

## Quieting a Very Hot Horse

By Marie Hoffman

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Page 1 of 3

Talent is a 9 year old Appendix 15.3H AQHA sorrel mare. Her owner wants to be able to trail ride her and enjoy his rides with her.

The problem is; she would sometimes be okay to ride, but more often than not she would spook at something, even something she was okay with the day before. Then she became get very excited, very forward and hard to control. Once she became excited she stayed that way.

Steve brought her to me for a month while he was away on business. The goal of the training was to see if I could help her or Steve was going to sell her. Talent was a very willful mare, yet she did have an endearing quality about her, though I was not sure what that was the first few weeks I had her. When she arrived I noticed that she has very long thin ears that are placed on top of her head and equal distance at the tips as at the base. This told me she had very hot ears. This means that it doesn't take much for this horse to go into her flight reflex, pump adrenaline into her system and become very over reactive. I started riding her with her snaffle she was used to. It was a D-ring with a small mouth piece. She liked it so I kept using it. My bit of choice would have been an egg-butt or O-ring. Horses some times resist by pushing into the flat side of the D-ring instead of yielding the direction of the contact.

I asked her, while walking under saddle, to flex her poll to the right a few steps, then straight a few steps and then left a few steps. I changed the pattern from time to time, right -straight- right- straight- left straight- left. My goal was to have her flex anytime I asked her to either direction. I was surprised how soft and easy she was to flex correctly. She flexed at the poll not at the vertebrae four inches behind the poll, which was very good. She did this when she was calm, but if something caught her attention she was much more resistant to flex at the poll. She had to have her poll straight in line with her neck to be in her instinctive stage flight. By flexing he poll I was able to override her instinct of flight and bring her back to thinking again. Because she yielded easily when calm, it was always possible to bring her back to thinking by flexing her poll. I repeated the vibrating signals on the rein to flex and if she was resistant I would straighten her head with the outside rein (the rein that was not asking her to flex) and ask again, repeating until she responded.

When I asked her to flex, say to the right, by giving a vibrating signal on the right rein. I used my right leg on her as well, vibrating my ankle on her belly if needed to achieve the flex at the poll. Once she was flexed where I could see her eye and nostril I then picked up contact on the outside rein and asked her to stop. I maintained contact on the inside rein. I exhaled, stretched my spine toward the sky at the same time I signaled on the outside rein (left) to stop. This motion is a very effective half halt. She would stop but was not quick about it. She would pull down on the bit to evade the signals I was giving. Because I had her poll flexed she was unable to be successful and soon realized she should stop. I continued just walking and stopping her the first several days I rode her. She wanted to prick her ears forward and go into flight reflex most of the time I rode her. I flexed her poll and sometimes neck to turn her eye away from what ever she was trying to focus on and spook at. The corn along the arena was a strong distraction to her. Our dog in the pasture at the end of the arena also seemed to be a good excuse too.

The reason I did not want her to prick her ears forward and raise her head is when she is doing this she is pumping adrenaline into her system preparing it for flight. Once she has done this, Talent becomes very over reactive to everything. If I would break her focus on whatever she was scaring herself with, she would stay calm.

Once I had her to where I could ride her at the walk and keep her attention on me when I asked. I wanted her to turn an ear toward me when I flexed her poll. If she did I knew I had brought her attention back to me and broke her concentration on what she was staring at.

I asked her to trot and walk. I only let her trot a few steps then I asked her to walk again. She was very forward and didn't want to slow when I asked her. I continued to use the same technique of flexing her poll to one side and using the other or outside rein to signal for the walk. No matter what she did I continued giving strong half-halts in the manner I described above until she responded. We did this several more days. I still had to break her gaze if she started to stare at the corn, by turning her head away from it. I kept a strong inside leg on her so she would continue straight and not turn in the direction I was flexing her poll.

