

# STEP UP, OR STEP OFF

Straining the limits of the imagination while simultaneously reasoning with logic, World Champion, Craig Johnson, is a mastermind of the reining arena. In the following excerpt from his soon-to-released book, the mentor shows you how to refine your approach to the stop and understand the proper usage of fencing drills.

BY CRAIG JOHNSON WITH JENN WEBSTER | PHOTOS BY DON HUNTER



## PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

People ask me all the time, “When you are going for an approach, when is the best time to say ‘Whoa?’”

I couldn’t tell you.

What you have instilled in your horse today, in terms of training, is a direct result of everything you’ve done with him in the past. Whatever you’ve practiced and trained for with your horse is an exact duplication of the history leading up to today.

So what is the future determined by?

It is concluded by what you do with the present. If you want to change something for the future, you may have to change something in the present, or start something new today. The great thing is, horses are actually quicker at picking this stuff up than we are. If you want to change something for tomorrow, start now.

If what you are doing is not working to improve your sliding stop, try something else (opposite) of what you were doing. I’m sure there is a certain period of time where the stop does happen best but if you try to time it, you have the opportunity of missing that moment. To improve your reining skills, you must always be thinking in the present. What is now? If you’re planning ahead, you’re not being present.

## THE APPROACH AND FENCING

**Exercise – Apply the stop cues, at speed. Achieve the Approach/Rundown via the use of Fencing.**

**Target – Get from Point A to Point B in a straight line. Gradually add speed. Achieve a sliding stop.**

Once you have got all the four steps installed for stopping, it is time to start applying them. These include the draw stop, stopping by letting go with your feet, pushing your weight deep into the saddle and saying the word Whoa. Incorporate these cues into



**Fencing is designed to teach your horse to stay straight and to respect speed – not stop.**

all of your riding exercises. Apply them on circles, straight lines, etc. Make sure your horse can stop anywhere you want him to: however, avoid stopping at the same place all the time. Ensure the horse responds to each of the steps separately and constantly test your horse.

Always ride your horse as though he is going to execute the maneuver correctly, then correct him if necessary. I’ve had horses that become offended when they miss a stop. They’re sorry and they will get the next one. Realize what you need to do as the rider to get the next attempt to be better. Be self aware.



**If your horse veers off the straight line in your approach, redirect him in the opposite direction.**

There are four main points to consider when approaching point to point: 1) Make sure you (not your horse) has control in determining the lead you take down the arena; 2) Ensure you have the ability to slow down, if your horse is running too fast and not listening, set him into the ground. If he's just a little fast, slow him down; 3) Ensure you have control over the direction you are going; if your horse goes left, take him right; 4) Remember that as you grow in your ability to solve problems, your problems will become smaller. The key to a good approach is ensuring the beginning and the end are the two most important and relaxing parts for the horse. The second key is a good departure. Achieve a good departure before you begin because this will help your horse go better into the approach. Once your horse is confident with all the stopping cues, it's time to begin fencing. Remember, fencing is designed to teach your horse to stay straight and how to build speed (respect speed) – not stop! Fencing can also teach a horse confidence because he is moving towards a solid object and he has to learn to trust the decision to do so. Fencing gives you the opportunity to create additional options in the horse. You determine the speed and if he tries to determine speed, this means your horse hasn't been offered enough options.

The line from here to there (one end of the arena to the other) is the approach. Keep mixing things up for your horse and come up with 8-10 different options for him on that line. This way, he will wait to see what it is you want him to do and you won't create a horse that wants to run off to the end. If he does, your horse doesn't have enough to think about on the way there. Be creative with your options and devise good confusion for your horse. He'll wait and see what it is you are going to do next and then, your horse won't take advantage of the rundown situation.

Examples of things you can do on the rundown include steering your horse in different directions from the line you originally started. If your horse appears to the left for example, instead of going straight, take him to the right. Be sure to use your neck rein to do so and not your direct rein! Or take him in a straight line, but ask him to move his face to the right and then the left on that straight line. Give him lots of things to consider instead of simply getting from Point A to Point B. Your responsibility as the rider is to determine what happens along the approach – the horse's responsibility is to stop when given any one of the stop cues.

Always use one of the stop cues for fencing! Since you don't necessarily use the fence to stop the horse, fencing is an opportunity to mix your cues up. Then following the stop at the fence, always

ensure you back your horse up a few steps – ask for the rebound – before you go left or right. Use a draw stop to get the horse back about 80 per cent of the times you fence. Drawing back gives you another opportunity to try out the draw stop cue.

## **COMMON OBSTACLES ASSOCIATED WITH THIS EXERCISE:**

### **• Your horse trots into the departure.**

If your horse starts trotting when you have actually cued for the lope, you will have to get after him to create more incentive to lope. As a result, your horse may overreact going into the lope and charge off. What you desire is something in between these two reactions. The departure should be executed in a relaxed manner and if not, you need to work on this away from the rundown.

Sit back on your horse to get him to lope off, so he doesn't have to pull himself to get into the lope. Tell him what lead you want, sit back and cue properly to drive him out from under you.

### **• Your horse charges off down the arena.**

Draw stop him into the ground (without using the W-word!) and walk him the rest of the way down the arena to the fence.

