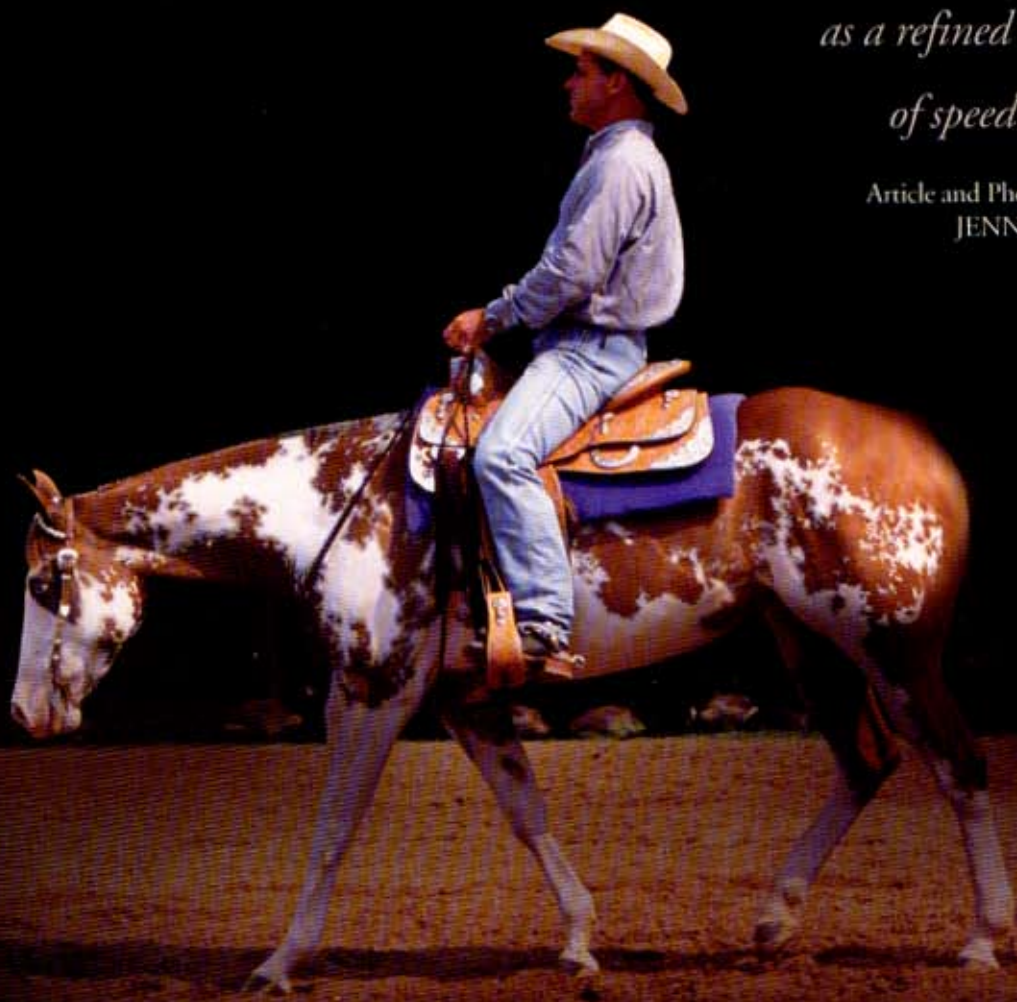




# The Spur Stop, with D. John Deas

*Leading Western pleasure trainer D. John Deas  
defines the spur stop and explains how it is used  
as a refined method  
of speed control.*

Article and Photography by  
JENNIFER NICE





If you find the concept of using spurs to decelerate a horse a difficult one to grasp, you're not alone. This is particularly true if you are more accustomed to watching speed events, where the idea is to go as fast as possible and the rider's spurs play an animated role in achieving maximum acceleration.

How do you slow a horse down using a piece of equipment designed to elicit impulsion?

The concept becomes even more difficult to get your mind around if you try to gain some insight by watching a pleasure class, particularly a top-level class. The cues are so subtle that they are just about invisible to everyone but the horse.

"If you watch intently, you will see when someone lays a spur against a horse," says D. John Deas. "But, ideally, the pleasure class is all about showing a horse without making it look like we are doing any work. It should look like we are not doing anything, but there is actually a lot going on."

According to Deas, the spur stop is the final, finishing touch that is put on a well-trained pleasure horse.

"It is the only way that you can go into the arena with confidence in your speed control without having to go to your reins," he says. "In my opinion, it is the only way to have a Western pleasure horse that you can show at the top level of competition."

However, he says, you cannot reach this finishing touch without starting from the beginning.

#### Starting the pleasure horse

Training horses is about what the horse thinks, says Deas, not what the trainer thinks.

"I learned a long time ago that the horse has to understand what you are asking him," he says.

For that reason, Deas applies the basic principles of round pen training that John Lyons and others like him have brought into mainstream horse training. Deas's horses begin their training first in a round pen, then on a longe line, either in the round pen or arena.

Deas follows a natural progression of steps to teach the horse the concept of pressure and release. He begins with the horse's face, teaching it to give its nose to the left and right.