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Page 2 of 3

After about 10 days of training, I had ridden Talent for her lesson and then used her to sit on while I gave other lessons. I had put her in the barn and took her out several times. I had done this at other times and she was fine. Talent had been ridden regularly for long times and was definitely in condition to handle the work. She was not happy about working though we were only walking. She raised her back and acted like she would buck if I asked her to trot. When I asked her to bend, she would stiffen her neck and shake it pulling it toward the ground. I checked to make sure she was not sore. She has just had enough of me being leader. She has been able to lead in the dance with Steve and was not happy I was not letting her. I did not aggravate her I just asked her to keep walking. I rode her another hour or so. She gave in some what to where I could flex her at the poll again. I quit. She had the next day off because it was Sunday.

On Monday I had a new horse. She was much more willing to focus and cooperate. She half halted easily. I started to work on her fast trot to slow trot transitions. Though she still did not want to slow easily all the time, she was much better.

Up to that Saturday she had been giving in reluctantly but had not made the decision to cooperate. She did things at different times like not want to take the bit, pin her ears when you saddled her though her back did not hurt and the saddle fit well, run over you to get out of her stall, not stand when you mounted, not stand after you mounted, on the ground lead you instead of you leading her and jerk your reins out of your hands while mounted. I find it is common to find resistances in older horses often the first two weeks I work them. I have changed the rules from what they know and they want to go back to what they feel is normal.

After Saturday she figured out it was a lot less work and easier to cooperate. Talent had spent most of her riding life going fast, yet she really was a lazy horse in her personality. Once she figured out cooperating was less work she was more willing to cooperate. With the adrenaline rushes no longer complicating things she stayed very calm.

It was time for Steve to come and ride her. He needed to learn a whole different riding style. Before Talent would always pull so Steve had learned to ride in a braced position. Now that Talent is slowing down easily, he was able to start to learn to ride in the normal way. He also realized that he had to not let her canter or trot when she felt like it, even if it was a very comfortable canter. If she did go faster than he had signaled or speed up when he had not given her a signal Steve would now slow her or stop her. It was very important that he stay the leader of the riding dance at all times.

The next week I cantered her. I would establish a good trot that I could half halt to a slower trot easily. Only then would I ask for a canter then after a few strides I would trot again. Talent wanted to continue cantering faster and faster. I had to use some strong outside rein half halts to get her to respond. I made sure I was using my legs to push her into the bit, making my reins signals more effective. It took her a few days to understand and learn to balance her canter better. This enabled her to canter slower. She sped up mostly because she was falling on her forehand and the more she fell on her forehand the faster she felt she needed to go to keep her balance. By half halting her, thus rebalancing her, she was able to keep cantering slower.

During the last week I was able to canter her and trot her at the speeds I wanted. The most dramatic change was her attitude. She was CALM!! She acted like a well trained school horse. I rode her on the side of the road and she was normal in that she had a little more energy but not frantic like she was before. In Steve's last lesson, I had a person walk out of the corn by the side of the arena to give Steve a chance to use bending her away from the spooky thing. She did not care at all! She walked and trotted by without even raising her head and looking. So we went out on the road, Steve had had trouble controlling her outside of the arena before. She was very responsive and though did try to canter on her own when they were trotting. She listened to Steve's half halts and readily slowed down. At no time did she start pumping adrenaline into her system and become overexcited.

Talent has gone home and has continued her quiet cooperative ways. Steve learned how to bend her poll, use the outside rein for half halting, and how to keep Talent focus away from anything that might excite her, thus stopping her adrenaline from causing problems. He has ridden her by big machinery and in fields with company. On one ride, the other horses went back to the barn and Steve was able to continue his ride alone with a responsive Talent. This was never possible before. Talent was so insecure she needed the company of other horses as security and was then very hard to control.

The best part is she is becoming calmer and calmer. Talent is very happy to let Steve be the leader of the riding dance. With him as leader she no longer has to worry about keeping safe. She can relax and let Steve keep her safe from "scary things". It

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Page 3 of 3

takes only a normal clear signal for Steve to bring Talent's attention back to him. Steve has the tools now to always be in absolute control, giving him the confidence he can pass on to Talent. Without the regular adrenaline rush, Talent was having different expectation about every ride. Riding has become fun for BOTH of them!!

Talent was not going to be sold. Both Steve and Talent are very happy with the new dance relationship in their rides. Steve is continuing with his riding lessons to better ride his "new horse".