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## DOES YOUR HORSE HAVE AN EMERGENCY BRAKE?

By Tim Hayes

If you had a friend who owned a car dealership and he said to you, “I have a brand new car, it’s fully loaded and I’m giving it away for free would you like it?” Most of us would probably say, “yes!” Then your friend says you need to drive it off his lot tomorrow and tells you “Oh by the way, you should know that once in awhile the breaks don’t work.” Would you still go pick up the car and drive it home?

When I teach a clinic, a class or a private session, one of my first questions is: “can you stop your horse, no matter what happens, 100% of the time?” Almost every time the answer is “no,” whether it’s trail riders, show jumpers, dressage riders, fox hunters, newcomers or dedicated riders with years of experience.

What amazes me is not only that they say no, it’s that neither they nor anyone else has ever asked that question before. Even more amazing is that many of them discovered this problem from personally experiencing the horror of not being able to stop their horse in some frightening situation. Finally when I ask them if they’re familiar with what I call an “Emergency Stop,” I again get “no,” along with a blank stare. At this point, in order to convey what I consider to be the insanity of this situation, I usually give them the above example of the free car with the unreliable breaks.

There are two indispensable ingredients required by humans to

become successful with horses no matter what riding discipline one chooses. The first is safety. The second is fun. Unless you use horses in your line of work, the only reason to ride them is because it’s fun. If it’s not safe, it’s not fun. If you can’t stop your horse 100% of the time, it’s not truly safe. Teaching yourself and your horse how to execute an emergency stop will enable you to stop your horse 100% of



Lateral Flexion begins on the ground.

the time. This is something everyone who rides should know and if not, learn it as soon as possible.

The purpose of this article is not to teach you how to execute an emergency stop (that can only be done in person); it’s to help you become aware of the importance of knowing and learning how to do it. In order to learn how to do it, you need to find a qualified teacher who can not only physically show you how to execute the maneuver with your horse, but also explain the principles involved.

### PRINCIPLES OF THE EMERGENCY STOP

1. Change direction of forward movement from straight line to circle by bending horse’s head and neck (his steering) either left or right. A horse can’t go very far if he’s going in a circle.
2. Remove the source of power that enables the horse to move forward. Cause the horse’s hindquarters (his motor) to switch from engaged to disengaged. A horse can’t go very fast if his hindquarters

are laterally crossing in front of each other (disengaged) while his back end is moving sideways in circles.

3. Cause your horse to calm down and pay attention to your request by switching from using the right side of his brain (the run without needing to think side) to using the left side (the thinking side needed to disengage his hindquarters - an unnatural act for a horse).

### EXECUTION OF THE EMERGENCY STOP

1. Reach down with one hand and bend the horse’s head around so his nose is almost touching your toe.
2. On the same side disengage the horse’s hindquarters by pressing your leg against his side, turning and looking back and down at your horse’s hindquarters.
3. Keep your hand and leg in this position firmly allowing your horse to keep turning in a circle and crossing over with his hindquarters until he decides to stop on his own. The instant he stops by himself and relaxes, take all the pressure off him.
4. Remove your leg and release your rein. Stand, sit quietly and pet him.

The best way to create an effective emergency stop is to start practicing your horses’ lateral flexion (bending the neck and head – see photo) and hindquarter disengagement on the ground. When your

horse shows you that he understands and it becomes smooth on the ground, begin practicing it on his back. Practice it at the walk, then the trot, the canter and the gallop. Practice it in an enclosed arena. Most horses favor one side. Practice on both sides until your horse shows you which side he does it best on and master that side. Test it periodically.

To be truly safe and have fun both horse and human must have confidence when they ride together. The best definition of riding with confidence I know is: Confidence is always being prepared for the unthinkable.

Whether you’re driving your car or riding your horse, make sure the breaks work 100 percent of the time. You’ll be safer, more confident and you’ll have more fun. ©Tim Hayes 2013

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