

Ask The Experts

A Definition for Working "Deep"

Q I have heard a lot of discussion about horses working "deep" or "behind the vertical." Sometimes I've heard it called "behind the bit." Do these three different phrases basically refer to the same thing? If not, what are the differences or definitions?

Name withheld by request

PAM NELSON:

A This question has been discussed quite a bit in print with many different viewpoints. However, I will try to answer as simply as possible. First, the terminology:

A horse that is working *deep* is the same as one who is working with his neck in a low position.

Behind the vertical refers to a horse who is maintaining the correct contact with the bit as he works, but whose nose, at times, comes behind the vertical.

A horse *behind the bit* is working incorrectly. This horse drops the correct contact with the bit for prolonged periods, therefore, the connection from the hind legs to the mouth is broken.

I believe that working a horse "round and deep" or "long and low" is the way to achieve the strength, suppleness and elasticity that a dressage horse needs for collection. We use it for our young horses as well as our FEI horses to keep them supple and make their backs strong. It is a wonderful way to achieve activity in the hindquarters while maintaining relaxation throughout the horse. However, in no way should the horse travel on the forehand in this gymnastic exercise.

It must always be emphasized that "round and deep" and "long and low" are gymnastic exercises used to achieve the strength and elasticity the horse



Mary Flood

is a U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) certified instructor through Fourth Level. She is a USDF bronze, silver and gold medalist and has won Grand Prix classes at Dressage at Devon and the U.S. Equestrian Team (USET) Festival of Champions. She teaches and trains at Wildfire Farm in Lovettsville, Virginia.



Pam Nelson

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list for five years. Now, she and daughter Heidi Gaian teach, train and import dressage horses at their farm, Villa Rosa, in Hollister, California.

Gary Severson

is a lifelong horseman known as "The Saddle Doctor" because of his 20 years of experience fitting custom saddles. He also repairs tack and saddles. Severson is the saddle fitter for the Doug Hannum Equine Sports Therapy Center. He lives in Collinsville, Connecticut.



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is a native of Sweden who has been an AHSA technical delegate since 1981 and a Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) chief dressage steward since 1994. She is presently co-chair of the USDF Technical Delegates Council and has officiated at many national and international competitions including the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

MARY FLOOD:

A It can be frustrating when you buy a nice horse with potential and then discover that he's brought along some baggage you don't want. The job of a young racehorse is to run as fast as he can. Acceptance of the bit is not a priority. Opening the mouth, grinding his teeth, drawing up the tongue or sticking out the tongue are all means of trying to avoid the bit.

Horses often learn to evade the bit to avoid pain. Long-term pain, from factors like sharp teeth that were not floated regularly, convinces a horse that anything put into his mouth is not going to produce a pleasant experience. When a horse anticipates or experiences pain, he tenses his body and is not relaxed in the topline. He learns that if he relaxes, he exposes himself to outside influences and possible further discomfort.



Your horse's past experiences may have caused him to mistrust contact. He sticks out his tongue to try to protect that side of his mouth from the discomfort of the bit. I commend you for having his teeth floated and trying another bit. You did not say what kind of bit you use, but I would recommend a medium-weight, three-piece, loose-ring KK bit that is anatomically more comfortable than most bits. Be sure that it is properly positioned in the mouth: snug enough for about one to two wrinkles in the corners of the mouth and just slightly wider than the width of the mouth, but not so wide that it slides back and forth when you take the reins. Also check that it's not so narrow that it will pinch. Be sure your cavesson is comfortably padded and not so snug that it clamps the mouth shut. You should easily be able to slip two fingers between the cavesson and your horse's jaw.

After seeing to these details, it's time to turn your attention to your horse's training. Most Thoroughbreds have a difficult time relaxing through their bodies and stretching their topline. Joyce Harman, DVM, explains, "There is a direct connection from the horse's tongue to his sternum and shoulder. ... Once you have tension at the sternum, the horse cannot raise his back and use his ring of muscles." (See "A New Approach to Biting," *DT*, July '99.) Try sticking out your tongue to the side and you can feel how much tension there is in your neck and throat. When your horse is able to relax and stretch over his back, then he will be confident accepting contact.

In order for your horse to relax, you need to help him find a comfortable rhythm and tempo. This is very important. As his rhythm and tempo improve, so will his lateral and longitudinal suppleness, and he will develop elasticity and looseness. This, in turn, will improve

contact—his acceptance of the bit—and he will not stick out his tongue so much.

Sympathetic hands and a balanced, independent seat also are essential for helping your horse relax and learn to trust your aids. When establishing contact with your horse's mouth, increase your driving aids—the seat and legs. Keeping steady contact with them when your horse attempts to connect the energy from his hindquarters will help him round his back and seek the bit. Do this gently and with utmost coordination, so your hands become the receiving aids of the hind-end energy. If he rushes when you send him toward the bit, give gentle, repeated half halts.

As he begins to trust your hands, he will begin to release the topline and yield in the jaw. This release in the jaw will enable the energy you send forward to come back to you for recycling. You then have this circle of energy that continues to flow through your horse from his hindquarters to the bit without getting blocked by your hands. If he stiffens, you can use gentle flexions and counter flexions to help loosen his neck and jaw so that he seeks a longer and lower frame while keeping the hind legs pushing.

I have found that by improving the quality of a horse's basic training, mouth problems usually disappear or at least greatly improve. You may never completely fix such a long-standing habit, but I have found success after improving the horse's throughness. If these techniques are beyond your experience level, seek a knowledgeable instructor to help you.

The Technical Delegate's Role

Q I am curious about the role of the technical delegate (TD) at a show. What are the TD's general duties. How does one become a TD? Do TDs ever have

to disqualify anyone at a show? May I call the TD if I have a question before the day of the show?

Name withheld by request

ELISABETH WILLIAMS:

A The technical delegate has several roles at a competition. We represent the American Horse Shows Association (AHSA) and ensure that the competition is run in accordance with the current AHSA and, at times, FEI rules. We make sure that competitors follow the show management's directives, as well as check that management is running a fair competition. Last, but certainly not least, we have to ensure that the welfare of each horse is first on everyone's mind.

To accomplish all of this, the technical delegate must be everywhere, keeping her eye on everything. For example, we check that the arenas are correctly constructed with good footing, that the judges' boxes are functional and placed correctly. We also see that the judges have reasonable hours and that they are scheduled to judge as many different levels and classes as possible in order for competitors to get more than one judge's opinion.

We assure that the judges have transportation to and from the show grounds. As one judge said to me, "TD does not stand for technical delegate. It stands for tour director."

We walk around the grounds, checking warm-up arenas, stabling and parking areas. We even check for toilet paper in the rest rooms, and that there are enough food and drinks available. We check that there are emergency numbers posted by public telephones along with directions to the show grounds in case an ambulance has to be called. We also help show management with problems they might have. We make sure competitors are treating the show secretary courteously and vice versa. A TD also has to check all