

Bridle Lameness and the Gaited Horse

By Elizabeth Graves ©2012



Bridle Lameness, also called rein lameness, is a term we don't often hear or use anymore. Not because it doesn't exist or it has become a rare occurrence but because folks would rather not talk about it. The passage of time and changes in cultural acceptance can change what we talk about or bring forth when sharing our experiences.

Bridle lameness can be hard to discuss with others because it is a problem caused by humans and many have difficulty recognizing and admitting that they may have caused this issue in their horse. Many have witnessed a vet or instructor struggle with getting a rider to accept that they could be the cause of their horse's performance troubles. It is troubling for those asked and employed to help when



Examples of the body shape that develops in bridle lame horses and are really common to see even before they start showing a mystery lameness. These are very commonly accepted shapes in gaited horses bodies today. The top photo is an extreme example, the bottom photo is less extreme, but common in the early stages.

- Both to some degree indicate Incorrect Top line development of the neck.
- Pockets at the withers
- Dropped top line of the back
- Distended abdominal muscles
- Incorrectly developed muscles of the hind quarters. In the top photo one can tell also that the Gaskin muscle is not developed properly.



an honest complete evaluation of bridle lameness will not be accepted by an owner. Often, lots of expensive testing, supplements and a variety of applications have been utilized then rejected because the rider or trainer is unwilling to accept the responsibility for having caused the issues. All too often the scenario is to see a horse get tagged as the faulty one and non-correctable, then moved on to a new home, turned out to permanent pasture or worse.

The Mystery Lameness: Bridle lameness does not present itself as other true, commonly recognized lameness issues do. There is no swelling, pain or heat that helps us distinguish it clearly as to what the horse may be feeling. Bridle lameness presents itself often as a choppy movement in the front or maybe a hitching in one of the hind legs. Forelegs may not be striding equally in length with each other or the same can be happening with the hind legs. Other changes in performance may include added incidences in stumbling on the fore legs or a buckling of a hind leg. A horse's attitude may change along with this mystery lameness, possibly becoming hard to catch, just ill tempered, or acting spooky—all showing themselves as new behaviors. How a horse's temperament can present itself as something new and different can be in a number of ways depending on each individual horse. These may show up early before the lameness becomes visible in some way or long after the horse has not been performing normally or correctly.

Visual Changes in the Body: Often the horse's body will start presenting itself with some changing in shape. Tightness at the poll is common and over time, the muscles behind the poll will start enlarging, overdeveloping, and becoming stiff in this region. In time, soreness at the poll may be found. Neck muscles can start to develop incorrectly with an overdeveloped bottom line on the length of the neck and the top line diminishing, giving an overall upside down image of the neck. Not uncommon is the development of pockets on each side of the withers and/or the top line of a horse becoming dropped. In advanced cases, the abdominal muscles have a slightly pronounced, distended appearance. Given enough time, other muscles in the body, such as in the hind quarters and/or Gaskin muscle will not develop as

they should. They can become flatter in appearance with tense hollows in muscle paths that should be filled.

Diagnostics, Corrections and Repair: When any lameness presents itself, first and foremost, it is recommended that a veterinarian be consulted for a complete examination and evaluation of the horse. This examination may include flexion testing, dental exams, radiographs, neurological exams; ulcer diagnostics, inspection for improper hoof trimming, inspection for misalignment of the Hyoid bone or checking for many other causes which could possibly explain why a horse has a change in performance. The goal in these exams is to rule out as many and all potential reasons for a change in a horse's way of going and to determine if a true lameness exists.

Bridle lameness can be recognized in its early stages, helping considerably in preventing a true lameness later on. When all possible avenues have been utilized to detect lameness and bridle lameness has been determined to be the cause, massage is helpful throughout the corrective work. A Veterinary Chiropractic examination may also be recommended and in some cases, a good cranial sacral practitioner may be recommended.

Bridle lameness is rider induced lameness. The most important thing to correct the lameness is for the rider to change the way the horse is being ridden by changing the application of the aids which created the bridle lameness. Training may have commenced too early, the use of straps such as training forks may have been excessive or a variety of martingales, etc., and their misuse in work could have advanced this lameness. Biting rigs are notorious for causing bridle lameness. Bridle lameness is not confined to show horses. It may be found in every type of athletic sport where horses are utilized, be it competitive, utilitarian or pleasure, including trail riding.

Bridle lameness can transpire in horses being worked in low or high headed positions while being held in a position behind the vertical. It can also occur in horses being worked in an above the bit position as well. It is important to recognize and correct imbalance if a rider has been riding heavy to one side, be it in the hand to rein application and/or the leg to stirrup application. Crookedness in the horse due to improper use of aids as well as imbalanced riders should be

corrected by learning and understanding the need to support a horse properly through straightness exercises.

A good warm up in a relaxed manner is always a good way to start and finish all riding sessions whether in an arena or on the trail. When asking a horse to perform added requirements during a training session, try to keep some element of relaxation and softness present in the horse's body and mind. In the beginning of corrective work the horse will need to have time to find softer shoulders, neck, and poll again; while also recovering soft feeling sides again, with an open and freed up back. It is important to consider that a lot of muscle memory may need to be changed to regain proper

use. Correcting bridle lameness is not a fast fix but one of dedication and great understanding on the part of the rider. A horse must learn again to trust it's rider to let go of the resistance they have used to protect their bodies from previous riding experiences. It is not uncommon for a horse to progress faster with a different rider. When this is not possible, it is helpful to have a good ground person to



An example of a correct healthy shape.

help the rider become aware when their aids are interfering with a horse's performance rather than helping it.

Difficulty in Discussing: Bridle lameness is correctable. In working with people who are coming to terms with having possibly caused bridle lameness in their horse, I have found that compassion and kindness are most effective. Only move forward in the discussion as an owner is ready to listen. It may be the discussion will take place in many sessions, in small pieces at a time. Give positive direction and support, but be honest. Riding properly to a good place for ourselves and our horses never happens from the first time we mount a horse. We all start at the same place, maybe just at different ages. We also know that a person with goodness in their intent never seeks to cause discomfort to a horse. We make mistakes and don't always get things right but that's how we learn and continuing to learn is how we get good at whatever level we desire in our horse experiences. Having these experiences and discussions about them also helps others going through the same situation and may even help them avoid these situations altogether.