

Horsing around: What does your horse's top-line tell you?

By Birgit Stutz

Have you ever wondered where such terms as 'level-headed,' 'well rounded,' and 'calm and collected' come from? Well, read on to find the answers.

The upper curvature of a horse's withers, back and loin is called the 'top-line.' Together with the position of the head and neck it is called a 'frame.'

There are four basic shapes that a horse can use to express himself. There is also a fifth shape, which is, however, completely man-made. The basic shapes are: high-headed while inverted, level-headed, low-headed, and high-headed while 'rounded' (collected). The man-made frame is inverted with a round poll.

What does your horse's top-line tell you?

High-headed while inverted



When the neck and head of a horse come up above level with his withers, then the back drops down. The spine becomes significantly lower in the middle than at both ends.

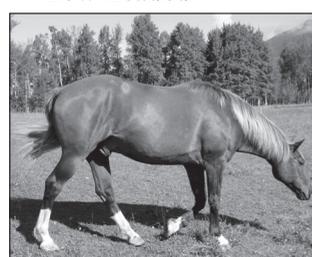
This shape is what is meant by 'hollowed-out' or 'inverted.' Several things happen to an inverted horse, and none of them are good.

An inverted spine causes the horse's vertebrae to pinch together. When that happens, the horse's spinal column starts producing adrenaline and sends it rushing into the brain. Adrenaline causes stress, which can result in fear, anger, defiance, or shutting down.

An inverted, high-headed horse is unfocused, braced in his body and unwilling to bend throughout his entire body. The horse is also drastically inhibited from achieving maximum athletic ability and forward impulsion (power) from his 'engine,' the hind quarters. The horse, to some extent, is pulling himself along by his front legs instead of pushing himself from the hind quarters.

Sitting atop a hollow-backed horse is, at best, uncomfortable and rough for the rider. At worst, it is hard on the horse physically and mentally. People often get away with riding hollow-backed horses; however, inversion can cause all kinds of behavioural problems.

Low-headed



The opposite of high-headed and inverted is low-headed – or

what coaches call 'long and low.' When a horse lowers his head (lower than lev-

el with his withers, with his head fully stretched out forward and downward), the hollow spine disappears and the horse's back naturally lifts. This causes the spine to stretch out, and when a horse's vertebrae stretch out, his spinal column starts to produce endorphins. The result is a calm and relaxed horse. Getting a horse to lower his head is my first strategy to deal with most behaviour issues. If a horse lowers his head when asked, it is much more difficult for him to become emotionally distraught because the flight reflex has been diffused. Lowering a horse's head is relaxation for his emotional, mental and physical state.

'Long and low' should be a vital part of stretching or warming up for any horse. It is also a transitional phase for horses who have only worked inverted in order to get them to relax and become soft and supple.

However, just because a horse is calm and relaxed doesn't mean he respects his rider or handler. When working with a horse, we also want focus, athleticism and impulsion. Yet a low-headed horse is simply not in that frame of mind. This is where level-headed comes in.

Level-headed

We have all heard the term level-headed for somebody who is calm and sensible. When a horse carries his neck and head level with his withers (level headed), his back is elevated. This is a neutral position, where no endorphins and no adrenaline are flowing. In this frame, a horse has improved balance, greater impulsion and athleticism.

High-headed while 'rounded' (collected)



A horse with his back round, his head high with a rounded poll and his nose vertical to

the ground, and his hind legs reaching further forward (stepping more under his body) is collected. A collected horse is the ultimate pleasure to ride, powerful, athletic, focused and graceful. This is the most difficult frame to achieve, as well as the ultimate training goal.

Inverted with a round poll

Unfortunately, the man-made position of round poll and hollowed back is a very common frame. To the untrained eye, it may look beautiful, as the saddle hides the hollow back, but this frame, along with high-headed and inverted, are the two undesirable frames when working with horses.

The natural horse

The natural conformation of a horse's back is inverted, not rounded. Some breeds are more naturally rounded than others, and even within breeds, one horse may be built with

his head high, while another may have a more level top-line. On their own, stallions and alpha mares achieve the state of round and collected for brief moments, but you will never see a consistently rounded and collected horse running around freely. That's where training comes in.

The spine of the horse is not naturally created to bear a rider's weight. In order for a horse to be able to carry the rider's weight comfortably and without sustaining damage over the long term, it is important that the horse is properly trained and taught to lift his back while being ridden in order to develop his muscles properly. Through this arching up, the spaces between the vertebrae open wider and the muscles get better blood supply, which enables the horse to achieve better lateral bend.

The way to the mind of the horse

is through his body, and if you change how your horse is shaped and moves, then you change, for better or worse, how he feels, thinks and behaves.

Birgit Stutz is a Chris Irwin Silver Certified Trainer and Coach and has been involved with horses for a quarter century. She owns and operates Falling Star Ranch in Dunster together with her husband. Birgit welcomes any questions related to horses. Send her an e-mail with your questions at: birgit@thevalleysentinel.com

Economic Development – McBride

I would like to convey my personal thanks to everyone who took the time to sign the BC Hydro Power Outage Petition. We have gathered close to 500 signatures!

Our special appreciation goes to John Molodwich, who singlehandedly gathered over 100 signatures in one day!

We would also like to thank the staff of the McBride Post Office for letting us display the book for everyone's convenience.

In addition, we have asked members of the Valemount Chamber of Commerce to recognize our efforts by providing letters of support. My request was well received and I thank all those who supported McBride.

BY WORKING TOGETHER, WE GROW STRONGER.

Margaret



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INVITATION TO TENDER

The Village of McBride invites tenders for *Caretaker/Attendant Services for the McBride Regional Transfer Station.*



Scope of work includes maintaining the transfer station facility in a neat and orderly condition and ensuring that the facility is safe for users, maintaining information signage and interacting with site users.

The contract term is January 1, 2008 to December 31, 2009.

Sealed Tenders will be received by Eliana Clements, Chief Administrative Officer, Village of McBride, 100 Robson Centre - 855 SW Frontage Road, McBride, BC up to 2:00 p.m. on Tuesday, December 11, 2007. Tenders will be opened in public at 2:15 p.m. on Tuesday, December 11, 2007 at the Village office.

Tender Documents may be obtained from the McBride Village Office at 100 Robson Centre-855 SW Frontage Road, McBride BC during regular business hours.

A mandatory pre-tender site meeting will be held on Thursday, December 6, 2007 at 10:00 am at the McBride Regional Transfer Station Site. *The cost for each tender package is five dollars (\$5.00) (GST included) and is non-refundable.*

The Village of McBride reserves the right to accept or reject any or all Tenders. The lowest or any Tender will not necessarily be accepted.

For further information please contact:

Eliana Clements – Chief Administrative Officer
Village of McBride

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