



Watch your horse's ears to see where his attention is. If he's looking away, he's not focusing on you.

# Steer His Focus

Use this simple exercise every time you ride to get your young horse's mind on you, encourage softness in his face, and help him guide willingly.

By **Trevor Dare**, With **Kaycie Timm**

Photos by **Kaycie Timm**

I use one basic exercise every day with my 2-year-olds to get their attention and help them understand that it's time to work. When I'm training a 2-year-old, my focus is on building his attention span and gaining his focus. If I don't have my horse's attention, I won't be able to make any progress with him. Here's how I get his mind on me.

## Teach Now, Use Later

In most cases, a 2-year-old won't be focused when you first get in the saddle because he's still too mentally immature to understand how he's supposed to act when you're on his back. You can't get much done without having his full attention because a 2-year-old hasn't had the repetition of training to know how to do his maneuvers. So, it's important to get his mind focused on you, ready to work, and willing to learn before you try to teach him something new. Otherwise, he'll end up scared and

frustrated instead of being confident and performing consistently.

I want to have all the tools I need to capture my horse's focus because, when I take him to his first show, he's going to be distracted and worried by the unfamiliar surroundings. If I can revert to a familiar exercise that he's done daily since he was started, he'll tune back in to me instead of paying attention to the distractions. The same thing applies when he's in the show pen. When he gets distracted, I can give him a basic cue, and he'll come back to me with confidence.

Instead of punishing him, I draw him back with something familiar by refocusing his attention.

## Guide, Steer, Soften

When I work with a 2-year-old, I try to listen to him and read his ears. I can tell if I have my horse's focus by watching his ears. Once I determine where he's looking, I quietly send him in another direction—a direction I choose, not where he wants to look. I do this with a simple exercise that you can use at any gait, but I've found it's most effective at a trot. →

## Reiner Insights



Once my horse shifts his focus to me, he'll start to soften as I guide him around the pen. This works at home and at shows.



When my horse's attention drifts, I urge him forward with my leg and move my hand down the rein opposite of where he's looking.

Each time my horse's attention drifts off what I'm asking him, I urge him forward with my leg, then bring him back in a different direction with my hands. Starting with leg pressure accomplishes a couple things. First, it gives him a warning that I'm going to take hold of his face, so I'm not surprising him. This keeps it from becoming an intimidation game, which won't lead to long-term success. Second, it gives me the forward motion I need before I take his face. I don't want to be abrupt with my hands, especially on a young horse, because that will cause him to get fractious and scared, which creates a whole new set of problems. Urging him forward with my leg reminds him to come back to me and listen before I redirect him.

As I take his face, I use my calves—not my spurs—to keep urging him forward. At the same time, I move my hand down the rein until he guides and moves toward my hand. If he moves too abruptly in that direction or starts leaning before my cue, I switch hands, take his face, and guide him the other way until he learns to straighten his body and hold himself naturally.

Once his ears are back on me and he's paying attention to my cues, I release his face and let him relax.

Then, I allow him to tell me where we're going. Each time he gets distracted, I repeat the exercise by using my leg, taking his face, and redirecting him to bring his focus back to me. Once he's soft, his ears shift back to me, and his feet follow my hands, I release him so he knows that reaction is exactly what I wanted. Using this exercise gets him focused on me, trotting in a straight line, with his body in a good position, so I can steer him without being abrupt. Then, I can guide him around the pen and focus on getting him soft while building his confidence.

### Build on His Skills

I repeat this exercise every time I ride my 2-year-olds so they become familiar with it. Even a 2-year-old that wants to focus and be good might try to guess what we're doing next instead of waiting for my cues. I use the same exercise in that situation. However, if he just looks away for a second and his ears keep working, I'll leave him alone. Ideally, a young horse's ears should come back to me every couple of steps as he's trying to learn how to control himself and pay attention.

As a 2-year-old matures, I build on this exercise by holding contact with his face a bit longer until I feel him

soften. I've found that if I steer him and he moves his feet, the softness will come without me trying to force it. When a horse moves his feet, his face and body follow, and everything lines up how it should. Since most reining horses are built where their necks come out a little bit lower, a natural, relaxed headset is often relatively low. When I notice my horse's head start to come up and his ears shift off of me, that's when I use this exercise to redirect and get my horse's body back in position. ❖



**Trevor Dare, Purcell, Oklahoma**, was raised by equine professionals—parents, Rusty and Linda Dare, and uncle Rocky Dare, an NRHA Hall of Famer—and has spent his life dedicated to horses. After winning the 2008 NRHA Limited Open Futurity, he chose to pursue a career training reiners. He currently works out of Silver Spurs Equine—Oklahoma, has been a finalist multiple times at both the NRHA Futurity and Derby, and has accumulated over \$561,823 LTE to date.