

DEVELOPING A SOFT, WILLING, RELAXED RELATIONSHIP

By Alice Trindle

HAVE YOU EVER TREATED YOURSELF TO THE RELAXATION AND PURE PLEASURE OF A GOOD MUSCLE MASSAGE? OR DISCOVERED THE EUPHORIA AND SENSE OF WELL-BEING THAT HAPPENS AFTER THE STRETCHING AND FLEXING OF A YOGA OR PILATES ROUTINE? IF YOU HAVE, YOU KNOW THAT THE FEELING ACHIEVED IS ADDICTIVE, AND YOU DEFINITELY LOOK FORWARD TO THE EXPERIENCE.

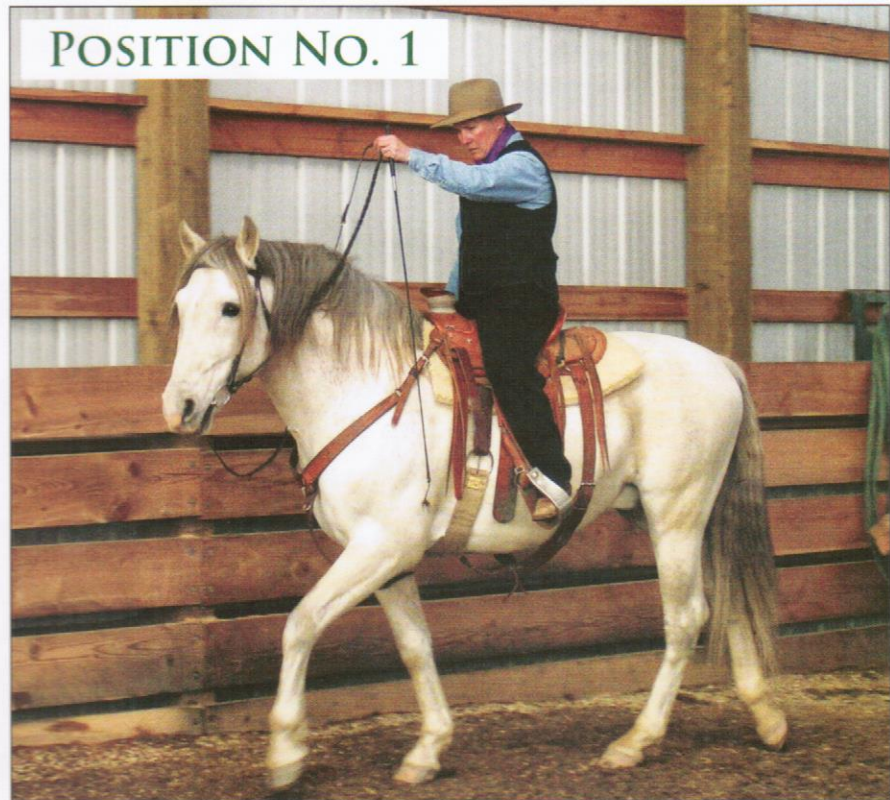
That is the attitude and feeling I would like to develop as a method of operation both for myself and for my horse. I want to establish posture and balance that is based on relaxation, flexibility and suppleness. In order to accomplish this beautiful ballet with my horse, I need to prepare us both mentally, emotionally, and physically for the dance. I can do this, in part, by accomplishing a series of warm-up exercises that prepare the horse and rider team for a great experience.

Let's start by getting ourselves prepared. Of course our overall physical conditioning is very important. Exercises that lengthen, strengthen, and supple are a must for all aspiring horsemen. There a number of great videos available that will help give you a routine to follow. In particular, I find the Pilates and yoga exercises beneficial. But let's look at three specific stretches we can do, while on board or on the ground, prior to riding. This series will work from my head (i.e., my atlas or poll), down through the neck, shoulders, and the rib cage. Here is the progression that I will go through first on me, and then progress to supple the same body parts of my horse:

Atlas (Poll) and Neck: As you sit with good posture on your horse, or on the edge of a straight back chair, or stand with good posture – Try lengthening your neck by politely dropping your chin, and extending your atlas upward, as if there were a feather on the top of your head that you wanted to lift. Next, in this position look softly left, then right. Be gentle, and only go as far as it feels comfortable. Close your eyes and identify what muscles are stretching, and which are flexing or contracting. Feel how you get a little wrinkle in your jowl area as you look and turn your head and chin softly.

