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Bell begins a counterclockwise dance using his right hand to drive the horse in a circle.

To a safe stop

Frank Bell's training program culminates in a graceful, yet quite practical, one-rein stop.

Article by Karen Boush

Photographs by Jane Reed

WHEN horse gentler Frank Bell performs a one-rein stop, he guides his equine partner through an elegant, free-flowing movement that involves solid communication and harmony.

According to Bell, teaching a horse "ballet," as he calls the final segment of his seven-step training system, elevates safety to an art. Two simple maneuvers—a one-rein stop followed by a turn on the haunches—give riders the means to disengage the hindquarters in dan-

gerous situations as well as teach the horse proper foot placement and weight shifting. Ultimately, once the steps have been learned and the moves polished, horse and rider are in sync both physically and mentally. When the hindquarters are properly disengaged, the horse cannot run off or rear.

The first five steps of Bell's safety system were reviewed in *WH's* September 1998 and December 1999 issues and taught riders how to bond with their horses, build horses' confidence through desensi-

tization, and get horses to think rationally during ground exercises.

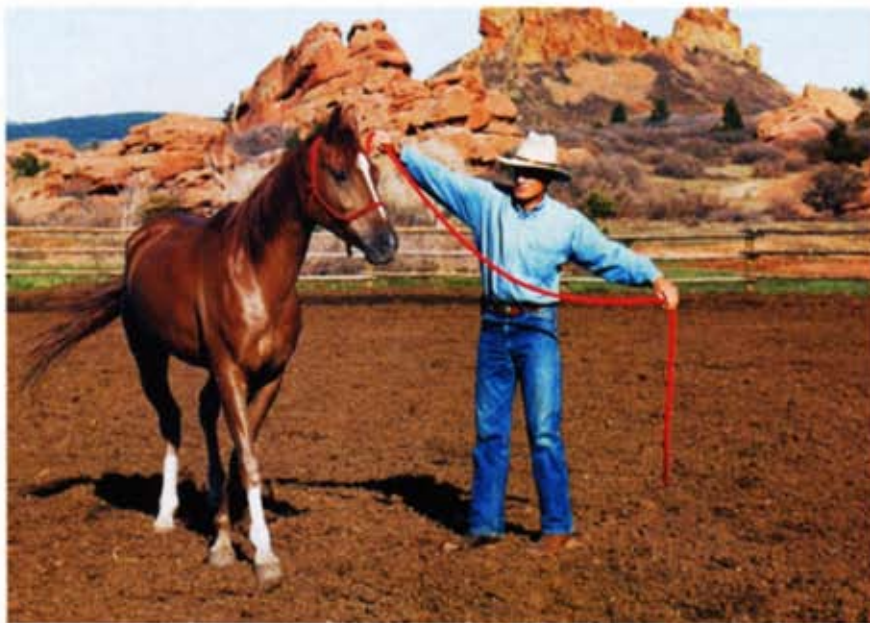
In the final two steps, which are the focus of this article, you will lead your horse through a dance that pulls together everything learned in the previous steps. The lessons require you to use clear, distinct body language and accurate timing to convey precise directions to your horse. According to Bell, the high level of communication and understanding you establish with your horse through this work will transfer into everything else the two of you do, whether it's in the barn, in the show arena, or out on the trail. Your horse will become an athlete, and you will become his respected friend.

Step 6: Ballet on the ground

Using a halter (preferably of soft rope with no buckles) and a 12-foot lead rope, ask your horse to walk forward in a clockwise circle. As in Step 4, when you drove your horse on the ground before winding him down, hold the rope with your right hand and use your left hand as the accelerator.

As soon as your horse is working his legs energetically, reach across in front of your body with your left hand and take hold of the lead rope. With a light tug on the rope, tilt the horse's head slightly to the right so he momentarily stops. Your horse will shift his weight forward and move his hind legs around, essentially performing a turn on the forehand.

Now, use the open palm of your left hand in a pushing motion toward your horse's left eye to send him off in the opposite direction. Ideally, he will rock his weight backward, his hind legs will remain fixed, and his front legs will step over each other as he executes a turn on the haunches. Open your arms to help guide him into a counterclockwise circle, using body language to help communicate your wishes to the



Bell stops the horse's forward movement by tilting the head toward the center of the circle, beginning the turn on the forehand.



