

Learning to Leg Yield

By Marie Hoffman

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Sonny is a black 12 yr. old Tennessee Walker gelding that is owned by Ruth. His usual job in life is to take his owner on trail rides and around the farm where they board. Ruth wanted him to learn to leg yield so she could maneuver better in the woods, open gaits and move him toward a stump or raised area so she could mount and dismount easier. Sonny did not understand that he should move away from Ruth's leg, so that is where we started in the first lesson, learning to do a pivot on the forehand.

Ruth rides in a western pelham bit. This gives her a rein that acts like a snaffle with a direct connection to the corner of his mouth. This was essential so that Ruth could give clear signals to Sonny to bend his poll. A curb bit does not enable the rider to give a clear enough signal to the horse because of the bit's leverage action.

After she had warmed him up, I had Ruth position Sonny close and parallel to the wall on the arena. The goal was to have Sonny move his hind quarters toward the middle of the arena while keeping his front feet in relatively small space. Ruth asked Sonny to flex his poll to the side enough so she could see his eye and nostril toward the arena wall that was on the left. To discourage him from walking forward her right hand used the rein as needed, the wall also helps. Ruth held the whip in her left hand ready to give light signals on his hip to move forward if he did not listen to Ruth's leg signals.

The leg yield is a FORWARD movement. The horse must be thinking of moving forward and then the rider redirects that motion into moving laterally. For Ruth and Sonny this was a key concept.

Once in position Ruth asked Sonny to move his haunches toward the middle of the arena while keeping his head and front legs by the wall. Sonny did move toward the middle but he also stepped back a step with his front legs and crossed his rear legs behind by stepping behind the other leg. He was backing up while he moved his hip toward the middle of the arena. The problem with moving this way was is if he would be asked to leg yield while walking he would not be able to cross his legs behind each other while progressing forward.

I had Ruth gait him in a running walk around the arena to encourage Sonny to think forward. Then, letting Ruth know that it was her outside or right rein that was holding him too much, causing him to want to get away from the pressure by moving backwards. (The wall was still on the left and he was bent left.)

Ruth slowly walked him along the wall to encourage him to keep the forward thought. Then she signaled him to move his haunches in, using the wall and her right (outside) rein just enough to stop his forward movement. Ruth also learned to use her seat. The seat moves in what I call a "walking seat" when the horse is walking. The rider's seat bones slide forward and back independently. Ruth needed to remember to keep her seat moving when she signaled for the haunches in, she would slide her inside (left) seat bone toward Sonny's right ear. After a couple more attempts she was able to position Sonny so he took one step crossing his hind leg, as he moved his haunches away from the wall and toward the middle of the arena.

Sonny at this point did not know what was being asked. Ruth put him in a position where he did as she wanted but it was because her aids gave him no other choice. As time progresses, he will and did realize he should move his haunches away from Ruth's leg signals learning the desired response.

After Ruth lavishly praised him, I had her gait him the other direction to help keep him thinking forward. Now with the wall to the right she reversed her cues and bent him to the right (toward the wall) using the snaffle or top rein. Ruth used her left rein (now her outside rein) to hold his shoulder from moving but cautious not to use it so much as to stop Sonny from thinking forward. Ruth used her right leg and heel to signal him to move forward. Once she felt him move his weight on his front legs she stopped most of his motion in his shoulders with her outside or left hand. Sonny having nowhere else to go with his energy, he moved his haunches in a step. Ruth immediately asked him to move forward along the wall and praised him as she went along.

We repeated the pivot on the forehand one more time along the wall moving his haunches to the left.

Ruth has a more difficult time bending Sonny to the right, not unlike most horses. So she discovered that because he was stiffer on this side, he moved away from her leg better toward the left when she was asking him to bend to the right. So Sonny did not have as hard a time learning the second direction.

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I gave Ruth the homework of pivoting him along the wall no more than a couple of times each direction during each ride. Then she was to only ask for a step or two to the side. After he stepped away from her leg she was to immediately go forward. If a horse is drilled on a new skill too many times he will not realize he is doing it correctly. He is likely to start trying to do it a different way much to the frustration of the rider.

