

### **The Difference Between Engagement and Disengagement**

*With some popular horsemanship exercises, repeated disengagement of the hind legs is encouraged. Here, I will explain the difference between engagement and disengagement and how this position one exercise is very different than disengagement of the hind legs.*

*When the horse is on a proper circle, the inside hind leg is the driving leg. This leg is coming further under the body and is bearing more weight. This is engagement of the hind leg, and we want to engage our horse to increase his balance, suppleness, and strength. With engagement, the horse steps more toward midline, stepping underneath his center of mass.*

*If the leg steps past midline, swinging across under the body, it is no longer moving toward that center of mass. This becomes disengagement. When the horse disengages, his balance is compromised, and he must shift his weight to the front legs, because the hind leg is no longer there to support the weight. This results in the horse coming down on the forehand.*

*Disengagement also results in more strain on the joints of the horse's leg, starting as high as the lumbosacral joint in the lower back and sacroiliac joints in the hips.*

*What can happen next is the horse's nervous system will enter the sympathetic state as it detects the threat of falling as a result of the loss of balance. The horse will not be able to regain a sense of calm or perform any athletic maneuvers until his balance is restored.*

*The problem with disengaging the horse's hind quarters is that the more unbalanced he becomes in his haunches, the more on the forehand he will become. Overuse injuries are also common, such as strains of the hamstrings, muscles through the hindquarters, hyperflexion of the hind leg joints, and hyperflexion and tension through the lumbar spine.*

*In position one, we encourage the horse to step towards the midline of the body. This achieves engagement of the hind leg, shifting the weight to the hindquarters, promoting balance, and building strength.*

What you will find is that as you do this - a step into position two and then three or four steps in position one, repeatedly - is that your horse will build confidence in changing his balance. Keep working at this and you'll find your horse will start to flow into position two with confidence.

### Warming Up for the In-Hand Work

When we begin an in-hand session with our horse, it is important to warm up.

During in-hand work, there is a lot of stretching, reaching, and relaxing that we ask for from our horse, followed by engaging the muscles and eventually collection. Therefore, it's a good idea, before we start asking for those things, to allow your horse a few minutes to warm the muscles and joints.



First, if the horse has been standing and inactive, we want to get the synovial fluid to circulate through the joints. It takes about three to five minutes for this to happen for an average horse.

The horse at rest has about 80% of his blood and oxygen in the body centralized in the internal organs. If we are going to be working the horse's muscles, we need to make sure that we have blood and oxygen circulating through the muscles. It takes the horse about seven to nine minutes of active work for that blood supply to transition from the internal organs into the muscles.

Through the exercises in this course we're not asking for anything high-level or intense, so there is not a high risk of straining or injuring anything in the horse if there are cold muscles. However, if the muscles are warm and the synovial fluid is circulating through the joints, we will get a better response from our horse as we move through the positions.

The kind of work that you do to warm up depends on your horse. You may lunge in big open circles, or even walk several brisk laps with your horse around the arena.

During our warm up we do not want to restrict the body through side reins or auxiliary tools, which may not allow the joints to fully circulate the synovial fluid.

Whatever it is you use for your horse's warmup, ensure that you take the time to really get that blood flowing and allow him to move freely before we start asking for focused, mindful work. You will find that that this work is going to be a lot easier once your horse has had the opportunity to warm up his body.

### Handler Position

When working your horse in hand, you must pay attention to your own position. Mistakes in the handler's position and movement are what most commonly prevent the horse from being able to move through the positions correctly.

It is common to become so focused on our horse's body or on asking for a specific maneuver that we get in the horse's way.

Or we get out of position and the horse can't understand what it is we're asking him to do. I think often about the movement that we do in-hand as being very much like dancing. I don't want to pull my horse around. I don't want to push his head or neck in any position. To create clarity in how we are asking the horse to move, we must be certain and stable in our own movements.

To continue the dance analogy, imagine the posture of your upper body and arms as being a frame. You want to frame this exercise for the horse, first physically by remaining stable in your posture and balance, but also emotionally, by setting your emotion as a point of reference for your horse. This means keeping an even rhythm in your breathing, being clear in your mind, and not being affected by any worry or anxiety from the horse.



Think of yourself as being the point of reference for your horse. You, as the handler, are leading the dance.

Your core is also very important, and all movement should be initiated through your core. A common mistake is that handlers start moving either before or after their horse moves, becoming out of position and out of sync with the horse.

They are no longer dancing, reacting to one another's actions rather than moving in synchrony.

When I refer to your core as a handler, I am referring to the stability in your core. When riding, the seat anchors the rider. When on the ground, the core anchors the rider to the ground. Your core stability is what allows for maintaining a steady frame and giving accurate aids, such as the half halt.

The half halt, when riding, comes through your seat, into the horse's back, and into the ground through his hind legs. In this case, we are not sitting on the horse so the half halt has to come through our core, through our legs, and into the ground.