### **• Your horse slows down near the end of the rundown.**

If your horse slows in the rundown, avoid correcting him with stiff punishment; he is just trying to do what he thinks you want. If he breaks down into a trot for example and you get after him, he will be suspicious when you actually do ask him to break to a trot. Therefore, if a slow gait occurs in the rundown, just cue for a faster gait as if it is no big deal.

### **• Your horse “bunny hops” at the end of the rundown.**

A secondary problem of having your horse slow down near the end of the rundown is what I refer to as a “bunny hop.” If you realize your horse is about to lose speed near the fence, the correct reaction from you as the rider is to initiate more forward motion: whether this be with a cluck or a quick tap at his belly with your legs.

However, sometimes this can also cause an adverse reaction, especially since the end of the arena is coming up soon. If instead of maintaining his speed the horse starts to hop, he is likely reacting to your tight body language.

You can tell how a horse will be able to stop eventually, just by the way he approaches. A horse will mirror us as riders – if he's tight in the front end, take a look at whether or not you're tight in your body as well. Then practice your rundowns and let your horse know he cannot slow down near the fence, but he has nothing to stress about down there either. If his approach is soft and willing, his stop will be smooth and slick.

### **• Your horse jams his front end into the ground for the stop.**

This is the worst kind of sliding stop to feel as a rider on board. It

## **Definitions you will need for this exercise:**

- **Rundown/Approach** – Rundowns are the same as an Approach. This is the run through the middle of the arena, or along the sides of the arena towards the sliding stop. Approaches must display control and a gradual increase of speed until the stop is cued for.
- **Fencing** – Fencing is a drill designed to teach your horse to run from one end of the arena to the other on a straight line. It can also teach him how to build and respect speed, however contrary to popular belief, fencing is not intended to teach a horse how to stop.
- **Sliding Stop** – One of reining's signature maneuvers. This is the act of slowing the horse from a controlled lope or gallop into the stop position, by bringing the horse's hind end underneath his body in a locked position. The horse slides on his hind feet because of special shoes he wears called “sliding plates.” Throughout the stop, the horse maintains ground contact with his hind feet.

# “Stopping is not hard, but we make it hard.”

- Craig Johnson

occurs when the horse gives you a stop but it is incredibly stiff and will likely pop you out of the saddle to some degree. If the horse is doing a “front end” stop, you need to get his chin softer. Following the stop, make him pick up his shoulders and get his front feet to move: first go right and then left with great persuasion. Ask for his chin all throughout this correction. Don’t allow the horse to stop and rest because he cannot be rewarded for a front end stop. Try it again.

- **Your horse gives you a beautiful stop during the fencing drill, but his approach to it is terrible.**

If you are working on your approach and your horse gives you a wonderful stop but his rundown leaves a lot to be desired, you don’t want him to misunderstand what it was you were working on. Following the stop, let him sit for a little bit but then take him in a circle or gently rein him to the left or right and get your horse working again. If you let him relax too long, your horse will think his approach was wonderful.

The approach to the stop is very important. It must be a straight line. If your horse is leaning this way or that way, drop the idea of a fencing drill because the present instead becomes a steering exercise. If your horse goes left, steer him right. Although you must be careful to avoid making sharp turns – this is drifting exercise. “Drift” your horse to the left, or the right. If you move your hand, your horse should get himself back underneath your hand.

**REMEMBER!** You want the beginning and the end of your rundown to be very relaxed. And you do not desire a defensive move from your horse, this is offensive. Instead, you want your horse to be very patient in the beginning of the rundown and very relaxed at the end.



**REMEMBER!** If your horse slows in the rundown, avoid correcting him, he is just trying to do what he thinks you want. If he breaks down into a trot and you get after him, he will be suspicious when you actually do ask him to break into a trot.

**REMEMBER!** When a horse takes off in the rundown, he’s still trying to do what he thinks you want – even though you don’t want that. Just gear him down.

**REMEMBER!** If the horse wants to lean on the rundown, even if your hand is in the middle you could be sending him somewhere with your body. It is possible to babysit with your body! Be very aware of this!



**REMEMBER!** The rider has several responsibilities in achieving the sliding stop. In regards to the proper riding body position these include, **A)** using the belt drive to create more centered riding with one’s body; **B)** Always looking up and not at the spot you are going to, as this will cause your horse to stop too soon; **C)** ride towards the stop zone in the stopping position for the entire duration of your approach; and **D)** keeping one’s shoulders directly over the hips or even a little farther back. Sit down. Sit back. And look up.



## CAUTION

When you first begin fencing rundowns with your horse, your mount won’t likely trust the situation. He will probably duck and dive. Ensure you give him plenty of room to get stopped at the end of the fence. Begin by stopping three-feet back from the end and if your horse stops too far back on his own, slowly walk him up to the fence. Having said this, you can only do so if you have not said the W-word to initiate the stop.

## FINAL WORD

To truly achieve the sliding stop, a rider must ensure the horse is physically capable of handling all the things he is required to do in the maneuver. In other words, maximize all the horse is capable of doing, conformationally speaking. Horses win events because of attitude, confidence, trust, heart, etc. Breeding sometimes plays a role in it too. All horses are complete individuals, but you can increase your odds by making sure your horse is sound and has good legs. Every horse has the ability to be better. The only time you could have trouble with the stop is if you were to try to get the horse to do something he is absolutely not physically capable of doing.