This photo shows the blocking motion toward the horse's eye that Bell uses to stop the horse's forward motion prior to the turn on the haunches.

horse. Then repeat in this direction.

Bell points out that when first introducing this to a horse, you most likely will need to be extremely obvious about your blocking. He suggests getting your left hand up close to the horse's eye to impress on him

your desire for him to move off in the other direction, or even lightly bumping his cheek with your open hand if he gets too close to you.

"Don't step back," Bell advises. "Get a horse to respect your space. If you stand your ground, he's going



The horse performs a turn on the haunches (above) as Bell sends him off in the opposite direction (below).



Bell begins a one-rein stop to the right, using his right hand to bring the horse's head around and his right leg to disengage the hindquarters.



to have to arrange himself around you." Be sure, however, to hold the line lightly so you don't unintentionally send him mixed signals by reeling him in toward you. Eventually, your horse will know how to do the dance on his own. "I barely touch the rope, and my horse understands what I mean," Bell says. "My body language gets the whole thing done."

As with any dancing duo, a lack of coordination by either will affect the flow of the steps. So you, too, will have to perfect your own moves. Bell suggests practicing the cues without subjecting a horse to your missteps. Either have a friend hold the far end of the rope and circle around you as a horse would, or tie the rope to a fence post and practice on your own. Refining your ability to perform the steps before you teach them to your horse will save him from feeling needlessly confused.

If when practicing with your horse you yourself feel puzzled, Bell suggests using a wind-down to regroup.

"You can always gain time and gather your thoughts by doing a wind-down. For a lot of people, they're overwhelmed the first time they do this—there's so much going on, and you really are teaching the horse to dance. We've got two part-

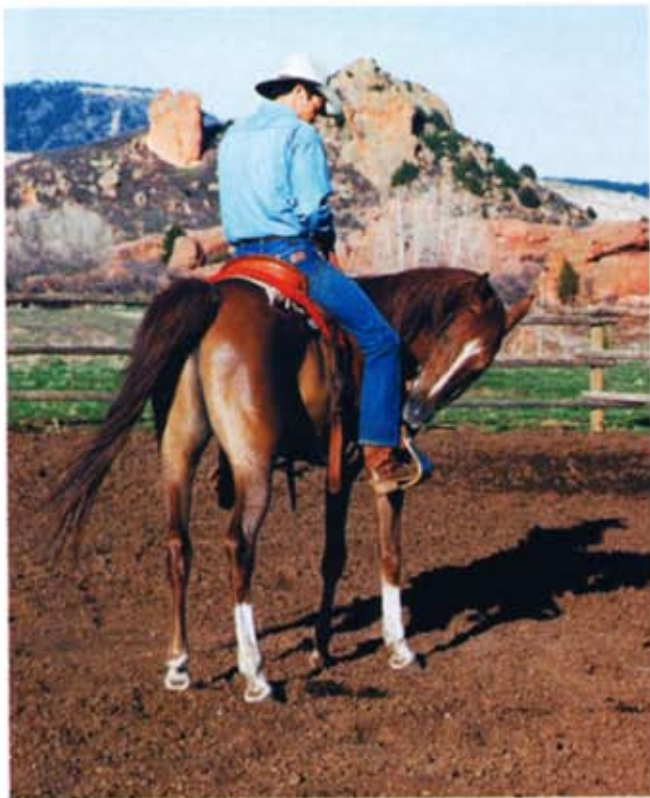


ners here, and you're not very good at it yet because you haven't practiced it. So when you start to lose it, do a wind-down, which is essentially a one-rein stop on the ground."

Beauty in motion

When you and your horse get to the point where you perform these maneuvers on the ground skillfully, it is a constructive use of the horse's energy. "You're deflecting his energy from one side to the other with a minimum of effort and engaging both his mind and body," Bell explains.

The exercise also reinforces important lessons and ingrains invaluable patterns of movement



Eventually, your horse will work his mouth, lower his head, and relax his tail. That's the invitation to ride.

in your horse. "He is reading your body language to understand what you want," Bell says. "As he does it, he's respecting your space, changing eyes, moving away from pressure, and using himself prop-



In these three photos, the horse gives Bell his head at the end of the one-rein stop.

erly." Bell reminds handlers that a horse cannot perform these precise foot maneuvers and position himself accurately without his weight being properly placed—first shifted forward, then back.