Application & Positioning for the Horse – (Massage Position No. 1)

While on board, ride your horse forward at the walk, and focus on a fairly straight line. Shorten one rein of your snaffle bit rein, or horseman's halter lead rope, or true hackamore, and lift the rein forward, up, and slightly towards the horse's outside ear. If I am lifting on the right rein, I should see the horse's right eye, and lift towards the left ear. My right leg will encourage





the horse to move forward, and to help him know that I am asking for a right bend. I will hold this position until the horse gives slightly by lifting his poll (similar to the feather example for us humans), and develops a wrinkle or two in his jowl area. Remember: This is massage therapy, so your positioning in the saddle and your posture are there to accomplish the best massage FOR THE HORSE! Hold the positioning as you walk for a short period of time, and release the hold in your rein very gently. I think of my hands as holding warm taffy, where I can't truly pull, but rather coax and massage, feeling for the release of tension. As the rein becomes light as air, I relax the rein position and follow the motion of the taffy, giving back softly to the horse. Release when the horse is soft and there is no brace in the rein.

Remember that your goal is to relax and supple your horse. This is not a drill and we want to set it up so the horse seeks these massage positions. You will have even greater success if you start either on the ground or in the saddle with the lengthening of the top line in a long and low picture. Note that all of these suppling positions are accomplished with forward movement to facilitate a more dynamic, organic stretch.

Massage/Supple Position No. 1 primarily asked us to relax the poll area and release the TMJ. Now let's move on down the neck vertebra to influence from the atlas, down through C1 and C2, and further down the neck.

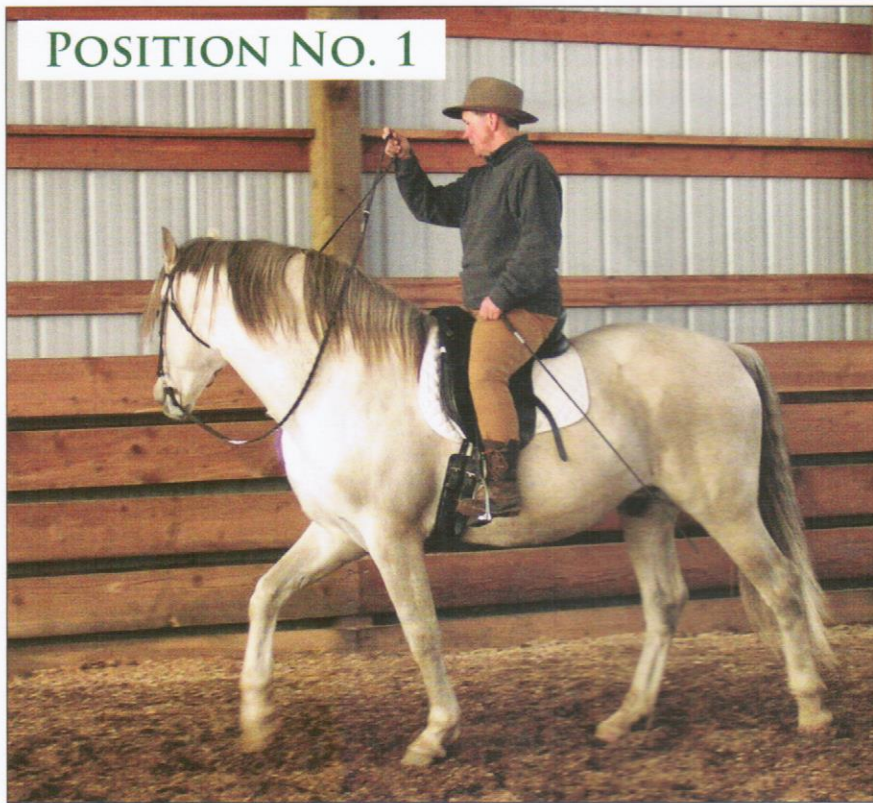
Neck and Shoulders: For us humans, let's go back to relax-

"For kicks, pull your chin into your chest, and then try to look right and left.

