The Upside-Down Horse

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By Lee Ziegler, revised 1997

Does your horse travel with his nose in the air, looking for stars? Does he have a concave curve in his neck, just in front of his withers? Is he awkward going downhill? Does he have trouble turning sharply or going in large circles? If he has these problems, it is a sure bet that he is an "upside-down horse."

This doesn't mean that he spends his time lying on his back with his feet in the air! It means that when you ride him, his neck, back, croup and belly form a series of concave curves. This "hollow "position is bad for the horse and not very attractive to look at; it also works against a smooth, rhythmic fox trot. Fortunately, being upside down is not a permanent state for most horses. You can avoid teaching young horses to travel in this position, and you can retrain older horses out of the habit. If there are no gross physical reasons for a horse to travel upside down, you can help turn him right-side up.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH AN UP SIDE DOWN HORSE?

High Head:

An upside down horse is usually one that carries a high head. This may not be a problem if he is ridden only in smooth riding arenas. However, it is a problem if you try to ride him out on the trail over rough ground, through brush, or up and down steep banks. With his head stuck up in the air like a peacock, he can't focus on where he is going. He will trip, stumble, and sometimes fall because he cannot lower his head to look where he is going.

Another problem associated with a high headed horse is the mental attitude that usually accompanies the position. "High head, high strung" — anyone who has attended a TTEAM clinic has heard this one. It refers to the fact that a horse with a high head has an activated flight reflex and is not likely to be thinking about what he is doing. Horses with high heads shy easily, often nervously looking around for reasons to run off.

Sounds like the perfect pleasure horse, doesn't it? When he is not tripping over something, he is looking for an excuse to jump off the trail or mash you into a tree!

Stiff Neck:

Along with the high head, an upside down horse also has a stiff neck. The concave curve "locks"

the neck and makes it hard for the horse to bend it from side to side.

A hollow, stiff neck is sometimes hard to see. Often the horse will seem to have a nicely arched neck, flexed at the poll, only to dip it just in front of the withers. It is that "dip" that makes the neck hollow and prevents the horse from making supple turns.

Concave Back:

This is the most physically damaging problem for the horse that travels upside down. The sag or sway in his back can eventually cause the edges of the spinal vertebrae to impinge on one another. This is aggravated by the weight of a saddle and rider and can eventually lead to nerve damage in the spine, resulting in fleeting, mysterious unsoundness and even paralysis in the hind quarters. If left untreated, this damage can leave a horse permanently unsound.

Trailing Hindquarters:

Physically, an upside down horse is not able to get his rear end under himself to balance going downhill or push going up. This makes riding him down hill dangerous because with poor balance he is likely to slide sideways and fall. Riding up hill is not much better, since he can't push effectively with his hind quarters and may "stall out" on a steep trail, worn out from trying to drag himself up with his front legs. It is not unusual for an upside down horse to strain muscles and damage joints from scrambling every which way up or down a trail. Think how difficult it is for a horse to pack a rider up and down steep hills when he can use his body well; imagine how much more physically challenging it is if he has poor use of his own legs and back.

HOW DID HE GET THAT WAY?

Conformation:

Some horses are built to carry a high head, a sagging back and trailing hindquarters. They have necks set on high, long functional backs (from withers to sacro-lumbar junction) and camped out or sickle hocked hind legs. These horses are physically predisposed to travel upside down. They can be "turned over" to some degree with a lot of work and conditioning, but it will be very difficult for them.

Training Techniques:

Some trainers like the looks of a high-headed horse. They have a picture in their minds of the ideal, collected, well schooled horse, and the one thing that stands out about that horse is the high head and arched neck. Since it takes a good deal of time to condition a horse to use that position through true collection, and since trainers never have enough time, they force their horses into an approximation of that head and neck position through the use of gimmicks. Some use a bitting rig with over checks and side checks to produce this position. Some use a gag bit. Others have devised ways to hang a horse's head up in his stall to raise the head and neck. No matter how done, this gimmick approach produces the same results. The horse travels with a high head, stiff neck and cramped, hollow back.

Riding Techniques:

If you ride with your hands held nearer your chin than your waist, with your weight on your tail bone and your feet "on the dashboard" in front of you, you are encouraging your horse to travel upside down. If you use a gag bit or ride in a long-shanked curb to tuck your horse's nose, without encouraging him to work through his back, never use your legs, and slump in the saddle, your horse will travel upside down. If you ride in a western saddle with a built-up hump behind the pommel, putting your weight back on the horse's lumbar region, or in a flat, cut-back saddle

that does the same thing, you are also encouraging your horse to travel upside down. It takes a remarkable horse to carry your weight on the weakest part of his back with his head held up by high hands or a leverage bit and not sag into a hollow, upside down position.

