

Horse Training How-To from Horsemanship101.com

# Crow Hopper's Big Guide to Buck Stopping

Put an End to Your Horse's Bucking Fits

*by Keith Hosman, John Lyons Certified Trainer*

*Part of the "Horse Training How-To" Series from Horsemanship101.com  
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“Crow Hopper’s Big Guide to Buck Stopping”  
by Keith Hosman

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## Introduction

Bucking is not something you get rid of by applying Simple Solution A or B. It's a long row to hoe because there's rarely some single glaring reason why your horse does what it does and because your job isn't so much to teach the horse "not to buck," but to gain the control you need to immediately make it stop doing one thing by purposefully causing it to do another—this from an animal that may today see you as a doormat and/or turns inside out at the very sight of a plastic bag.

Your first step toward change begins with you promising yourself that you will never again climb aboard any horse when you think there's a decent chance that it might buck. Your horse, somebody else's horse, any horse. You don't want to take your chances, you don't want to say to yourself that you'll "outlast him and show him who's boss" or that you've lived through it before so it's okay—you keep your feet on the ground. (If professional rodeo cowboys don't "ride the buck off" the horses you see there at the show, horses that have bucked a thousand times, you're not going to cure your horse by merely staying on either. You gotta "retrain the brain.") In the case of your own horse, this means that you take a pass on riding today and

spend your time doing everything you can from a position of safety, working to turn around his thinking and gain control.

“Turn around his thinking and gain control.” How? And why from the ground?

Because if your horse is bucking, then he’s obviously not listening to your requests (to turn a specific way, to drop its head, to go forward or back, to stand still...) and so needs schooling on these things and much of what you’ll do on the ground mimics exactly what you’ll later be asking from his back. More, it gives you a chance (again, from relative safety), to many times over get the horse to place its feet how, when, and where you ask. Combined, those many repetitions make a change in his brain, flipping his first response from “I’m not gonna” to “Sure, no problem.”

Right now, you get knee-jerk reactions and it doesn’t take much of a catalyst to cause an explosion. You nag the horse to slow down repeatedly, another horse lopes past—and suddenly you got a rodeo. Your every request is met with “no” out of pure, nonsensical habit. You say “down,” he says “up.” You say “walk” he says “not gonna budge.” There’s no thought involved; it’s just practiced behavior in the case of a horse that’s used to having its way, or inherent behavior in the case of a youngster or a spooked horse. “Yes?” “No!” “What are we arguing about?” “I don’t know!”

If horses more often than not buck for one of two reasons, fear or defiance (or its close cousin, “frustration”), then discerning which will help us choose our training path. The contrarian described in the preceding paragraph needs to practice agreeing you, (whether that means walking forward when asked, or standing

## Bridle Work from the Ground

*Develop control over your horse's individual body parts—and gain respect along the way.*

While we've previously worked to begin softening the horse's head and neck, changing his first gut reaction from overt resistance to "give," here we will work to soften the horse's entire body, asking him to soften to the bit, to round up and "give," to not brace his entire skeletal system. As we improve his reaction to our requests, we'll concurrently improve his overall willingness and performance, sharpening major basics like "turn your hips," "move your shoulders," "back up," and "always be thinking forward."

You're accomplishing more today than simply teaching the horse to soften or to move his hips or shoulders when you pick up the rein. You personally, the human, are learning the mechanics necessary for success and seeing firsthand that you actually make things easier or harder for him based on how you set him up at the outset. You will do all these things by taking the exercises I prescribe slowly and repeating them, taking mental pictures of what the horse looks like before he succeeds—and comparing them against those taken before he fails. (For example: "He seems to back better if I first ask for a disengagement of the hips" or "He'll move the shoulders better when the chin is closer in to the chest" or "He always shifts his weight to the left before stepping to the right.") You will experiment,

you will accept that mistakes are valid teachers of “what doesn’t work,” and you will consistently tell yourself “This works when I’m on the ground—I’ll need to remember this later when riding.”

Beyond how your horse carries himself, there’s timing (yours) to work on. From the start you’ll want to begin releasing your bit pressure when you think the horse has the correct thought instead of waiting until he actually completes the requested step. If you release your rein pressure when the horse actually places his foot, the entire sequence might take 6 seconds (let’s say). If we shorten that and release when we believe the horse has the idea (“I need to place my hoof there”) we might hold the reins for just two seconds. What the horse knows, in either case, is that something he did warranted a release. But just exactly what? Holding all the way through the maneuver gave him another four seconds of “things happening” all around him that may or may not have caused the release. Was it the step he took or the shake of his head or the gas he just let out? He’ll continue guessing till he narrows it down—but why not speed up our training by giving him fewer choices?

