bit" is receptive to the rider's signals, and will be more receiving and accepting of what the aids ask for, such as a half halt.

When practicing half halts on the circle, the rider must be sure that the horse's whole body is positioned on the arc of the circle from tail to poll. A half halt is not correct if the horse's head is counter bent toward outside of the circle during the half halt! This, of course, is not the art of a properly applied half halt, but a butchering of the aids. Thus, a rider has to figure out how to coordinate the counter balance of the half halting outside rein with the inside positioning rein and leg. Until the rider feels the result of what he is asking for from the horse, he will not have learned.

In the process of practicing half halts, some times you will feel the horse slow down the front end and sometimes you will feel the horse slow down the hind end. A good half halt is felt when the horse downshifts, or steps under and carries from the hind end. It is when one feels a half halt *go through*, that the half halt is what is termed "*through*" and a good half halt. However, all rider's should ask, *through* what? Well, *through* the horse's whole body.

The nirvana of half halts is when the horse steps forward from behind *through* its back, bascules over its top line and under the rider's seat resulting in the horse giving at the jaw and poll through the elastic rein connection with the rider. The horse then drops its nose to the vertical where the rider's light rein aid from the hand and elbow captures each forward thrust generated by the hind end. The rider then determines if the horse needs a rebalancing half halt at any particular moment while riding. The application of the precisely timed half halt then rebalances the horse's forward movement back *through* its top line under the rider's seat to the hind end. The result is a half halt that went "*through*" both the rider and horse.

If your half halt is too strong, the horse may walk instead of slow and rebalance the gait. Timing and feel is essential, along with the ability to utilize the leg aid in conjunction with the rein aid. Many articles say to apply your leg first before you half halt, but if your horse already has a good rhythm and is in "front of your leg," then you just need to half halt. If your horse does not have any impulsion, then likely it would not need a half halt anyway. However, there is no doubt that the leg and rein aids conjoined by the seat are always working in a symbiotic harmony. Finding this "symphony of aids" is what makes a good rider; one with "equestrian tact" or timing.

Years ago a wise man named Hubert Rohrer, (RIP) who trained at the Spanish Riding School, and was the youngest rider accepted into the school, used to bellow to his students, "the half halt can be 20 ounces or 20 pounds." God forgive the horse and rider that need a 20 pound half halt. The point is, however, that the more elastic, submissive and thus receptive the horse, the lighter the rider's aids and application of the half halt.

With any riding exercise, it is best to practice in both directions. And, as riders know our horses do not always go as well in one direction as they do in the other. There is no doubt that sometimes just riding a simple circle can be a challenge let alone maintaining relaxation, rhythm, and con-

tact plus maintaining the horse's whole body positioned on the arc of the circle. So make sure all these prerequisites are in place for each direction before practicing half halts.

Squeezing the Sponge to Half Halt

Often riders are told to squeeze water out of a sponge with the hand and this is how the half halt is applied. But, a rider has to have an established elastic contact elbow to bit before the horse will feel their fingers trying to squeeze a sponge with the rein! Too often riders have no contact and this squeezing action has no effect. Therefore, be sure you have an elastic elbow to bit connection with the horse's mouth via the rein, before trying to squeeze the water or use your fingers for a half halt. Thus learning to apply the half halt by bringing the elbow slightly back is more effective for the novice horse and rider. The elbow bends just ever so slightly to establish more contact and a simplified half halt is applied. A more adept rider who maintains a steady elastic contact and uses the squeezing method for a half halt, may find this method works more effectively than the novice rider. Riding aids become more subtle the more experience both horse and rider maintain.

Half Halting with the Seat

Half halting with the seat is for the more advanced rider and horse. It is difficult to imagine how a rider can half halt with the seat if he is posting the trot. If the rider is to ask the horse to go forward in the down ward beat of the rising trot, and half halt during the upward beat of the rising trot, then to half halt with the seat at the rising trot could put the whole sequence out of rhythm.

It must be highlighted that the seat does not mean the cheeks of your butt, but your lower back and/or abdominal muscles. (Now referred to as the core.) The lower back of the rider is controlled by the abdominal muscles and vice a versa, just like the horse. How the "seat" works to half halt is that it pushes or applies increased pressure on the oscillating dorsal muscles of the horse's back that are pulsating back and forth under the rider's seat. When the rider sits taller or exhales to half halt, this affect slows the motion of the horse's back muscles. Thus a half halt with the seat is created.

