



Voice Communication

Since we only have the reins for physical communication with our horse, we rely on verbal communication a lot more than we would if we were riding them.

Being consistent in our verbal cues will greatly improve our communication with our driving horses.

It doesn't matter what verbal cue you use, as horses don't know what they mean, they just learn what response you like when you use them.

Try It:

Make a list of all the verbal cues you use with your driving horse and when. Then go for a drive and pay attention to each time you use a verbal cue. Are you consistent with their use? Do you get a prompt response? Does the horse even know what you're talking about, or are they relying on other cues instead?

Here's my verbal cues:

- Walk
- Trot
- Hup (Canter – I don't know why, I just have always used this. Canter would make a lot more sense, but luckily horse's don't speak English)
- Whoa
- Gee (Right)
- Haw (Left)

Again, whatever feels straightforward to you for direction cues is fine, and I usually only use the verbal cue for a turn on a sharp turn or at speed, to give them some warning and help them balance. The use of gee and haw is just because I was taught by my teamster Grandad, and it makes sense to me. Come and Get are also common, as well as Left and Right, or even just Turn or Around with the rein cue being the cue for which direction. And if you don't do obstacles or speed events, you may find that a verbal cue for direction isn't necessary, though they can be fun to play with and have in place regardless.

I use the gait name to change gaits, and a cluck or shush to ask for more within a gait.

Consistency is key. I used to just use a cluck for everything, but it made it very difficult to ask for more effort within a gait, without accidentally cuing a break in gait. So now a cluck means "more" but only the name of the gait means a change of gait, and it's resulted in a much clearer communication with my horses.

Try It:

Now that you've considered the verbal cues you're using with your horse, are there any changes you'd like to make? Are you consistent in your cue use, to avoid confusing your horse?

If you have decided that some changes have to be made, it's good to phase in the new cues gradually. Use the new cue, and then follow up with the old to set them up for success, and you'll be able to gradually phase out the old cue.

Verbal Half Halts

When we're working with a driving horse, especially a Miniature Horse, their balance is a hugely important consideration. We're routinely asking them to pull their own weight and look good doing it, so the more warning we can give them that a change in gait is coming, the more easily they'll be able to balance and make that change in gait as smooth as possible.

Before every verbal cue, I use the word "and" to let them know something's coming. As an additional hint to them, if I'm about to ask for a downward transition, I make the word all drawn out, "aaaaaaand Whoa" so they can be thinking about slowing down. If it's an upward transition, I make my verbal half halt bright and energetic instead: "AND trot!"

Try It:

Add the word "and" in front of each of your main gait cues, anytime that your cue is going to result in a major shift in balance. Do you notice smoother transitions?

Timing of Verbal Cues

Changes of gait do not happen instantly, especially in a learning horse, and while we can begin to build promptness in the response to our cues as the horse develops more and more balance and strength, initially we want to give them time to balance into the new gait.

A quality transition is way more valuable than a prompt transition, and the more warning and help we can give them with our cues, the more beneficial to their development AND their performance.

Try It:

Think about the timing of your transitions. What cues (verbal and rein) do you use to ask for a change of gait? What order do you use them in? How does your horse respond?

For downward transitions, I like to use my verbal half halt "and" then the verbal cue "walk" and then follow up with a rein cue if needed. (When you're consistent with this order, a rein cue becomes unnecessary most of the time, which allows the horse to balance much more easily into the new gait or halt).

For upward transitions, I start with a rein cue, taking a bit more contact to help them balance into the new gait (how much more depends on the horse, remember, they are all individuals and it is our job to figure out how best to communicate with each horse as an individual) and then my verbal half halt "and" then the verbal cue "trot!" and then if needed follow up with a cluck or a whip cue if needed. Again, if you're consistent with this order, a follow up cue for encouragement will rarely be required.

Try It:

Go out and play with the timing of your verbal and rein cues in transitions. Try the options above and see how your horse response. What is working best for your horse?

Breath Communication

Another tool I use is the addition of a breath half halt.

Horses naturally communicate with their breath a lot. You've likely seen them do it – they snort at something scary, they throw their head up and hold their breath to listen and see if they need to run away, and they sigh when they relax after becoming nervous.

Because horses use their breath a lot, they're very aware of our breathing, much more than we are. We can use this to our advantage in a couple ways.

First, taking a deliberate breath prior to a cue is a great way to get the horse listening and away that "something's coming", much more effectively than a trained half halt because they already understand it.

Before you begin your cue sequence, simply take a breath. Breath "And ... walk"

Try It:

Add a breath half halt before your cues, and see if it makes them more effective. Be sure to use a long deep sigh before downward transitions, especially a halt.

The other way being aware of our breath can help us is on days when we're feeling nervous – whether a new stage of training, or an outing. When we get nervous, as humans, we tend to hold our breath, even without realizing it. The same is true for horses, so when you're nervous and hold your breath, the horse is going to pick up on that. The only thing is, while we know we're nervous because it's an important show, the horse just knows you're nervous, so they're going to be looking for a reason they understand. They're expecting to see a predator or something, not just a judge who they can already tell likes horses! 😊

So what can we do to avoid making our horse nervous just because we are? It can be hard to just remind yourself to breathe, so instead, try humming. You don't have to be humming loud enough for anyone else to hear, but if you're humming, you'll be breathing, and the problem will be solved. And if you pick the right song, it might just help you with your rhythm too!

Try It:

What song are you going to practice humming while you drive, so you'll remember to breathe in new situations?

My go to is "Don't Fence Me In" but "Surrey With The Fringe On Top" is a great trotting song too!