

The Comfort Zone

Sam Schaffhauser discusses a system of give and take to train a willing and responsive horse.

SAM SCHAFFHAUSER

EMAIL: SSREINING@GMAIL.COM

WEBSITE: MCQUAYSTABLES.COM/SAM-SCHAFFHAUSER

PH: 940-437-2470

BY WENDY LIND

AS DESCRIBED IN THE NRHA HANDBOOK, *A. General*, *The best reined horse should be willingly guided or controlled with little or no apparent resistance and dictated to completely.* This simple line is at the heart of the reining industry. While it sounds obvious, when it comes down to it, training a horse that exemplifies *A. General* takes a lot of consistent hours in the saddle.

NRHA Top 20 NRHA Professional Sam Schaffhauser's approach is to create a "comfort zone" for his horses. This comfort zone develops a willing and quick responding mount that Schaffhauser can pilot through a pattern with minimal cues. By using his legs and hands in a very consistent way, the horse learns where he should be in terms of speed, head carriage, and body position.

"Once the horse is in that comfort zone, I'm going to leave him alone. If they come out of that spot, I remind them with my leg or hand cues that they aren't where they're supposed to be," Schaffhauser explained. "You want a horse to be feely, but not too much. When you use your legs, the horse goes forward. When you take your legs off they melt back where you want them to be. When you pick your rein hand up, they give to you as long as you apply pressure, and when you give the slack back they go back to that zone you want them in."

It boils down to applying pressure and release in an educated manner. Hold the horse too long and it will quit trying and dull out. Don't hold long enough and the horse will deliver half-hearted and inconsistent results.

"As soon as you feel a horse lighten off your hands or legs, you need to lighten up as well. Then they understand where that comfort zone is—that area you are creating for them which is the ideal," he pointed out. "You always want to give the horse a chance to respond off of light pressure before going to stronger cues. For example, if they don't give to



my hands, I'm not going to attack with my hands because they didn't respond. Instead, I'll simply add more pressure on the reins while also applying leg pressure. I'll incrementally increase those until the horse softens."

If still resistant, Sam draws the horse into the ground and bends its head around to either side or backs it up. And just as the application of pressure is important, so too is the release. When the release is too abrupt, a "rubber band" cycle can arise: the rider picks up on the reins, the horse softens, but then as soon as the rider releases, the horse quickly goes back out of the zone.

"Give the reins back slowly. Avoid making the horse soften and then just throwing the slack back in the reins," Schaffhauser explained. "Instead, put them in the comfort zone, keep that pressure for a few strides, and then slowly put your hand back down."

As you might expect, that comfort zone is going to be different for each horse.

"It may not be exactly where you want it to be. But if they're comfortable and they can do all the maneuvers properly, then that's the zone I'm going to develop," Schaffhauser said. "When they're in that zone I leave them alone. When they come out of that zone, I put them right back in it. If I start riding a horse in a

training session, I may have to pick up on them three or four times each circle when I first start circling. After a while, the horse will lock into that zone."

Schaffhauser always uses his legs and hands in tandem in order to keep the horse driving forward and rounding over the bit. He uses the same gradient approach with his legs-calves first and then he goes to his spurs if he doesn't get a response. "You never want to lose the forward momentum—that's the key ingredient," he said. "Lose that momentum and that's when the horse gets pushy or resistant in the face."

"Another common thing I've found is that people new to the sport think they need to ride one handed all the time when they are practicing." A better approach, he said, is to go back and forth when practicing, using two hands if necessary. "When I'm schooling a horse, I'll first test things out one handed. That gives me a chance to see what the horse is thinking and gives it a chance to respond. I'll go to two hands if I need to fix something, and then go back to using one hand."

This less-is-more principle also applies to verbal cues. "We use that 'cluck' cue in every maneuver—whether it's to go faster, spark the turn, roll back, or change leads. So you don't want to over use your voice cues to the point where they get dull to it. And when you do cluck, something needs to happen," he said. "If the horse doesn't respond, that's when you follow up with your legs. If you don't get the response you want, don't panic and make a big scene out of it. Just go back and try to lighten up and hone that response."

On an overall note, Schaffhauser reiterated that a rider's consistency is the underlying thread that develops a willing and responsive horse. "Consistency is the most important thing in training. Horses have good days and bad days just like we do," he noted. "It's our job to be consistent so they understand where that comfort zone is." ♦

