

WHAT DOES ‘BROKE’ MEAN?

By Jena Garwood

If you ask 20 different barrel racers what “broke” means in a horse, you’ll get 20 different answers. Even the top futurity trainers have very different ideas when it comes to how they want or need their horse to handle before going to the pattern. In the warm-up pen, you see everything from horses riding around like reiners, to horses that are just running around nearly out of control. So, obviously this is a matter of taste.

In college I was blessed to ride several horses through multiple training and horsemanship semesters with Walt Brindley. We learned what a foundation was in the show world. As I started training barrel horses, I carried that over. For me, a “broke” horse is one that you can control their different parts—head, shoulders, ribs, and hips—all independently, with relative ease. I don’t want to have to “make” that part move—I want to give a cue, have the horse understand the cue, and respond (not react). The majority of horses can be taught to make a very efficient, correct pattern if you have control of their parts—regardless of their breeding or conformation.

In addition to having clear communication with your horse and having him listen, the thing I love the most about a horse with this foundation is the mind it puts on them. Within a couple months, they learn how to think through cues. They stop reacting, and start thinking, “What am I supposed to do?” For example, instead of just reacting to a spur in the ribs out of discomfort, they understand that a heel pressed to their ribs means, move the ribs. Since they understand your cues because you’ve taken the time to teach them, these horses become very confident and secure. I don’t have cattle or big pastures to ride, so I can’t just go get a horse tired, in order to get them thinking. Instead, you can keep challenging that horse to learn more and to really think about what you’re asking. It teaches them focus, maturity, and work ethic, and just puts an amazing mind on them.

Also, by teaching your horse all this off the barrels, it keeps the barrels fun and easy for the horse. These maneuvers can be hard for a horse at first. You don’t want your horse associating the barrels with difficulty, drills, and being tuned on. If you do your tuning and training off the barrels, the horse sees the barrels as play-time, and it keeps them from getting sour or bored. Having a horse really responsive gives you precision on the pattern. It’s like driving a sports car, versus a bus.

“A ‘broke’ horse is one that you can control their different parts—head, shoulders, ribs, and hips—all independently, with relative ease.”

FACE...

This is probably the one part of “broke” where opinions differ the most. I will share what works for me, and why—keeping in mind that there are 100 ways to train a barrel horse. I prefer a horse that gives its face very lightly both vertically and laterally. When giving laterally, I also ask them to bring their head down, towards the point of their shoulder or towards my foot, depending on what I’m asking—instead of keeping their nose in the air. Having vertical flexion is the first part of true collection. If you’re riding a ratey horse, this isn’t quite so important. But the more free-running the horse is, the more important collection is. When the horse’s head goes up—the back goes down, which makes for a less athletic horse.

Continue Garwood...

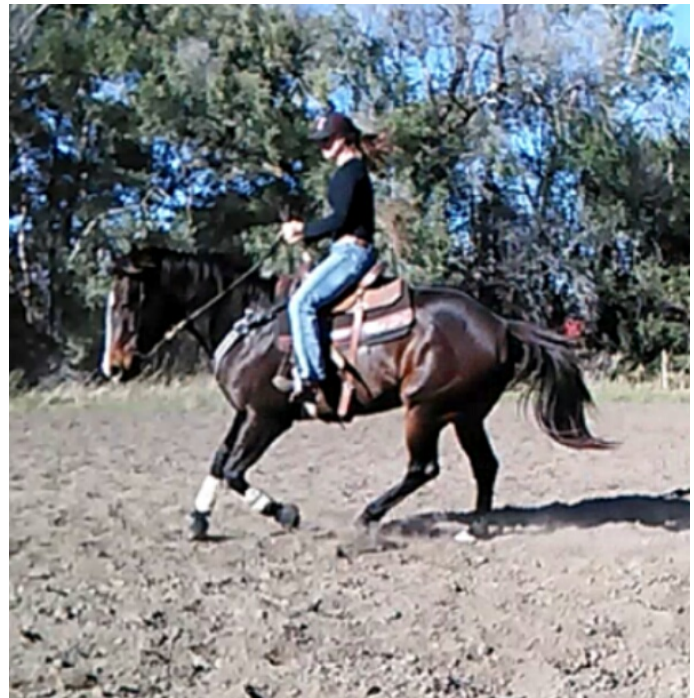
Continue Garwood...

The face is only the first part of collection though. I hear the argument that putting their head down, pulls the shoulders down. This is true—if you stop there. But, moving on, by also teaching the horse to “carry” their shoulders and back up, you have collection. (Side note--A slow lope is not necessarily collection—the horse “carrying” their shoulders and back, is collection). Once your horse starts giving his face vertically, you teach him to pick up his shoulders and back through maneuvers—square corners, gait transitions, listening to your seat asking him to gear down, etc. You will go through a period where the horse buries his head too far (correct by bumping up with your reins, until his head is where you want it), or stops listening to your seat and continues forward when you’re asking for a downward transition or stop (correct by working on your horse listening to your seat). Once your horse understands that picking up a rein means he collects, that saves a lot of time drilling on the barrels. I find this difficult to describe by text. If you’re interested in learning how to teach collection, I encourage you to take lessons either with a barrel racer who uses these methods, or a reining/working cow trainer.

