LIGHTEN UP!

End the tug-of-war with a heavy horse.

RIDING A HORSE that's nagging you about is probably not your idea of a good time. With a few simple tips from Grand Prix dressage rider Reese Koffler-Stanfield, you can put a stop to the endless tug-of-war. Are you ready to lighten up?

A Heavy Load
A horse that's pulling, leaning on the bit, or heavy in general is a horse that's on the forehand—and being on the forehand comes with lack of engagement. This means he isn't using his hindquarters or back properly.

"That's really the problem: when a horse learns to pull, he also learns that he doesn't have to engage," says Koffler-Stanfield, a United States Dressage Federation gold medalist and certified instructor/trainer.

With over a hundred neck muscles and weighing in total about 10 times the rider's weight, it's got to be the horse's job, not yours, to be responsible for carrying himself. "Once the horse has learned how to pull, it's up to you to teach the horse that he has to carry his own weight," says Koffler-Stanfield.
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If you're tipping and the horse is pulling you forward, then your horse can't connect his hind legs to his hind end. This can lead to a lack of balance and your horse feeling rushed.

To help your horse learn to carry weight on his hindquarters, start by checking your position. There should be a straight line through your ear, shoulder, hip, and heel, as well as a straight line from your elbow through your wrist to the bit. "This checklist is a great way to self-diagnose if you are sitting in the proper position," adds Kofler-Stanfield.

Put it into Practice
From that strong and solid position, you'll be able to ride an effective half-halt. The half-halt is your go-to move for rebalancing your horse, so he learns to shift his weight from his forehand to his hindquarters. To half-halt, be sure you're sitting correctly, then close your leg, seat, and hand. "You have to be really consistent, engaging your core—that means tightening your stomach, back, and seat," explains Kofler-Stanfield.

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Koffler-Stanfield. “I often tell riders with strong horses that they need to do sit-ups! You have to be strong enough to provide a moment of resistance. This is hard work for the horse—it’s less work for you just go on the forehand.”

Habitual pullers will often need more than just half-halts. “At this point, if the horse is really on the

forehand, he’s going to pull you forward,” says Koffler-Stanfield. Transitions are the solution. Otherwise, she says, the horse will just get heavier and heavier.

Transition to Success Begin with walk-half-seat transitions. “You may have to do a hundred of these transitions,” explains Koffler-Stanfield. “What you’re looking for is that the horse steps underneath his body with the hind legs without pulling on your hands.” Use your core to ask the horse to rebalance using his hindquarters instead of plowing onto the forehand in the downward transition.

You can build on these transitions at the trot, riding trot-walk-trot and trot-half-seat sequences. Make sure you’re always riding from a correct and strong position and your horse is taking responsibility for his own weight.

In the canter, ride transitions within the gait: move forward into a lengthened frame, and ask your horse to come back again. This doesn’t mean fast, notes Koffler-Stanfield, just that the horse pushes forward and comes back again. If he pulls, you’ll need to ride stronger in the transition, and may even need to ride a canter-halt transition to make a statement.

Turning Points

Another great exercise to help the horse learn to shift his weight back is the square turn. In the walk, ride the short side toward the wall, halting before you reach the corner. Walk on, riding deep into the corner, making your turn a 90-degree angle.

You can also ride a strong half-halt before the corner, almost halting before you turn. Once you’ve mastered that, step up the game, riding this exercise in a trot, halting or almost halting before you turn. You can even work your way up to riding a rein-back before you turn.

Progress Report

Horses that pull typically lack the strength to carry themselves properly. Developing that strength takes time and repetition, notes Koffler-Stanfield.

Be consistent in your corrections to build your horse’s strength and break his habit. Your role as a rider is extremely important. You need to be consistent in showing your horse the correct way to carry his own weight and reward the correct response. Your goal is gradual steps toward moments of self-carriage. “It takes time for the horse to develop strength,” says Koffler-Stanfield. “As you do these exercises and the horse learns to rock back on the hind legs, he should have moments of feeling lighter. You have to be really diligent.”

“Just be considerate to the horse; remember, this is hard and can make him sore. He has to use his body differently—it’s like going to the gym. It can be frustrating and a struggle, but eventually you’ll get it. It’s just not an overnight process.”

Step by step, lightness will be your prize!}

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Halt your horse before reaching the corner so he shifts his weight off the forehand.

Ride deep into the corner for a square, 90-degree turn.

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