

# Getting off on the right foot, er, I mean lead

By Kathryn Kincannon-Irwin

Dear Alpha Mare:

I have a 13-year-old Arabian Quarter horse mare named Shameless that is quite tough to canter. Up until I purchased her, three years ago, she was exclusively a brood mare. When I weaned her last foal and started her under saddle it was quite obvious that she didn't like to move her feet. She will canter easily out on the trail without pinning her ears, but in the arena, she keeps her ears pinned flat, especially when loping big circles. So I abandoned this tactic and began focusing on transitions instead so that she wouldn't blast off in a tantrum when she finally, after trotting very fast, broke into a canter. We now spend the majority of our time trotting softly and quietly — everything but cantering soft and quite on the correct lead. As you can imagine, her stop is really good! She's also good at counter-canter and cross-firing, plus the ear pinning is just ugly. We have found a good saddle to fit her. She has been checked out by both chiropractor and dentist. Any other suggestions? Have you ever met a horse like this?

— On The Brink in Oregon

First of all, yes. I have met many such horses. While men might say we women are born with a whine-and-nag gene, I have seen enough examples to believe that mares are born with an ear-pinning gene. Which is not a bad thing really, as it is their warning radar to whoever is causing them either discomfort or displeasure or both. When a mare's first impulse is not to bite, kick or pitch a fit, but instead to glare and pin their ears, it can be a blessing for the hapless human who may not

be aware of their being offensive. Of course, it can also be a witchy symptom of bad manners, sour attitude and the precursor to more dangerous behaviour, but it would be prudent to look at yourself first to check if you are the cause of this mannerism before blaming the mare.

I will say that from the pictures you sent, Shameless doesn't appear to be the brazen hussy such a namesake conjures up, but she no doubt keeps her own counsel and has a mind of her own. That she didn't have a saddle put on her back until she was 10 lets me know that that mind may still be reeling at the radical shift from raising babies to carting humans around on her back. Think about it from her perspective: although she may have something to say about the stallions who mounted her (but that's for another column), being bred and having foals was what she was born to do. But to carry a saddle and the weight of a person on her back, especially a back now weakened and potentially sore from so many pregnancies? Had she been in a room full of horses who were asked who would like to be ridden, she may not have been one to eagerly raise her hand and say, "Pick me!"

Not to say many horses do. Resistance — playful or otherwise — being a horse's middle name, the confident, aggressive ones put up a huge stink, the majority, who are passive-aggressive, play games up the yin-yang, and the passive ones just give in, give up and take it. But I've seen over and over again how that initial "I don't think so," can change into "yes, let's do it!" when the rider knows how to finesse a horse into feeling so good in their body and thus in their mind, that they shift into believing it's not only okay, but in their best interest. If a horse

like Shameless feels the weight on her back is smooth-flowing and beautifully balanced rather than a huge sack of potatoes, she will come to the gate when you bring out the saddle, looking forward to the muscle-massage and physiotherapy she so needs and desires in her middle-age.

Getting to the heart of the matter, to diagnose Shameless' ear-pinning as being either discomfort or displeasure, I am glad you told me you have addressed the potential physical back pain aspect, and that you are having Shameless chiropractically aligned and massaged to keep her back in shape. Knowing you can rule out such pain will allow you to focus on the discomfort she is feeling being about her sense of balance as you ride her, which is what I am deducing is going on here.

I'm glad to hear you have found a good saddle that fits her well. I also hope you are posting with her when you trot. Were she having any lower back pain, a sitting trot would only exacerbate it. I also hope that when you post, you are doing so based on the bend she is in, not the direction you are moving, i.e. taking weight off her back by lifting yourself out of the saddle when she is on the diagonal that is not strongly balanced to accept your weight. "Rise and fall with your leg on the wall" was designed for robots that always have true bend for the direction of travel. Horses are not robots, and they often counter-bend for many reasons. So riding your horse instead of the arena will make a big difference to your horse feeling balanced and stable and able to move comfortably and freely with you on her back.

The picture with you on Shameless' back shows her level headed and squarely planted (no



need to go indeed!) but my eye detects a bit of a pouty countenance. Her ears are not flat back, and they could just be turned back paying attention to the fact that you are on her back. But she has a kind of listless look in her eye and an overall hang-dog demeanor. This is not the case in the second picture of her on her own walking towards the camera where she looks bright-eyed and curious. The difference can be telling.

That you say Shameless canters easily on the trail without attitude, but pins her ears flat in the arena says a lot. On the trail, you are not looking for a "correct" lead — just a canter, so Shameless gives you a canter that is comfortable, which means she would give you the canter lead for whatever bend she happens to be in. And if you are prone to tell me, she isn't bending she's straight, remember that since horses serpentine in their diagonal movement, they are always in one bend or the other, regardless how slight. The problem then comes in an arena where riders think about direction rather than their horse, and presume that if they are riding to the left, their horse will/should pick up a left lead, and if they are riding to the right, the right lead. What they don't realize is that the horse may not be in a true bend for the direction of travel. My guess is that Shameless spends a lot of time counter-bent, which would explain her counter-cantering. I will venture to add that if you were thinking about direction while on the trail, there is a good chance you would notice Shameless counter-cantering there as well.

Coming back to this issue of bending, please don't confuse bend with flex. While horses certainly have the athletic ability to bend like a wet noodle (think of how often they reach around to their girth and nip at it to scratch), a horse that hasn't been shown the good feeling and benefit of bending from a rider that knows how to use their twisting core and long inside leg to arc the barrel around them, would not

necessarily naturally do so when being ridden, especially a stocky horse like Shameless. Instead you may get only flex in her neck, which only kinks her neck like a kink in a garden hose, restricting and damming up the movement, especially if you resort to the hand on the bridle to "tip" or "lead" the turn from the inside rein.

Not at all the same as bending from the barrel through her body, which gives a wonderful endorphin flow through the entire spine and up into the brain. So without getting a true bend for your direction of travel, it is fairly unlikely Shameless will give you the canter lead for the direction you are travelling, without pinning her ears and rushing the trot to avoid giving a lead that would be difficult for her current bend. In essence, Shameless is no doubt pinning her ears when you attempt to lope or canter her because she is counter-bent and feels unbalanced, uncomfortable and therefore unable to easily oblige your request.

From what you've told me, I applaud this mare. That her response to what's not working is first and foremost to just not go and accentuate it with pinning ears rather than explode like a bucking bronco or take off like a bottle rocket is commendable. I'd take her kind over the latter two any day. She seems a sensible lady who is doing her best to get along and not make too many waves, but still let you know your riding could use a few adjustments to make her feel trading babies for being ridden is a wonderful transition. 🐾

— Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and Train the Trainer sessions throughout North America and Europe. They are currently developing Riversong Ranch Equestrian Retreat on the shores of the McLeod River just west of Edmonton.

If you have a question that you'd like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please e-mail her at [alphamare@explornet.com](mailto:alphamare@explornet.com).

