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DISENGAGING THE HINDQUARTERS

Round Table with Buck Brannaman, Lester Buckley and Tom Curtin.

By Tom Moates

Disengaging the hindquarters—it is a phrase that is often used in horsemanship discussions. But what does it describe exactly? It commonly is meant to put words to a maneuver where one rein is brought around and the horse is bent until the horse steps his hind end over, but is that really “disengaging” the horse’s hind end, and can the phrase have other applications? In this round table discussion, three experienced horsemanship clinicians weigh in on what this term means and how it pertains to their own horse work.

Buck Brannaman

is a renowned horseman who travels the country conducting clinics. He has authored the books *Groundwork* and *The Faraway Horses*, and has produced many horsemanship videos. Learn more at: www.brannaman.com

“In all honesty, I look at it differently probably than most people,” Buck Brannaman says when asked about disengaging a horse’s hindquarters. “Number one, I’m sorry that anybody ever referred to it as ‘disengaging the hindquarters’ because you’re not disengaging the hindquarters. With one rein at a time, you are engaging one hind leg at a time. It’s engagement of the hindquarters done in a very simple way through lateral flexion. And you do that on a horse prior to him being ready for you to work on engagement by using both hands and both legs. And horses that are troubled are horses that are anything but engaged. One that wants to buck, run away with you, lean on the bridle...that’s a horse that’s the opposite of engaged. They are disengaged and they’re pulling themselves along with their front end. So it’s about what Ray used to talk about in his explanation of straightness.

“While some people’s interpretation of straightness is the absence of lateral flexion, which is a load of bull butter, straightness is defined by the horse’s weight distribution being as even as you can get it at all four quarters no matter what the maneuver. And that’s weight distribution being level front to back, side to side. Well, straightness and engagement go hand-in-hand. If a horse is not engaged and he’s pulling himself along with his front end, it’s like that little bubble on a level that you put in your camper to get everything where it’s level. The bubble will be showing when you’ve got him heavy on his front end.

“So just the term ‘disengaging the hindquarters,’ you can tell, frankly annoys me because of the fact that that’s not physiologically what’s happening with the horse. They’re learning to engage one hind leg, one side at a time by stepping forward and through with that inside hind leg which then makes it possible to advance to a higher level and engage both hindquarters simultaneously. It’s a combination of the hands and legs.

“I’m doing it the first ride on a horse. I’m asking him to be able to move his hindquarters right or left off one rein or the other, right off the bat. And once the horse can roll over behind, forward, and through correctly, oh, that’s where you take your leg off and allow them to stop. But I mention in my clinics that there are five methods that I work on on moving the hindquarters.

“The first, I just mentioned, being able to walk your horse or trot your horse, bend him, roll his hindquarters through, and stop. But once your horse is forward and through, then you can work on this from a stationary position. But in the beginning, you can’t do it in a stationary position because you don’t know if that inside hind leg is going to step forward and through. You don’t want it just shuffling side to side—that’s worthless.

“The second method is to be able to hold a soft feel with the horse standing



“The fifth method would be to hold your horse into a soft feel, and maybe have 10 or 15 degrees of right flexion, for example, and move his hindquarters to the right, which is a first cousin to what’s going to become a haunches in or half-pass. And all of it’s built from just bending the colts, asking them to move over behind, and stop. Every bit of that is engagement, not disengagement. A horse that is engaged is quiet mentally because he’s moving the way God designed him to move. Horses that are moving out of balance are troubled.”

Lester Buckley

is a horseman and clinician with a broad range of experience, from training some of the world’s top cutting horses, to starting colts on large ranches in western states and Hawaii, to working extensively with top German Dressage trainers at Nordrhein-Westfälisches Landgestüt and German Olympic Training Center in Warendorf, Germany, where he earned his International Trainers License in Dressage and Sport Jumping from the German FN. For more on Lester visit: www.lesterbuckley.com.

“The first thing that comes to my mind is what is the end goal for my horse?” Lester Buckley says when asked about disengaging a horse’s hindquarters. “Because a lot of times, if I’m sitting on a horse, I’m disengaging the hindquarters so that I can release energy. As they loosen their loin underneath me and behind me, I release energy. But basically my end goal for that horse is to take that outside hind leg and release energy out of my horse and the end balanced stance is neutral. Which is a little different for me than engaging—of course the engaging actually can be a similar move going lateral like that, but it would be more me encouraging the inside hind leg to step up under him.

“If I just let that go with no harnessing effect, then the next step would be disengaging the hind leg. But if I engage

squarely and lightly and shift his hindquarters right or left—it doesn’t have to be a great number of steps, a step or two is plenty—and have him not get any heavier on your hands, and release.

“The third method is legs without hands, which is pretty self-explanatory. If the horse was to make the wrong choice and walk forward rather than shift over from one hind leg to the other, you’d block him with your hand as a second option.

