

# Stretching Your Horse's Legs May be Counter Productive

by Betty Lindquist



Are stretching exercises for your horse valuable? Most horse owners would guess "yes" ...but the answer in many cases is "no."

Lots of riders have a routine for stretching their horse's legs, either before riding or after a work session. They do this because they believe it will loosen the muscles, increase the length of the horse's stride and increase the range of motion in the major leg joints (stifle/hip joints in the hind legs, shoulder/elbow joints in the forelegs). Most riders do these stretches by picking up a hoof or fetlock and pulling the leg away from the body – the forelegs out to the front and the hind legs out behind the horse.

I have long felt these stretches are counter-productive. In most cases these leg stretches do not increase flexibility or range of motion, and can actually tighten the muscles and decrease the horse's ability to stretch. This tightening of muscles is due to the "stretch reflex". In the belly of all muscles there is a safety mechanism to keep the muscle from being torn if it is over stretched.

***When a muscle feels a pull that could cause over-stretching (hyper-extension), the "stretch reflex" kicks in causing the muscle to contract in order to stop the stretch. This is a description of the stretch reflex responding to an extreme situation, but even a less intense pull can cause a muscle to contract in response to an uncomfortable stretch; and when this happens the leg stretches are actually teaching a muscle to contract and tighten.***

A study done by English researchers at Myerscough College in Lancashire, England (Reference: "Effects of a stretching regime on stride length and range of motion in equine trot." **The Veterinary Journal**, May 2009) concluded that some limited stretching could increase range of motion in some of a horse's joints, but there was no corresponding increase in length of stride for any of the horses and the study also suggested that stretching too frequently could actually decrease the range of motion in both front and hind legs.

I have found that leg stretches can be useful if they are done correctly, but they must be done in such a way that the legs do not

stiffen against the pull. In the leg stretches I recommend, you first loosen the muscles with massage/grooming to the muscles on the top and sides of the haunches and to the shoulder muscles behind the shoulder blade. In this way the horse's body is prepared for stretching rather than just being pulled on, running the risk the stretch will activate the "stretch reflex."

## To stretch the left hind leg:

1. Stand between the stifle and hock facing the horse's hip.
2. Lift the leg keeping the leg fairly low.
3. Put your right hand over the hock and grasp the hock with the palm of your hand on the inside of the hock.
4. You will support the leg with this right hand on the front of the hock, leaving you left hand free to reach forward and cup the front of the stifle.
5. Move the stifle joint back and forth (front to back) six or seven times. You want a smooth, easy motion to this back and forth movement; don't ask for more movement than the horse can give easily.

As you do these motions you will see and feel an opening and stretching of both the stifle and hock joints. After completing the stretches, and when the leg is behind the horse's body, gently allow the foot to return to the ground without stiffening. Be sure to stretch both the right and left hind legs.

Stretches for the front legs will facilitate the opening of the elbow and shoulder (point of the shoulder) joints and increase their flexibility. For the stretch of the left fore leg:

1. Stand in front of the horse, facing the left fore leg.
2. Pick up this leg, holding it with both hands behind the knee and keeping the foot off the ground at a height that is comfortable for the horse (the radius does not have to be parallel to the ground).
3. Still holding behind the knee with both hands push the knee back and forth six to 10 times – this will open and close the elbow joint.
4. As you are doing this forward/back rocking, gradually begin to let the foot get closer to the ground until it finally makes contact.
5. As the horse puts its weight back on the foot it will stretch the entire fore leg up through the shoulder.
6. If the horse is comfortable with having the radius parallel to the ground, you can hold it in that position with your left hand behind the knee, cup the elbow joint with your right hand and

move the elbow joint forward and back. You will see the muscles on the back of the shoulder (triceps) stretch and the shoulder joint open more fully as the elbow comes forward.

Riders will find these stretches are more effective than commonly suggested stretches which induce the horse to stiffen its legs often activating the “stretch reflex.”

About the Author: Betty Lindquist is a www.HorseCoursesOnline.com instructor of the Equine Massage course. CHA members receive a \$25 discount on each course they take and all hours count towards your three year certification renewal requirement.



## Pet Peeves Around the Barn

### Dropping the Hoof After Cleaning

It is disrespectful to your horse to just drop its hoof after cleaning or handling it. If he has held it up politely for you, try to set the foot down gently. If the horse is leaning his weight on you it is acceptable to drop it so he will understand that he must hold it up himself, but otherwise it might make him reluctant to pick it up next time. It is important for your horse to trust you to maintain good foot manners-so remember that a doctor would never just drop your hand after looking at it. Also, be sure to never allow your horse to jerk his foot away from you, and insist he wait for you to set it down.

**Polly Haselton Barger**  
CHA Program Director

### Letting Horse Walk Off While Mounting

It is rude and dangerous for a horse to walk off while the rider is mounting. Horses that do this have been allowed, or even encouraged to move off before the rider cues them to do so. Always insist your horse stand completely still until the rider is settled in the saddle and asks him to walk. The easiest way to train this habit into a horse is simply not to mount

if he moves. Hold the reins so that you can stop forward movement, if necessary, and put your foot into the stirrup. If he moves take your foot out and gently apply pressure with the reins and/or say whoa. Continue this, progressing further into the mounting process as he stands still for each step. Remember to be consistent and always insist on a complete halt while the rider is mounting.

**Julie Goodnight**  
CHA Master Instructor

### Don't Cut Me Off!

My pet peeve is riders exhibiting poor sportsmanship in order to win a class. At a recent horse show I witnessed a 9-year-old rider on a really nice pleasure horse cutting rider after rider off behind the judge's back. This just sickens me that trainers/parents encourage this type of poor sportsmanship. Yes, my daughter was in the class having a beautiful ride on the rail when the rider began to cut her off. My daughter pulled her horse up, and the judge witnessed my daughter breaking stride. So, how do you teach your child to ride more aggressively when she is concerned that the other horse will kick hers? I can't fault my daughter, because she was always taught safety first. I am trying to teach my students to tell the other riders when they don't have room. If they are being rude

and unsafe let them know. Does this work? Well in the same class one of the older riders did say something to the 9-year-old. Instead of cutting her off the 9-year-old cut across the ring to find a new spot.

**Terry Williams Jones**  
CHA Region 4 Director

### Equipment Concerns

My pet peeve involves riders who aren't properly trained using arena equipment such as poles, barrels, jumps etc. As the owner of a facility I will often set up equipment for use during my lessons. If I don't get it picked up immediately, boarders will go out and use it. Sometimes the poles will get moved out of the correct spacing and the rider won't notice. This misuse of the arena equipment not only causes confusion to the horse, but can cause injury to both horse and rider. Plus, my equipment gets damaged! I have actually had boarders come to ride during every trail or ground poles lessons so they can use the obstacles I have set up! One boarder client got angry when I asked her not to ride over the poles during my lesson. So riders, please get proper training on how and when to use ground poles, barrels, jumps etc. You may save yourself lots of re-training time or even prevent an injury. 🐾

**Cheryl Rohnke-Kronsberg**  
CHA Master Instructor