The next week, Ruth rode Sonny around for a few minutes first, to warm him up. Then she demonstrated how she had been asking him to move his haunches in and away from her leg. Sonny did well but at times he still wanted to cross his legs behind each other instead of crossing in front. I had Ruth, while walking, ask Sonny to move his haunches (to the right) toward the center of the arena while she used her outside hand (right) to hold his shoulder. This time I did not want her to stop his shoulder completely, just to ask him to slow it until he would swing his hips away from the wall in response to her inside (left) leg aid.

The inside leg and hand are on the same side as the direction the horse is bent. The outside is the opposite side of the horse's bend. It is not in reference to where the arena walls are.

The next week during each ride, she repeated a couple of times the new exercise each direction. Ruth asked Sonny to move his haunches away from the wall remembering to cue him before he stopped his feet. He would stop when he moved his haunches in, but was still thinking forward and would hopefully cross his hind legs in front of each other instead of behind.

At the next lesson, success! Sonny consistently crossed his legs in front of each other. Now it was time to teach him how to move down the rail with his haunches in. Using the same cues, bend away from the direction you want his haunches to move. The rider uses the inside leg and rein to bend and signal him to move his haunches over. Then use the outside rein to slow or hold his shoulder from moving too much while the outside leg is used only to encourage forward movement if needed. While Sonny was walking down the wall Ruth signaled in the same way except she allowed his shoulder to move down the wall too. Ruth learned how to use the outside rein to encourage Sonny to take a sideways step with his front legs. Her inside rein (next to the wall) bent his poll and once she felt his haunches respond to her aid to move away from the wall. Then she used her outside rein to invite his poll to straighten a little while softening so the shoulder would move down the wall a step. Then Ruth signaled the haunches to move in another step and then the shoulder, haunches, shoulder, etc.

Sonny walked down the wall a couple of steps with his head toward the wall and his haunches in. He crossed both front and rear legs as he took the couple of steps. Then Ruth immediately asked him to gait forward while praising him for his efforts.

The first times we only wanted a couple of steps that were correct. If a rider asks for too much too soon the horse will have a tendency to tense. Then every time he is asked to move his haunches over he will become tense making the maneuver more difficult.

Over the next week Ruth was able to ask Sonny to take a couple of steps each direction down the wall during her regular riding sessions. The next week we just added more steps. Sonny's nervous system was learning to move his legs in a different manner and we wanted to give it enough time to develop. The more time he was given, the better developed his coordination became.

The session following, Sonny demonstrated he had learned what Ruth was teaching him. He could now walk down the rail in either direction crossing his legs correctly with his haunches in and away from the rail while his head and shoulders stayed near the rail. He was now moving almost perpendicular to the rail. His body was at about an eighty degree angle to the rail.

During this lesson it was time to train Sonny to do a leg yield away from the wall. Ruth walked him about 10 feet off the rail and then asked using the same cues to move toward the rail. Sonny walked to the rail leading with his shoulder and letting his hips trail along. This is not a leg yield. The next try, I walked backwards about 15 feet in front of them with my hands outstretched acting like the wall where they had been practicing. While they walked toward me while off the rail, I had Ruth pretend I was the wall. This helped her visualize and signal Sonny correctly. Before she was not stopping his shoulder with her outside rein enough, so he had to step sideways instead of walking forward.

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We repeated the same exercise the other direction.

It took a couple of more lessons before Ruth was able to feel when Sonny was moving correctly as he leg yielded. Soon she was able to practice moving him toward the wall and away from the wall. Sonny responded easily and calmly to Ruth's aids because he totally understood and was able to do what was asked of him.

Ruth discovered that she needed to keep her balance the same until he was in the desired spot, in their practice of leg yielding to other areas, like the mounting block. If she changed her balance too much focusing on where she wanted him to go, he was unable to leg yield correctly and would not move where she wanted him.

Ruth and Sonny are now taking advantage of their new skills on the trails and at home.