GAIT PROBLEMS OF THE UPSIDE DOWN HORSE

Pace:

While all upside down horses do not pace, it is safe to say that all pacing horses are upside down. The pacing gait seems to require the stiffness of a hollow neck and back. In my experience, many straight trotting horses can be made to pace, without shackles, simply by turning them upside down. It is also interesting to note, although probably not of much value to horse people, that the camel and giraffe, both confirmed pacers, travel upside down.

Rack:

All horses that rack are upside down. Although the gait is flashy and comfortable to ride, it can be very bad for a horse. In addition to the usual stress on the spine of carrying weight while traveling upside down, the racker endures the additional stress of supporting his weight on one leg at a time, and flexing up and down at the sacro lumbar junction. This leads most rackers to develop "hunter's bumps" at this flexible place in their spines and leaves them vulnerable to nerve damage in this location.

Fox Rack:

This is not a true gait, but it is what is resulting from some recent training methods that have become popular in the show ring. These methods, which are giving us Fox Trotters with high heads and stiff necks, produce a diagonal gait in which all weight is carried by one foot alone at some point in the stride. In this gait, head nod which normally comes from the natural looseness of the way the horse moves, comes instead from the up and down motion of the shoulders as the horse hops from hoof to hoof in front. Horses in this gait are visibly upside down.

TURNING HIM RIGHT SIDE UP

Training Techniques:

1. Avoid the use of all bitting rigs, unless you are working the horse on the longe line and teaching him to move and use his back as he learns to carry his head and neck. In that case, use loose side reins (no over checks) on a halter or cavesson attached to a surcingle. Gradually shorten them as he learns to carry a slightly higher, rounder neck. Don't use any bit at first, then go to a light snaffle when he learns to give his head and round his neck a little bit. Don't try to raise his head until his back is in condition to carry it at a higher position. This will take several months of work, not just a couple of days. It is better not to use side reins at all if you are not skillful in evaluating your horse's progress with them.

2. When you start to ride the horse, teach him to stretch his neck down and forward. Remember that you must lower a horse's neck before you can bring it up again. This down and forward neck position stretches and conditions the muscles from poll to tail, makes them more elastic, and helps the horse round his body later. Vary this low position with a slightly higher, more natural one. Even a horse with upside down conformation should be able to stretch down and forward—he can graze, can't he?

3. Longe and later ride the horse over poles or cavallettis. Encourage him to stretch his neck as he goes over them. This will help him learn to use his back and condition his hindquarters.

4. Teach the horse to round his body a little and give to the bit at an ordinary walk and flat walk. To do this, push with your legs to increase his forward energy, then "catch" that forward motion with your hands by lightly fingering the reins, taking your leg pressure off just before you use your reins. Use a snaffle bit, with your hands held low — at or below his withers. You must use your legs and reins independently; otherwise, you will merely be setting his head, and not encouraging him to round his back.

5. Teach your horse to back and practice it frequently. Practice frequent transitions from going forward to backing up. This helps the horse learn to balance under a rider and encourages him to round his back.

6. Avoid riding in a curb bit. Only when a horse has learned to carry himself well in a slightly rounded position can he be properly ridden in a curb. It takes a long time for a horse to learn this, and until he does he should be ridden, only in non-leverage, snaffle bit. Sound too radical? Compromise with a Pelham or western Pelham, so that you will have a curb along with your snaffle if you feel that you need a bit for control — not a good reason to use a curb. Too far beyond what "everyone does?" Turn your horse right side up with a snaffle and then decide which way works better.

7. Never, ever --for any reason— ride in a gag bit. This device exists only to raise the horse's head and neck. It works against you if you are trying to prevent an upside down

position. RIDING TECHNIQUES

1. Ride with low hands, one on each rein, English hunt style. Do not "bridge" or cross your reins, hold each one separate from the other. Remember the saying: "High hands, high head."

2. Ride with light, even contact on your reins, alternated with leg pressure to push the horse forward. The action of your legs on your horse's sides encourages him to tighten his belly muscles and round his back.

3. Try to use a saddle that puts you "with" the horse, not back on his lumbar vertebrae. There are many Western saddles advertised as "Balanced Ride" types. Try one of those, or a good all-purpose English saddle that will position your seat as close as possible behind the withers. Sit straight to keep your weight balanced just above the horse's own center of gravity. This helps the horse carry you with less effort and is good for your posture and back as well.

4. Lean forward up hill, sit steady and centered downhill. Ask him to shorten his steps as he goes downhill with light action on the reins.

5. Finally let your horse relax when you ride him. Don't keep him all keyed up and excited by racing him around. He will certainly be upside down if you do that! If you miss the thrills of having a high strung horse (he will likely calm down if you let him) remember some of the other "thrills" you will be missing like falling over logs, and sliding down hillsides while wondering when he will

go end over end. ** These are only a few of the things you can do to retrain or prevent an upside down horse. The next time you ride, decide if your horse could benefit from them.**