This brings us back to what you’re looking for when you study your horse. Obviously we can’t read their minds—but what we can do is recognize patterns. Case in point: If you were to stand with your feet together, your weight evenly distributed, you’d need to first place your weight on the right leg before stepping the opposite direction, to the left. (Try it—it’ll help you remember this concept.) Your horse is bound by the same gravitational laws as you and I: Before he steps his shoulders to the left you’ll notice (feel and/or see) him shifting weight first to his right, then lift his left shoulder before finally moving the left foot itself.

## Your Individual Prescription

*Diagnosing your horse is a primary step to charting your fix.*

The exercises you'll find in this book (teach the head to drop, cause the hip to step across, etcetera) give you physical control of certain horse body parts (head & neck, hips, etcetera). The ideas you find here ("Gain control by improving performance," "Get the horse to repetitively say 'yes,'" "Ride where you can, not where you can't," and so on) enable you to logically tailor your own training based on an understanding of what's happening with your individual horse. (Understand the ideas presented and you'll know which exercises are especially important to you and your situation.) Maybe you decide you need three helpings of one chapter, a single dose of the next, and a plate full of the last.

See each exercise as a test. Like checking your car brakes before hooking up the trailer, it's you finding out whether you have control over a particular body part, something you're gonna want to know before planning a chummy trail ride. For instance, do you know the very moment when most folks—folks who have never tested their horse—find out they don't have shoulder control? Two seconds before their knee hits the fence post. Had they done exercises designed to test (and therefore improve) the control they have over their horse's shoulders, they would have saved their knee. Pass more tests, have more control. Get more

control, get more ability to diffuse the next bad situation. In the case of a bucking horse, conditions might always crop up that put a charge in your horse—but spending the time beforehand to “pass as many tests” as possible will give you a greater capacity to keep things enjoyable.

The reality is that we often go through our exercises and find out how little control we have. That means that finding a remedy often requires going back to fix something we didn't even know was broken.

But what? What are we missing?

Consider the horse that bites today for the first time. He didn't “bite out of the blue.” That horse told us last week with his pinned ears that he was going to bite. He just didn't say when. We should have picked up on those pinned ears and administered an attitude adjustment right then and there. Same for the bucking horse. The best time to fix a bucking horse (or prevent the next incident) is beforehand. To do that, we keep them on the straight and narrow—and we watch their signals.

The signals get broadcast in the moments, days, weeks and months, preceding the buck. If it's a buck out of disrespect the signal could have been the horse freezing up, ignoring your cue to slow down or kicking the stall when you didn't move fast enough with the grain. Is it bucking caused by fear? Maybe the signal was throwing his shoulder into you as you led it past the scary garbage cans or a “near bolt” through the exit when some kid blew a whistle.

## Core Exercises

*Every horse needs to be schooled on each of the following.*

When your horse excels at the ground work in Section I of this book, it's time to despoek and desensitize your horse to scary places, objects and moments. Given that fear lies at the heart of many nasty accidents and that you'll be on the ground for this work, it just makes sense to cover this material before first climbing aboard.

This is particularly important when you ride a horse that seems perpetually on edge—but common sense dictates that every bucking horse should be tested on this material. If you don't believe that fear plays a role in your situation, do the same regardless. You can go over the material quickly, prove to yourself that fear really isn't an issue, plug any holes, and then move on.

Afterwards, when you're personally ready to get in the saddle, your next step is to perfect the core riding exercises as outlined below (and as detailed in coming chapters).\* You will want to practice the first three in the order presented.

The foundation exercises will:

1) Give you power over the horse's hips. Swinging the horse's hips over is what you'll do if it starts to buck again. Beyond this, hip control is the key to much of your training—spend the time it takes to gain the ability to move the hips with a single rein.

2) Connect the rein to the horse's feet (you pick up a rein, the horse does something specific with a specific foot) and soften your horse's entire body to your pressure on the reins (aka "giving to the bit").

3) Teach your horse to lower its head anytime you ask, regardless of stress level.

4) Enable you to precisely control the speed of your horse. Beyond the obvious benefit, the actual practice required to gain speed control is an excellent way to confront and deal with your horse's inner demons under controlled circumstances.

5) Turn when you decide to turn, putting an end to confrontations arising when you want to "go over there" but the horse wants to be "over here."

Practice to perfection the exercises designed to build "core control" as listed above—they fix problems that are very often the root cause of a bucking situation.

The rest of material in this book, (that is, in Section IV), is of a more general nature, appropriate for every horse and rider—but is included here for a special relevance to those tackling a crow-hopping horse.



## Getting Back On: What to Do If the Horse Bucks

*Here's your plan in case your horse bucks before you can teach it not to.*

Note: Study this chapter and the next together before first getting on your horse. In this chapter we'll get you riding again and learn to move the hips in an emergency. In the next, we'll teach the horse to do this properly when cued.

The ground work you did added physical and emotional control, but that's just a first step toward a fix. Sooner or later you'll want to get back in the saddle.