This gives you a little empathy for those horses that are ridden in tie-downs, or by people who 'pull' back on the reins to get the horse's head to go down!"

ing at the atlas, with a slight movement looking gently right and left. Start with the position No. 1, and as you look slightly to the right, quietly drop your right ear towards your right shoulder. Be kind to yourself. You are not demanding that the muscles stretch, but rather lengthen and release tension gently. Come back to neutral and start again by feeling for the feather on the top of your head, then looking to the left, feeling for a little wrinkle in your jowl area, and finish with a lowering of your left ear. Enjoy the stretch along the right side of your neck. As you become more limber, try increasing the flex by lowering your ear towards your shoulder and begin to accompany the movement with a tipping of your shoulders too. Note how it feels even better when you start by lifting your atlas, then finding those little wrinkles in your jowl, and last lifting a shoulder.

POSITION NO. 1



Application & Positioning for the Horse – (Massage Position No. 2)

Again, while on board and moving forward at the walk, shorten up on both reins, then go to Position No. 1, watching for the wrinkle in the jowls, but being mindful that the ears are staying relatively on a plane with the ground. Next lean a bit forward and push your outside rein (outside of the bend) forward too, directing the energy on a straight line. You will have a feel, or contact now in both reins, and both are directing the energy forward towards the outside ear and in the direction of travel. Watch first for the lifting of the poll, then the wrinkles in the jowls, and last some wrinkles in the neck, in front of the shoulders, near the spot where a breast collar might rest. Your inside leg helps keep the bend and suggest forward movement. Reward the slightest try and only hold for a short period, remembering to release slowly, like giving to warm taffy.

RELAXATION + FLEXING = SUPPLE

SUPPLE + LATERAL = STRENGTH

STRENGTH + SUPPLE = LIGHTNESS

LIGHTNESS + GATHERING OF ENERGY = COLLECTION IN BRILLIANCE

As you progress with these massaging positions, you'll notice several wonderful elements in your horse. First, as he becomes more supple, he also relaxes into the movement, and begins to seek a balance that allows him to find positive flexion, along with a positive attitude. You will also discover the value of the supportive rein when adding a 'feel' in the No. 2 position. This outside rein contact provides an opportunity for the horse to begin to re-balance, drawing the shoulder blades up and back via the balance in the neck and head. These are key elements in understanding a true "soft feel" that biomechanically positions the horse for better mobility and lightness.

A final supple position will continue to move down the body of the horse to ask for a more full-body flex, particularly along what Mark Russel refers to as "length-bend." Let's carry this suppling progression a little further to begin a comfortable flex through the rib cage as allowed by the skeleton structure.

Supple Position No. 3 - Atlas, Neck, Shoulders, and Rib cage: For the human, begin by flexing and suppling with Position No. 1 and then add in Position No. 2. Next, drop the shoulder in the direction you are looking, and feel the lengthening in the opposite rib cage. Note that you still have the wrinkles in your jowl, in neck, and now some wrinkles or flexing in your rib cage. It feels GOOD from your atlas, clear down through your back to your tailbone!

Application & Positioning for the Horse – (Massage Position No. 3)

As always, start with Position No. 1, add in the outside rein and suppling of the neck with Position No. 2, and next make an adjustment in the inside rein position. Draw the energy up towards the armpit of your outside arm. (Example: If you are flexing to the left, you see a wrinkle in the left jowl, and in the left shoulder area, and your left rein moves from up and forward to a trajectory towards your right armpit.) A little more leg may need to be applied to keep the forward motion. You want to feel the shoulder rising up, not diving down on to your hands. The ears of the horse should remain relatively level, not tipping forward with the jaw tipping back towards your boot. The idea is to develop a soft self-carriage, with the poll and shoulders lifting upwards, and the

energy coming from behind. Be very conscientious about your goals here. Remember you are giving a massage, and flexing and lengthening muscles a little more with each position. Be careful not to just drop the feeling on the reins.

It may take you a little time and work to get good at giving yourself and then your horse a wonderful massage, but can you imagine how much you would look forward to riding if every time it was preceded by a muscle massage? As you get more proficient, you will notice that your horse gets lighter when you pick up on the reins. Soon when the calf of your leg comes in contact, your horse will lift his poll and shoulders, find his driving force, and prepare a soft feel. He will be ready to go to work with a smile on his face knowing your hands are there to give a massage!

Please Note: There are many great additional warm-up and suppling exercises that I recommend to prepare yourself and your horse for a safe and fun day of riding. Visit the website at www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles for "articles and Tip for the Ride" videos. Other references:

- *Gymnastic Exercises for Horses, The Classical Way* by Eleanor Russell
- *Lessons in Lightness*, by Mark Russell