“The fourth method is hands without

legs. Anybody that has studied some form of classical riding understands the concept. You would simply take your horse’s head around quietly, maybe pet him, you want to stand still, and then you take his head around and hold it and you sit quiet and you allow him to search. Pretty soon, he’ll explore and he’ll realize, ‘I think this rein is relating to my feet.’ If he moves his front feet, you don’t release. That’s not what you had in mind. When he steps his hind feet over, you release. And you build on that.



ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

the inside hind and I don't allow the outside hind to really rebalance and go neutral, a lot of times from the engaged inside hind leg laterally, I can walk off or push off or do a number of things—I can pick up a walk or a trot from there. So that needs to be clear in my mind so I can present it to my horse in such a way that they know what they need from me.”

Lester says that he might disengage a horse's hind end for a couple of “big reasons.”

“There are others,” Lester explains, “but the big ones for me are: to get them to turn loose and relax, which is one of my end goals for disengaging. And then the other one is, if I'm on a trail, or I see something that kind of puts my horse into high alert, especially the little zippy spitfire horses, which I have a fair number of—I kind of like those—their head goes up, their body goes on alert, and they're thinking about a number of options which is NOT what I'm thinking of. I need to be able to ‘disengage’ their emotions as much as anything else. But I'll do it through the loin and through the hind legs, and I'll let them release that tension out laterally.”

Lester explains that he will then engage the horse to allow

for coping with some instances, like coming across something spooky on a trail.

“The plane of their head never leaves the spooky object,” Lester says. “If there's a T-square on their forehead, it stays T'd up the whole time. But I will move their loin, and the feeling that I'm looking for is kind of like I'm allowing them to go into flight but without moving their front end. And what I have found that's real helpful—I don't nag them back and forth—is maybe move them one or two steps to the right with their hip only and I'll just keep them facing up whatever has them mystified. And then a lot of times their head will start to go up and down and they will change their focus a little bit. And then I'll move the loin back to neutral and I'll go back another step or two in the other direction, and what I find is that by the time I do that a couple of times with a moment of poise always at the end of that in between, you'll feel a big intake of air and exhale and you'll see their posture, their alertness, start to change and soften.

“I've honored the fact that they're a flight animal, and I've allowed them to feel the motion of moving but I never let them



1a. Beginning, engagement, (stepping under)...



1b. ...followed by the start of disengagement...



2. ...and disengagement of outside hind...



3. ...wide and stable to beginning of loading of outside.



4. Release and unloading of inside hind.



5. Soft release of inside hind to more neutral state, can be followed by walking forward with same leg if cued in time or ending in another lateral step of disengagement if desired.



ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

run away from whatever it was that I was trying to get them to handle. And it works real well and would be a prime example of me disengaging the hind end, because I'm taking some of that extra something-stirring-them, and in this case something startled them, and I'm allowing them to kind of feel it. And the horse gets to moving a hip over to the left and there's a moment of poise, and then move it back to neutral and then back to the right. And after doing that—there's no magic formula—but a number of times, always with a moment of poise between there because otherwise they think you're turning on them, I have found that most of my horses will take kind of a double breath in then let a big one out and relax. It's kind of like I'm honoring their sense of self-preservation—which is exactly what I'm doing—I'm allowing them flight without letting them turn loose of what it is they're looking at. And then, they'll just walk right up to it or past it, like, 'Okay.' So it's a great coping skill.

"So for me the disengaging—say we're bringing the nose to the left and we've got the inside hind leg stepping up underneath, well, that inside hind is engaging, and engaging. And depending on what kind of a bind we put the front end in, they may find relief by disengaging that outside hind but there's a moment after that where they will actually rebalance on that outside hind and can bring the front end through real lightly if asked to.

"So that's why I kind of want to have the feeling—am I releasing energy or am I storing it up to do something with it? If I'm storing it up, the first part of the disengaging would be stepping that inside hind under—or closer to their center of balance—and would be a moment of storing. But if I allow it to just release and go lateral and I don't put any boundaries on it, it's like blowing air in a balloon. But if I've got a leak in the other end, I'm putting energy in but it's coming out the other side, then that is certainly disengaging. It's a little bit like positive stress.

"I do better with a little bit of positive stress than I do with apathy. So apathy is the removal of all tension whatsoever—there's like zero stress. This might be the disengaging the hip and just letting them stand. But if I have a positive tension, I have no leak in my balloon and I've put a little bit of energy in there, now we can harness that and do something with it. We can redirect the inside leg underneath him and then walk off or we can place it and turn. That's where my mind starts asking, what's my end goal here? Do I want to release energy, or do I want to store it? And that kind of gives me an idea of what my balance might be and where my horse's feet might end up. It doesn't have to be lateral. It could be straight ahead, as well. You could allow your horse's hindquarters to disengage and relax or after disengaging you could have him step up underneath himself a little bit.

"That's why it's important for me to have an end goal for my horse in my mind."

When I hear the term 'disengage the hindquarters' I understand it is not just an analytical movement but is a horsemanship concept.