And when you do climb aboard, you can't just ride off and wait till he screws up. You've got to keep your horse active while you stay vigilant for warning signs. Anytime, for instance, that your horse starts doing something you didn't ask it to do, he's thinking about something besides you—and you need to take charge before things get nasty. Reclaim his attention by practicing an exercise, (preferably you'll ask him to repeatedly move his hips, left then right, left then right). If you're already in the midst of training, then you want to either give the horse more to do or to move to a spot where the horse is in control. Doing both is a great option.

Your first day back riding, take your horse to an area where you won't have to worry about interferences (barking dogs, rushing horses, slamming doors, plastic bags, etc.).

From the ground, move your horse around as you did previously, judging his softness and mind set. Does he soften his neck and move smoothly or does he brace and resist? If there are signs of resistance, keep moving about, practicing earlier material as long as necessary. Ask the horse to move its hips away, then its shoulders, to back and to side pass. Remember as you do this that you want the horse calmer after your work than before you began. If you find it becoming more agitated, back off and take things more slowly; get more yeses.

If you feel his mind is elsewhere, work longer and ask for more. For example, instead of just asking the horse to move, ask him to drop his head, soften his neck, bring his chin toward his chest, step three feet to the right, then backwards, and then two feet to the left before releasing your pressure, (with a slight break in your rein pressure with each correct answer). This is how you deal with a horse that doesn't seem to be on the same page as you. If instead, you use force, you will stress the horse. Then it won't learn anything and it'll be more agitated—the last thing you want before getting on.

Be careful to release often and pet when his emotions are down. (Petting to “calm your horse,” as in “there, there, relax” only says to the horse “it's okay to be a nut.” Pet when the horse comes down, never when he's up.) If the little voice in your head says this may not be a good day to get back on—maybe you perceive the horse to be too stiff or goosey or far too

## Hip Control

*Core Lesson 1: Control over the horse's hips allows you to tamp down or even shut down a bucking fit—but it's also the key to lots of other stuff your horse can do.*

The hips are the driving force behind crow hopping, so diverting the energy coming from those back legs is critical. Hip control also plays a major role in many aspects of your horse's training, enabling you to pick up a particular lead, to slow a fast horse, to side pass, to perfect your stop—it's a long list so any time invested here pays big dividends. This is the first of five core abilities you must drill into your horse.

From the saddle, we're going to teach our horse to properly move his hips over just as you did on the ground (though at first we'll only ask for a step or two). However, you're going to use a trick to cause this to happen a bit quicker. Mount up now and walk to the nearest wall or fence line. Walk with the fence on your left and picture the horse stepping his hips off to the right by about twelve inches in response to your picking up the left rein. Once pictured, go ahead and give it a try: Pick up and apply pressure to the left rein, just enough to put a very slight bend in his neck. Pause a few seconds, walking and waiting. When he ignores your cue to move his hips over (because this is the first time you've practiced this) apply more pressure, enough to turn his entire body perpendicular to the fence—as if turning back the other way. You may stop briefly here (with his nose to the fence) because of the

dramatic change in positioning—and that's fine—but use the right rein then to ask him to resume walking the same, initial, direction, (the fence on your left). Always pick up your rein and ask first with the lightest of pressure before applying more “motivation” should he miss your initial request. Remember, “he'll only ever be as light as the lightest pressure you use.”

Repeat that sequence. Walking with the fence to your left, think “move your hips to the right” and apply pressure to the left rein. Again, if and when he ignores your cue, pull hard enough a beat later to turn him wholly perpendicular to (into) the fence. The simple initial pressure you apply is your cue, applying increasing pressure, enough to actually turn him, is motivation. It's hard work to move that big ol' butt and turning “motivates” him to figure out what gets you out of his mouth sooner. After repetition, he'll realize that a turn is always preceded by you picking up the rein and he'll begin moving his hips over as you take up your rein. (He's looking to gain that release so he'll naturally start leap frogging through your training sequence to get it ASAP. In this case, he starts bringing his hips over in anticipation.) Drop your rein when he angles those hips over, saying “that's all you need to do to get a release” and continue walking as before, fence to your left.

Note: It is critical that when you do ask the horse to turn, that you do it with the attitude that you really are going to turn back and go the other way. Don't think “turn to the fence.” Think “turn and go back the other way”—but then stop your horse when he's perpendicular and turn back to your original direction as if changing your mind. If you don't carry this thought, you'll find yourself just sort of slogging around, aimless.

## Books by This Author

Check out these titles from Keith Hosman:

- Crow Hopper's Big Guide to Buck Stopping
- Get On Your Horse: Curing Mounting Problems
- Horse Tricks
- How to Start a Horse: Bridling to 1st Ride
- Rein In Your Horse's Speed
- Round Penning: First Steps to Starting a Horse
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- What Is Wrong with My Horse?
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Keith Hosman lives just outside of San Antonio, Texas and divides his time between writing how-to training materials and conducting training clinics in most of these United States as well as in Germany and the Czech Republic.

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