



Arizona Reining Horse
Association Trainers
Discussion

“Tricks of the
Trade”

Perfecting the Rollback

By: Stephenie Bjorkman

Rollbacks are a necessary
maneuver for not only
reining, but cutting,

working cow horses, and ranch versatility horses. In this article we are going to discuss how to do a rollback in a reining pattern. Every NRHA reining pattern requires two rollback maneuvers. The easiest way to describe a rollback would be a sliding stop followed by the rider whirling their horse into a 180’ degree pirouette. In order to perform a correct rollback, after completing a sliding stop, you must pause and then ask your horse to rotate back on his/her haunches and then lope off in the direction you just came from. As you may know, this is not an easy as it may sound. In fact the rollback is one of the most common areas non pros receive penalties on. What makes a rollback difficult is that it is technically two separate maneuvers. A perfect rollback is when the rider can make it look effortless. The horse must rollback on his hocks with ease and a slight touch of the reins. A correct rollback is a beautiful thing and is sure to score you extra points in the show pen! Some of us are lucky to rollback at all, let alone make it perfect!! So how can we achieve a beautiful and accurate rollback???

To help all of us non-pro’s with our rollback skills, Top NRHA reining professionals Martin Muehlstaetter and Tracer Gilson will teach us of few of their “tricks of the trade”.

What is the biggest mistake you see people make when trying to perform a rollback?

Martin: “The biggest mistake I see non pros make when making a rollback is that they rush. By doing this they don’t complete a 180’ turn and that forces them to lope off to early. Remember...after you do your sliding stop it is important to pause for a split second, make sure you get a “fresh mouth”, and then rollback.”

Tracer: “The biggest mistake I see is when riders don’t wait for their horse to finish stopping and try to roll back. Or they throw themselves into the rollback and try to rush their horse.”

Do you have any quick tips for teaching a horse to rollback?

Martin: “For the young horse I recommend teaching your horse to rollback at the fence. Make sure you do a 180’ turn before you lope off, stop, pause and rollback. This technique will vary depending on the horse.

Tracer: “When I start 2 year olds I keep simple. I usually do a ½ turn with a lead departure. If I am maintaining a horse that is already broke, I stop and back up a step or two, roll back and lope off. After 15 feet I break to the walk.”

What is the most important thing someone can do to prepare their horse for a rollback?

Martin: “It is very important when preparing for a rollback to make sure your horse is broke and soft in the body, face, rib cage, and shoulder. By doing this it is easier to perform a rollback. If you have a horse that is stiff in face or belly make sure you get him soft and supple before you go into the show pen.”

Tracer: “If you are showing a broke horse, they are probably ready to roll back. Make sure the horse is totally turned before you use your leg. The horse should almost be facing the opposite direction before you add any pressure with your leg. Using your leg to early will can give you a “motorcycle turn” rollback. Your rollbacks need to be clean and you should rollback in your tracks.”

What “tip” could you recommend for someone who rides a horse that is difficult to rollback on?

Martin: “If your car is broken, you take it to the mechanic. If your horse is “broken” you should send them to a professional for a tune up. If you think the problem is you, by having a professional watch you with “fresh eyes” they can assist you in perfecting your skills. If you are not in the position to take the horse to a trainer, sit back and think about each part of your rollback step by step. Whatever you do, do not rush.”

Tracer: “Keep it simple. The more the horse does it right, the better off they will be. If a horse is good at doing it incorrect, the more you do it wrong the better at doing it “wrong” they will get. If a horse has issues rolling back it is time to go back to the basics. Half turn with a lead departure. If you don’t make a huge deal out of the rollback it will eventually clean itself up.’

What is the best way you can practice a rollback without making your horse anticipate rolling back after every stop?

Martin: “What I recommend when practicing it to be consistent. Do the opposite of what the horse wants or expects you to do. Mix it up. Instead of practicing this all in one day, you should do a couple of rollbacks each day.”

Tracer: “When I am practicing rollbacks before a show, my routine is that I will lope diagonally across the arena, and then stop. Before a rollback I always make the horse sit there for a second. If they are anticipating the rollback I will ask them to go the opposite direction that they wanted. Another good way to practice at home is to lope a circle and stop somewhere other than the center and rollback.”

How often should you practice rollbacks and when?

Martin: “This truly depends on horse. But you should never work on rollbacks for too long in one single day. A little at a time is best.

Tracer: “It depends on your horse. If you’re going to a show, you should touch it up before you go. If you’re having trouble work on it a little bit every day. By doing this you will keep your horse from being resentful and anticipate. The horse seems to understand it better if you do a little everyday instead of cramming it into one stressful training session.”

Do you recommend practicing rollbacks at a show?

Martin: “Yes, absolutely. It is a good idea to make sure your horse is prepared for the show pen”

Tracer: “I don’t recommend practicing them, but I recommend “testing” it at the show. If your horse does it good, then leave it alone and go show. With my non pros I make sure they can rollback each way before they walk into the show pen.”

What do you do if you have a horse that trots out of a rollback consistently?

Martin: “If you have a horse that tends to get lazy and trot out of the rollbacks, I will usually spur them a little harder to get them to wake up. I like to complete my 180’ turn and really push them to lope off. Even if they lope off to fast or speed up that is ok. You can always break them down to a walk after they accomplish the maneuver you asked for.”

Tracer: “If you have a horse that trots, it is time to go back to the basics. Just like I do with my 2 year olds, I work on a half turn with a lead departure at the end. I will also go to the fence. When I use the fence to rollback I will try to kick them out of there with both legs a few times, and make sure I do a 180’ turn and cluck.”

Some NRHA reining patterns have you rollback two times in a straight line, do you have any tips for this type of pattern?

Martin: “A lot of non pros make the mistake of not practicing your hardest at home. It is important to practice everything at a higher level at home. I do not recommend you do this every day, but once in a while is a good idea. Doing this will help take the edge off both you and your horse. In a straight line pattern I recommend practicing by running down the center, perform a sliding stop, roll back strong and then break your horse down to a walk. You should also make sure you can lope off. If your horse gets anxious break him down to a walk. Do not get in a rush, stay calm, and don’t punish him. Keep the horse relaxed and soft in the face. I would recommend practicing this at the end of a training session.”

Tracer: “It shouldn’t be any different rolling back in the middle then on the sides. In this type of patter I don’t think it is the rollback that gets the the rider flustered. In my experience I think the stop in the center is what makes it difficult. I recommend keeping it simple. You need to make sure you can do this at home before you go the show pen.”

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