A horse is most athletic, regardless of conformation, when it is collected and balanced. I have also found that if a horse knows how to pick up his shoulders and back, rate becomes much easier—and they don’t even really have to slow down for the turn. They just shift their weight back, shorten their stride, and can keep that momentum through the turn. See *Photo ‘A Balanced Lope’*

SHOULDERS...

Again from the show world, I like to teach my horse to respond with my hand moving from my saddle horn, to a line between his nose and my hip. I have a small box there that I want my hand to stay in. Having my horse respond to those small movements of my hand makes timing in the run so much easier. Instead of my hand moving from his neck, clear out away from my body to turn him, ideally all I have to do is move my hand from in front of the horn, towards my hip or out just a couple inches. I have three hand positions I use.



A BALANCE LOPE
Shoulders are elevated and
his hind end is reaching up under his body.

If my hand is in line with my saddle horn, this means counter arc. And I want a really free, sweeping counter arc, moving quickly—no dragging around slowly. This again requires collection—the horse has to know how to pick his shoulders and back up, in order to counter-arc quickly and freely. If I move my hand right in the middle of my swells, I want the horse to continue forward, but with an arc all the way through his body. See *Photo ‘Counter Arc’*

This allows me to shape the green horse going towards a barrel, without them trying to turn too early. If I move my hand either out a couple inches, or towards my inside hip, that means turn. Again, I want the outside front leg coming over quickly and freely—I don’t want to have to drag my horse through the turn. I use two different positions here, for a different type of turn. If I’m on a more ratey horse, or we are close to the barrel, moving my hand out keeps the horse moving forward, while asking for the turn. If I’m on a free horse, or we got by a barrel, bringing my hand towards my hip to ask for the turn will bring the horse back over his hocks.

Continue Garwood...

Continue Garwood...



COUNTER ARC

Picking up my hand starts a counter arc.
He is making a big move with his inside front leg.

Having a horse understand these small movements of my hand allows me to simply guide them through the turn, without having to pull much. It makes for such a smooth, easy turn. See *Photo 'To Turn'*.

RIBS...

Many horses I start on will give their head, but have no sense of moving their ribs. I have found that if you have rib control, meaning you can arc that horse's ribs and the horse is comfortable with moving towards a barrel and around the barrel with their ribs arced, then shouldering simply doesn't happen. (You can still have a ratey horse shut down too early...but that's different than shouldering/slicing). It's physically impossible for a horse to shoulder while their ribs are arced. This is something I keep a feel for, at all times. If I'm in a circle—whether I'm circling the arena, or a barrel—that horse needs to keep his ribs up. I don't like to spur them constantly—I just use my heel to remind them until it becomes habit. Hand position also comes into play here. If you keep your hand up by the horse's neck ("lifting") going into the barrel, you lose control of the ribs. If you keep your hand down, by your swells or in line with your inside hip—it keeps the horse's whole body arced. Try



TO TURN

I apply outside leg and move my hand to the inside.
He responds freely and quickly.

it—feel the difference in your own body. If your hand is up lifting, by your horse's neck—your own ribs arc toward the barrel, instead of away. So, of course your horse's body will follow. If you keep your hand down, using your heel to shape the ribs, your own body also mimics the correct position. Over time, this prevents shouldering and slicing. If you have rib and shoulder control, to finish the barrel, all you have to do is sit up straight, straighten your own ribs, and move your hand out in the "turn" position, and your horse finishes without bowing away from the barrel. So, while all this may seem quite technical, once you get the feel and habit of it, it actually makes the pattern very simple for rider and horse.

HIP...

Moving my foot back a couple inches, right in front of my back cinch, should move the horse's hip over. Sometimes I teach this before shoulder control, because as you are teaching the shoulder to move, some horses will want to move their hip out, and you need to be able to immediately correct that before it becomes habit (in my opinion, the hip swinging out is one of the hardest things to correct, after it becomes habit). Eventually, I like to have horses keep their hip in

Continue Garwood...

Continue Garwood...

by habit, so it's not something I cue for a lot once a horse is finished—but in the beginning, it's something you correct often. Riding to your pocket, stopping, and moving the hip in is a great exercise for both ratey (helps them keep their hip engaged and moving forward) or free runners (also teaches them to use their hind end going into the pocket). *See Photo 'Applying It All To The Pattern'*



APPLYING IT TO THE PATTERN

He is down in the ground, even for a 16.1 hand horse. His ribs are rounded to the barrel. My inside hand and outside leg are asking for the turn, and he responds by bringing his head and shoulders around. His whole frame is round and collected. Note how in every picture, his body mirrors mine.

Finally, a very important part of being broke is what I call “rating to my seat.” When I ask a horse to stop, I don’t want to have to use my hands. By asking for a rate or stop by sitting, rolling your hips under, and moving your feet off their sides a couple inches, before using your hands, they will start respecting that cue. It’s easy to teach, but you have to be very consistent. This translates to the barrel pattern beautifully. If the horse responds to your seat without pulling back with your hands, he is free to keep his head down, which allows him to

to rate into a stop, because this translates into the barrel pattern better than a fast stop. The flip side of having a horse really broke, is that you have to be a very conscientious rider. There’s going to be a lot of buttons, and you have to ride more with your body, instead of just your hands. If you are just pulling on your horse around the barrel, they will get frustrated and start making mistakes. But, if we demand that our horses be their best, we should also always be striving to be a better pilot.

www.facebook.com/GarwoodBarrelTraining