

Does Your Horse's Go Equal his Whoa?
by Bonnie Martin

Have you ever ridden with someone, or worse yet, been mounted yourself on a horse that either had to be in front and moved down the trail at its own fast speed or lagged behind at its own draggy pace? Makes it hard to ride with others on either kind of horse, doesn't it? That doesn't mean that you are doomed to always ride alone or find other riding friends who go the same speed.

No matter the breed, you can get cruise control on your horse so that it will go at the speed you request rather than choosing its own all of the time. You should be able to ride your horse with any other horse and be able to maintain the speed you ask for. Of course, this means you will have to spend time being more than just a passenger on your horse. It might require some lessons if your riding has not included much communication with your horse.

Most horses have three gaits (gaited horses may have more), and within each gait, there should be a slow, medium, and fast pace. This means that if your horse typically walks slowly, you will have to work harder to get a medium and fast walk. If your horse generally walks really fast, your job will be to get it to slow down to a medium and then a slow pace. Same with the trot or the canter.

Just what can you do to get your pokey horse to speed up? Start at the walk to work on this, and then as time goes on apply the same techniques to the other gaits. First, make sure you are riding in rhythm with the horse with your hips moving with the horse's movement, not restricting it. Feel the rib cage of your mount as it swings from side to side. Don't kick, but as you feel the rib cage push against your leg, press back with the calf of your leg and then let go. Do this alternately with one leg then the other and make sure you are not holding the horse back with your reins. You should feel a lengthening of stride that will carry you along with more energy. Make sure to keep your hips relaxed and moving with the horse. To begin with, you might only get a few steps of more energetic stride. Accept that and reward your horse with a rub on his neck. Over time, this will become easier and easier for your horse and you can ask for longer and longer periods of extended walking.

Horses that are slow moving and more prone to want to stop than go will benefit from work in areas where there are lots of long stretches instead of short distances. Being outside of a small arena would probably be a good idea if the horse is safe to ride out. Ride from one point to another and reward the horse at the end of each long stretch with a rest. Having a treat placed at the stopping point might help inspire some energy in getting there too.

Horses with too much go are a different story. They need to be slowed down, but you don't want to do it by getting in a tug of war on the reins with them. A lot of work with variations of circles is very helpful for this type of horse. Spirals in and out, serpentes,

and different diameter circles will help convince them there is no need to hurry to get somewhere. Instead of urging your horse on with one leg then another, you might need to be adding frequent half halts along with using the inside rein of a snaffle bit in a squeeze and release motion.

Taking the time to rate your horse's speed at all gaits will create a horse whose go and whoa are more equal and you will find that you can ride with other horses of various speeds a lot more easily without having to hold your horse back all the time or rush to catch up after falling behind. You'll have a mount that is a lot more responsive and enjoyable.