Half halting with the seat is best suited for horses and riders that are spending more time in the sitting trot than in the rising trot. And, as we know, sitting the trot of the horse should be done when the horse's back is up under the rider's seat and not hollowed and concave because of the rider's seat. The classical horseman Waldemar Seunig, author of the book *Horsemanship*, says that, "the horse's back is to come up to meet the rider's seat, and massage the rider's seat!" So, once one has this then half halting with the seat is easier and harmoniously effective. However, before a rider is sitting the trot regularly, he can still learn to use the seat for halt halts. Such as just slowing the posting to get the horse to slow down, that is also using the seat, or going from a rising trot to a sitting trot which typically slows the horse and gets it to walk.

The best way to experience a half halt with the seat is to go into a "school" sitting trot, that is a slow sitting trot, allowing the horse's back muscles to come up and move the rider's seat. This is called a following seat. Of course, we expect that the horse is relaxed, rhythmic and its body positioned on the arc of a circle softly accepting the contact. With these basics established, the rider then sits up tall and/or exhales. As a result, the horse should downshift or slow down. Sitting up taller or exhaling tightens the rider's abdominal muscles and, as a result, tightens or braces the lower back

causing the horse's back muscles to slow by interrupting the movement of its back. The seat has gone from following the horse's back motion to not following, which impedes the horse's rhythmically moving back muscles to slow. This is called biomechanics, or the rider's body communicating to the horse's body through the silent language of aids.

This above exercise is a simplified version of learning to use the seat for half halts. If the horse does not respond, then likely it is experiencing a short circuiting of the rider's aids, meaning the horse is not getting a clear communication from the rider. If that is the case, immediately soften the seat so it is following again and try again, or simply just use the half halting rein. The half halt with the seat should happen within a few strides. A tight or stiff rider will have a difficult time learning to use the seat, because he first must learn to follow the horse's movement before the seat can be effective. A soft and feeling rider will be more effective with the seat aid because he meshes with the horse's movement, as opposed to resisting the horse's movement.

Once a rider learns to use the seat to half halt from a sitting trot to walk transitions, he can then advance to transitions within the gait. That is, slowing the gait and then allowing the trot to move forward with the action of the "seat", determined by its following or stilling action. Eventually, as the rider and horse develop, the seat and/or rein half halts will be used for canter to trot transitions and/or to "collect" the canter or trot, or for any kind of downward transition. Once again, it needs to be emphasized that the synchronicity of the aids are used when needed and at any particular moment in time it may be the seat half halting or the rein or both! Horses are unpredictable and riders need to be adaptable with the aids to apply what is needed at any given moment in time. Knowing what to do, with equestrian tact and keeping it subtle, is the art of riding.

All of this fundamental verbiage about the half halt is just a beginning of the invisible world of the rider's aids communicating to the horse. And, as we have established, until you feel the effects of your aids while riding, then you have not learned what to feel for to get the desired results.

Developing the skill of the half halt, whether with the rein or the seat will be a new dimension for the developing rider. The rider will be able to use the seat to allow the horse to go forward or slow and rebalance the gait, use the fingers and elastic contact to keep the jaw and poll soft, and the leg to keep the energy coming through with impulsion so the horse's back stays lifted. As another great classical equestrian named Charles De Kunffy is quoted as saying, "The leg energizes; the seat modifies; the hand verifies."

There are so many variables to riding and that is what makes it hard to clearly and concisely teach and write about riding let alone the mystical application of a half halt. Since riding is a dynamic activity a rider does not ever really learn until he actually feels what is happening through the experience of riding. This process of feel or equestrian tact is developed over the years of being in the saddle, and the gift of having good guidance along the way. Learning how to apply the half halt with the perfect timing of aids whether sitting or rising will certainly be a gift for any rider. Riding with a clarity of the aids is a compliment to your horse. And, to think, we did it on the back of a horse and did not have to trek up a mountain, sit cross legged and drone tones in order to accomplish an effective half halt.

* In order to add more clarity about the half halt, I need to mention a third way to half halt a horse, and that is with the thigh or upper leg of the rider. However, using the thighs for a half halt is a more advance way to contain the forward energy of the horse. More often than not the thigh is used to help create an upward lift in the horse's gait as the horse develops more collection with training

and advances up the levels of dressage. But, then again if you squeeze with the thighs while riding there is no doubt the horse will slow down.

No matter which method of half halting you are mastering at this time, it is important that the half halt does not impede the horse's natural gait and constrain it in anyway. A horse must be coming through its top line and the rider's seat in order for any half halt to be properly effective.