"And you want your horse to do this slowly. When the horse moves abruptly, he's impulsive. You want to see a horse think about it and do it rationally—that's the big word here." Eventually, it will all come together, Bell says, and your horse will work his mouth, lower his head, and relax his tail. And that, Bell says, is the required invitation to ride.

With the footwork already practiced on the ground, it transfers easily to work in the saddle. "I find that once this work on the ground is accomplished, and you've really got some finesse working on the ground, you're in a pretty good place when it's time to get in the saddle," Bell says.

Step 7: In the saddle

You can use the rope halter with the lead rope as reins or a snaffle bit to effectively and humanely communicate from the saddle to your horse. Once in the saddle, begin a one-rein stop to the right by walking your horse in a clockwise circle. When he is moving with life, bring your left hand and reins up toward your chin to pull the slack out of the reins. Then, *simultaneously*

- lean slightly forward (because that's where the horse's weight needs to be),
- slide your right hand down the rein and pull to the right, toward your hip bone,
- release the left rein, stroking the horse's neck with your left hand if you can, and
- move your right leg back just slightly and bump the hind-quarters over.

When your horse complies with your request by turning on his forehead, immediately release your leg pressure. Wait for the horse to come

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The horse steps over in front, performing a counterclockwise turn on the haunches.

to a full stop and get soft to the right rein. Release the head slightly, then ask him to turn on his haunches by

- first shifting your weight back a little and waiting for your horse to follow and shift his own weight back, then
- laying the rein across the horse's neck with your left hand, and, finally,
- encouraging him to step over in front by moving your left (outside) leg slightly forward and applying gentle pressure.

Note that your horse may take a half-step back with his inside front leg before he steps over in front, which means he has shifted his weight back. As you finish the movement the horse will walk off in the same direction you started.

Bell tells riders to remember the cues from the saddle as "inside, inside, outside, outside," meaning that for turns to the right first use your inside (right) rein and leg, then your outside (left) rein and leg.

Note that during the maneuver—both on the ground and in the saddle—one side of your horse will be stiffer than the other. "Your

horse is going to be less accurate, he's going to bend less, and he's going to be a little more clumsy on one side," Bell says. "It's your job to know which side is behind so you can get in there and help him with it and get him caught up."

Disengaging the hindquarters

The most fundamental and practical goal of this exercise is to disengage the horse's hindquarters, which occurs when the horse's inside hind leg steps over in front of his outside hind leg during the turn on the forehand. If your horse were a car, the movement would essentially throw him into neutral by disengaging the engine that keeps him moving—his hindquarters.

"We've all been run away with, with the horse's head cranked around to the side 90 degrees while you're yelling 'whoa!'" Bell explains. "You can be pulling the horse's head around, and they'll still be going straight until they are disengaged behind.

"The idea is to have a plan. We're practicing this so when an emergency comes and the horse freaks out, you

have somewhere to go. Just like your foot pressing the brake, you've done it enough you don't have to think about it. You just bump the hindquarters over and bring the horse around."

"The idea is to have a plan."

—Frank Bell

If your horse has trouble performing this move, it's essential that you take the time to teach it to him on the ground. Press the stirrup or your thumb into his side (at the point where your leg would fall if you were signaling to him while in the saddle) until he understands that he needs to move his hindquarters away from pressure.

Once you and your horse have perfected this sequence at the walk, progress to the trot, then the canter. It's critical, however, that the faster you're going the bigger you make the circle. "If you bring the head around too abruptly," Bell explains, "the horse could lose his balance." Also be sure to determine which lead the horse is in and direct to that side.

Practice Bell's routine regularly and use it as a way to warm your horse up

mentally and physically for whatever you want to do. "It gets them loosened up and takes 90 percent of the risk out of riding," Bell says. "And it's the repetition of working at it that gets the whole thing going.

"It's a step-by-step process. You'll get it," Bell encourages. "It's not easy, but what is? You're creating an athlete who knows exactly what his feet are doing. He's using his whole body and really separating it out. This dance allows you to have complete control."

As in all training, timing is critical. "Ask, anticipate, get it, release, reward," Bells says. "It is the accurate release of pressure that the horse learns from. People who are sharp and have good timing can get amazing things out of horses."

Even a waltz.

The author is a free-lance equestrian journalist who lives in Parker, Colorado. 🐾

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"I think we're herding 'em too close together!"