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# Reins And Hands Work Together

## How Different Types Of Contact Move Up The Levels

By Connie Jehlik, Director of Instruction USPC

When teaching beginners to ride, the instructor focuses first on position and balance. Being longed and learning to ride without balancing on one's hands is crucial to develop the ability to feel and learn how to correctly follow the contact with the horse's mouth. As beginners learn to properly balance themselves and that their hands aren't the tool for balance, their ability to learn to use their seat and legs becomes more effective.

According to the USPC Intermediate Manual of Horsemanship, there are three basic types of rein contact:

riding with loose reins, riding on a long rein, and riding on light contact. A fourth type of contact is for more advanced riders: riding on the bit. Each of these is used for a specific purpose during a horse's training. They are also terms used in Dressage Tests as each shows a different level of training and development of horse and rider.

**The loose rein** is used to allow the horse to stretch his neck out as far as he or she wants which is common at the end of a ride, to stretch his or her neck and back. It is commonly used in western



This photo demonstrates a nice contact between rein and hand with a straight line from rider's elbow to bit.

PHOTO COURTESY: USPC

riding disciplines as well.

**Riding on long rein** (also called a light rein) is similar to the loose rein but the reins are slightly shorter with less slack. This is used to allow the horse freedom to stretch and relax, but gives you more control and communication with your horse.

**Riding on light contact** is just that. You have a light, but steady feel of the horse's mouth through the reins all the

time. This type of rein contact is not for the beginning rider. If a beginner doesn't have good balance and position they will use the rein contact as a means to balance themselves. If the rider never experiences a following hand, one that has this light contact but not a pulling contact, it is very hard to reverse this process.

**Riding on the bit** begins with understanding the relationship between the rider's hands and reins in connection with the bit, seat, and legs. It takes time, patience, and development by the rider and horse (physically). We see many people force the look too early, usually causing the rider to lose their position which creates bad habits. The picture above demonstrates a nice contact between rein and hand with a straight line from riders elbow to bit.

With these basic types of contacts briefly described above, let's jump to some other types of rein handling that we **continued on p. 19**



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**Reins.....from p. 19**  
 hear and see, but that are used in other disciplines such as jumping. I used the term “a following hand,” and when we go from riding on the flat to jumping, this concept is still important but we typically use the term “release.”

The purpose of a release (a following hand) is to allow the horse to use their head and neck freely to help balance themselves over the fence. The basic types of releases described in the USPC Advanced Manual of Horsemanship are: long crest release, short crest release, and automatic release. The reason for a release is to not lose control but to allow the horse to make a good jumping effort. The picture below shows excellent jumping form, showing a straight line from riders elbow to bit (allowing for that following hand).

Two more types of releases that you might hear about are the driving hold and slipping the reins. The driving hold is a special way to hold the reins to help the rider follow the movement of the horse’s head and neck more accurately. Used by instructors to help teach or remind the rider how the horse uses their neck and head to balance themselves and to improve the riders release. Slipping the reins is typically used as an emergency measure to keep from interfering with the horses balance, such as on drop fences as seen in the picture above, or when a horse stumbles and is trying to regain



**Slipping the reins on a drop fence in eventing.**

PHOTO COURTESY: USPC

their balance. This type of release you will sometimes see advanced riders use, especially in the discipline of Eventing.

You can find more details on types of rein holds and contact in all three USPC Manuals of Horsemanship. The most in-depth descriptions and material are in the USPC Advanced Manual (second edition) Chapters 3 and 4.

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**The goal of a proper release over a fence is for the rider to follow the movement of the horse’s head and neck.** PHOTO COURTESY: USPC  
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