# Horse handling and training series

## Part 2: Flexion behind the saddle – Summary

Flexion of the head and neck is an important educational tool when training a horse. A horse that has been educated to use proper flexion will be softer and more responsive to ride. It will be able to carry its own weight plus the weight of the rider more effectively without straining joints, muscles, and ligaments. It also allows the horse to transfer weight from the front end to the back end more efficiently.

Lowering the head and neck results in biomechanical changes to the forehand. Overloading the forehand increases the workload of the thoracic muscles, therefore developing the pectoral and serratus muscles. This improves support and lightening of the forehand when the head and neck are in a neutral position.

Flexion helps to gain control of the horse’s head, neck, and ribcage, and transfer weight from the front end to the back end. Flexion also aids in balance and gets the horse to follow its nose when riding and handling.

Flexion behind the saddle is an exercise which can be used to gain control of the head, neck, and rib cage, and also transfer weight from the front end to the back end. It is important to give the horse confidence by holding the headstall under the chin or placing a hand on the head or neck. The horse’s nose should not be taken past the point of the shoulder when asking for flexion. It is important to ensure the handler does not ask for too much when educating the horse in the exercise.

In flexion behind the saddle, the handler places the rope over the head and slides it down the neck and around the back of the saddle while holding the horse’s head still. The handler then asks the horse to flex to the direction where the lead rope is, ensuring the horse does not flex past the point of the shoulder as this will encourage the horse to move. The horse should be comfortable to stand in the flexed position. If the horse has not done this exercise before, it is best to start off by only asking for a small amount of flexion.

Once the horse is soft and comfortable standing in the flexed position, the handler can take up the slack on the rope and begin to pull on the rope while walking away from the horse. This will result in the horse rotating away from the handler and back around to face the handler, keeping the hind legs as still as possible and walking the front end around. This should be a calm and slow exercise.

When starting this exercise with a horse that has not done it before, the handler should under rotate. This means that the handler will move towards the horse’s tail as they are pulling on the rope to meet the horses head mid-way through the rotation. This makes it easier for the horse. Once horse and handler are experienced at this exercise, the handler can step towards the horse’s head, making the horse rotate a full 360 rotation. The aim of the exercise is to get the horse to pivot on its hind legs and walk the front legs around on the circle. This is an indicator that the horse is transferring weight from the front end to the back end.

To increase the difficulty of the exercise even more, the handler can progress to lunging the horse out of the rotation.