Tom Curtin

teaches horsemanship clinics across America. Tom grew up in Montana with his father who ran an outfitting and packing business, and he spent many years learning from horsemen like Buster Welch and Ray Hunt. For more visit: tomcurtinhorsemanship.com.

"I've got maybe a whole weird outlook on that deal," Tom Curtin says when asked about disengaging a horse's hindquarters. "There's a certain amount of that that you're disengaging, but if you look at the positive side of that thing, there's a tremendous amount that you're engaging in that deal. Everybody always talks about disengaging the horse's hindquarters but I haven't seen many folks talk about engaging the hindquarters. And the reason I teach my horses to disengage their hindquarters is so I can engage their hindquarters.

"My whole idea behind all that, what I picked up and what Ray [Hunt] helped me with, was the only reason you disengaged your horse's hindquarters was to be able to teach him how to engage his hindquarters. He [Ray] was real big on when he rode his horse off that that horse started with his hindquarters, and would engage the hindquarters, and that all built from being able to what a lot of people will speak of as disengaging the hindquarters. And he would talk about that a lot. He said, 'The only reason I teach a horse to take his head around where I can rub him and pet him is so I can step his hindquarters over—and once I get to where I can step his hindquarters over, there's nothing I can't do.' And that's where your half-pass and your leg yields and your haunches in and your haunches out—that all builds from that your lead departures—build from off of that disengaging those hindquarters. But I think a lot of times we get so hung up on the maneuver of the disengaging the hindquarters we don't realize the value of what we're teaching that horse is actually how to engage his hindquarters.

"To me, we teach these horses to soften and get to where we can rub them and pet them and get them feeling good, and then that first ride or so get it to where we can take that head and step that hindquarters over—but what are we actually doing when we step that hindquarters over? All you're doing is separating the hindquarters from the front quarters.

"When I ask my horse to leave off in his left lead, I'm going to step his hindquarters over to his left—that's where the lead comes from. When I ask for a lead change—say if I'm going across somewhere and I want to change leads—I'll take and step that hindquarters over to change my leads. Everything comes from behind. So being able to take that horse's head around and step his hindquarters over to separate his hindquarters from his

front quarters, maybe he can't rear up or maybe he can't run off with you, or this that or the other, you're actually only getting 25% of that value of what is actually there for your horse to build off of and learn from."

According to Tom, what does it look like to disengage the hindquarters?

"It depends on what maneuver I want to do," he says. "We talk about getting these horses soft, supple, and bending in the younger part of their lives so that in the latter part of their lives they can be straight and firm, not stiff and hard. So I take that horse and I get him where he can step those hindquarters over left or right. You can take his head around and call it 'throwing him out of gear' or 'disengaging him,' but sooner or later I've got to get that horse straight. Tom [Dorrance] really preached about how important the straightness is in a horse—and that would be the only reason I would teach my horse to disengage his hindquarters and keep him soft and supple is so that I can teach him to engage them and get my straightness and my firmness in my horses.

"If you don't have hip control and shoulder control on these horses, you're not going to have much for straightness or firmness in there. You have to have some hip control. Or if you want to do a haunches in, like a two-track, that's getting control of that hip. That all comes from teaching a horse what a lot of folks in their minds think of as disengaging that horse.

"I think a lot of times people think of a one-rein stop as disengaging a horse's hindquarters, and I think that's as far as they take it. But if you want any of your upper-level moves, or getting refinement built in this horse, you have to have control of his hindquarters. I do that by teaching that horse to soften laterally from the tip of his nose back to his shoulder. Once I get that put together, then I'm allowed to handle and move his hindquarters. Basically, I want to load all his weight I can get on his front feet. So therefore I have to take his head around only to the point that I load his front feet. Do what it takes to load his front feet—that's the whole purpose of bringing that nose around and softening that horse's head, neck, and shoulders. And he's got to be soft all the way through his body. A horse will learn to give to pressure and a horse can learn to get real light but you don't see a lot of real soft horses.

"The thing about it is in order to get any forward movement and get any collection, any balance, in a horse, he has to have his hindquarters engaged. That doesn't mean a horse can't go forward without engaging his hindquarters. I see a lot of horses that'll pull with their shoulders and they're just kind of bringing their back end along. When you get a horse that gets his poll slightly above the withers and vertical on the face, and if you're not careful you'll see some of those horses kind of draw

their neck back into their shoulders and shut that off and then that doesn't allow any place for the hindquarters to come forward and they just pull on that front end. Or you might see a horse get way overflexed and kind of drop his poll way down but he's still pulling with that front end. To get that engagement from the hindquarters you have to be able to have control of the hindquarters.

"The biggest thing is, I wouldn't worry so much about the maneuver as I would be more concerned about how my horse feels about himself while I'm asking him to do these things or how he feels about himself while he's around me. And building that softness in there is what's going to be important—that's the most important thing to be able to get this stuff working for you whether you want to disengage the hindquarters or whatever it may be. Understanding what those horses' needs are, so that we can have what we'd like to have because they want to, not because they have to."

