



## **Perfecting the “Whoa”**

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One of the most important things we can teach a young horse is “whoa.” The younger we begin to teach them, the easier and less stressful it will be. Simple ground manners can go a long way when working with a young horse and it all begins with teaching them what “whoa” means. While I could go on and on for several pages about the importance of ground manners and how imperative it is for them to respect you while you’re handling them, the vast majority of this article will be exclusively dedicated to discussing methods of getting them stopped while you’re on their back.

When I’m riding a young horse, one of the first things I want them to know is how to stop. As they become older and you start taking them out around other dangers and distractions, the more critical it is that they know what the word “whoa” means. There are many methods to be used to accomplish the kind of stop you need. Most of the time when I hear stories of horses running off, it’s on a horse that didn’t have a good “whoa” to begin with. For a horse that you are just getting broke, this should be one of the first things you work on. After you’ve put between 60 and 90 days on one, you can really start to perfect the stop. There are four separate methods I use to stop a horse and to train them to stop. When all four are used together, the result is usually really good. However, this method of teaching a horse to stop reaches beyond teaching safety; it also is applicable to performance horses and extremely helpful in the working events such as: reining, working cowhorse, and ranch horse events. Teaching them while they are still young and green can make the stop become such much more efficient than if we wait to emphasize it later down the road.

### *Technique #1*

The first method I use when I’m on a 2 yr old to teach them “whoa” is to simply say “whoa.” I will probably begin to use this method of stopping them even on the first ride. I don’t pull back, I don’t sit down. I simply say “whoa.” Many times, they won’t stop on the first, second, or third, tries. However, they eventually will stop. This is where our ground work and ground manners should come in extremely handy. The word “whoa” should be familiar to them before you even put a foot in the stirrup. It should be a word that has been in their head for nearly two years and something they should know the answer to when you ask them. It is really crucial to reward the smallest amount of effort when working with young horses. This is just as important when you

are working on teaching them how to stop. The second they stop, give them a pat on the neck. Maybe hop off and then hop back on. Let them stand still for awhile or let them walk. The point is to try and find some type of reward for them. If they feel more comfortable walking around, let that be their reward.

### *Technique #2*

Once I feel like we are making some ground with saying “whoa,” I will advance to pulling back on the reins. When I pull back, especially with a young horse, I always use slow hands. For me, slow hands = soft mouth. A horse with a soft mouth is one of the most important characteristics of riding a good horse. When I pull back, I always make sure I accompany it with saying “whoa.” If nothing else, this lets the horse know that something is coming. If you’ve mastered the first technique/step, your horse will already stop when you say “whoa.” The pulling back is merely a bonus at this point. When I pull back, I go straight towards my belt. If my hands can extend past my belt line and the reins are still loose, I probably have too much drape in my reins. It is also in this step that I will back my horse a few steps with each back. I will back them each time I stop from this point forward in their training. The backing is what really helps them become lighter on their front end and drop more weight on their haunches. This is the pretty stop we are looking for at the show.

### *Technique #3*

The final two techniques are used primarily when a horse has 60-90 days of riding time. That’s not to say it can’t be used on green horses, it’s simply a method that is better for those horses that are ready to go show. At this point, I should have a horse that knows how to stop when I say “whoa,” and I pull back on the reins slowly. For the third technique, I replace the pulling back with simply sitting down in the saddle deeper. Sitting down in the saddle deeper doesn’t mean leaning back further; it is basically placing more weight down in the seat and sitting on my pockets more. If you have ever seen a reining horse stop, the rider is sitting down deeper in the saddle than they were when they were loping circles. This is the look that we are after. The reason we are sitting deeper and not leaning back as much is for the simple fact that when we sit deeper in the saddle to stop, it places more emphasis on the horse dropping his weight down into his hocks and stopping on his hind end, rather than on his front end. When I use this method, I don’t pull back, I only say “whoa” and drop down a little deeper in the saddle. I don’t pull back in this technique (you’ll see why a little later on).

### *Technique #4*

In the final technique/method I use when perfecting the stop is to throw my legs forward when I go to stop. Also in this technique, I am not pulling back and I am not sitting deeper, I am merely saying “whoa” and throwing my legs forward. Just like the other exercises, it must be mastered at the walk first. It is also better if these techniques are done in the round pen or in an arena to minimize distractions for the horse. I will keep asking until I get the result I was looking for. There will be some horses that enjoy stopping more than others. If I’m specifically training one for the reining, working cowhorse, or ranch horse classes, I want one that likes to stop and anticipates the next time he will be stopping. This tells me that he enjoys his job and is eager to please.

### *Final Element*

Now, let’s add all four of those techniques together to come up with the most ideal stop. In all of the techniques we have done up to this point, we have only done two things at once. In each technique/method we always said “whoa” but we used different means of maximizing our stop. If your horse has done well at all methods, he is ready for you to use all four methods at once. If I’m showing or doing a demonstration, the likelihood of my horse nailing the stop has increased exponentially at this point. We have put ourselves in much better position to succeed and lay down a pretty stop where our horse is sitting down in his hind quarters and taking weight off of his front end. I have found that most horses enjoy stopping when we teach them this method for the simple fact that they know what’s coming and they know what is expected of them. If I have learned nothing else at this point, I have learned that horses thrive on consistency. In this method there’s no yanking or slamming them into the ground. We have put together a great stop that’s done by first saying “whoa” and sitting deeper in the saddle, throwing my legs forward, and finally pulling back with slow hands. The ultimate goal is to not have to pull back at all. In doing so, we have kept our horse’s mouth soft and made each maneuver a little easier to accomplish.

As mentioned earlier, everything we do should be perfected at the walk, then trot, and then finally the lope. If you’re loping circles and your horse isn’t stopping very well, the best thing you can do is rewind in your training and work on stopping at the walk and progress forward. These exercises should be repeated several times before we can really expect our horse to do it exactly the way it needs to be done. If you feel like you can do it at the trot but are having a difficult time at the lope, try these techniques at the extended trot. With the extended trot you have added speed, but haven’t necessary exceeded the level of difficulty your horse is capable of.