"It all starts with the horse's nose," he says. "If the horse learns to give his head to the side, he also learns to bring his head down at the same time."





From there, Deas teaches the horse to move its hip away from him. These lessons from the ground prepare the horse for understanding the concept of responding to pressure from a rider in the saddle.

"Everything in horse training is based on pressure and release," says Deas.

Once Deas is in the saddle, after the horse has learned to accept him on its back, his first

goal is to teach the horse to move and to stop while maintaining softness in the face.

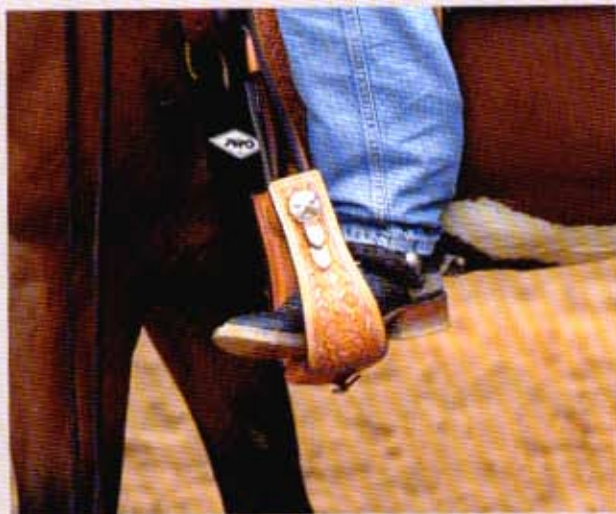
"First, you have to have movement," says Deas. "You can't teach a horse to stop if you can't make him go.

"Initially, I don't care where he goes; I just want him to move. That's why the round pen is useful. But they have to be good in the mouth and soft in the face, no matter what. I

*Above: D. John Deas utilizes the basic principles of round pen training to teach the horse to be soft in the face and to move its hip away from him, as Dirty Skip N demonstrates above.*



*Far left and left: The same principles are taught under saddle. The horse learns to give its face first and then yield to leg pressure, as Deas demonstrates with Imagine This Splash.*



*Top left: Because this horse is small-barreled, Deas's spur reaches up under the horse's belly.*



*Top right: This horse is larger in the barrel, and Deas is not able to reach underneath the horse with his spur.*



*Right: Two types of spurs include an average rowell spur with a long shank and a ball spur with a shorter shank.*

## Types of Spurs

Because the spur is an extension of the rider's leg, the length of the spur should be directly related to the length of the rider's leg and should be proportional to the depth of the horse's rib cage, as well. A small-barreled horse requires a longer spur, while a deeper-barreled horse requires a shorter spur.

"The length of the shank of the spur should balance with how long the rider's legs are," says Deas. "I am five feet, 10 inches tall, and I have relatively short legs, so I like a spur with a shorter shank. A long-legged rider wants a spur with a longer shank that can reach up under the horse's belly. A long-legged rider actually has an advantage because he can reach up under the horse's belly, as opposed to the short-legged rider who is just scratching at the horse's sides."

Selecting the most suitable pair of spurs for the horse and rider is something that is often overlooked, says Deas.

"A student sees her long-legged trainer in long-shanked spurs and goes out and buys the same spurs," he says. "I think people buy spurs without putting much thought

into what type of spurs are going to work best for them, based on their height and the size of their horse.

"The spur shank needs to be short enough that the rider is not scrubbing it against the horse's side all the time," he says. "A short-legged rider on a big horse, wearing a spur with a long shank and sharp rowel, can be a recipe for disaster. It gets in the way. The rider needs to be aware of whether the spur is in the horse or not."

Deas prefers a spur with an average rowel. Other types of spurs include the equitation spur, ball spur and rock-grinder spur, which has a very sharp rowel and is more commonly used in cutting and reining, where the spur is seldom used, and when it is, it is applied with a thump for a quick response.

"Some people will get their horse really finely tuned and will show in a sharp-rowel spur, but that's because they don't want to use their spurs too often," he says. "It depends on the horse. I like to have a horse that I can show in a sharp spur because I don't have to use it often."

bump the horse to move, and once he moves, I cease bumping.

"The bumping is a cue, and a cue is nothing more than an aggravation that we do to the horse to get a desired response."

To stop, Deas asks the horse to give to one rein, called a one-rein stop or emergency stop, until the horse stops moving its feet. As soon as the horse stops, he releases the rein. In this exercise, it is the rein that is the aggravation.

"Everything comes from one side at a time," Deas says, explaining why the one-rein stop is so effective. "The rein is used in the beginning to get the spur to work later on."

The next step Deas takes is to teach the horse to move away from his leg by applying pressure and then releasing the pressure as soon as the horse yields to it. Then, once the horse understands how to give its face to the bridle to one side and the other, and how to move away from leg pressure, he puts the pieces together.

"What I use to control the shoulder is a combination of rein and leg," says Deas. "The same with controlling the hip. When you connect the two, you have the beginning stages of two-tracking. I ask the horse to step one back leg over the other and one front leg over the other."

"You can't teach the spur stop if your horse can't side pass and if you don't have control of the horse's hips, because the spur controls the horse from the shoulders back, and that's half the horse. You have to be able to steer from behind and the front."

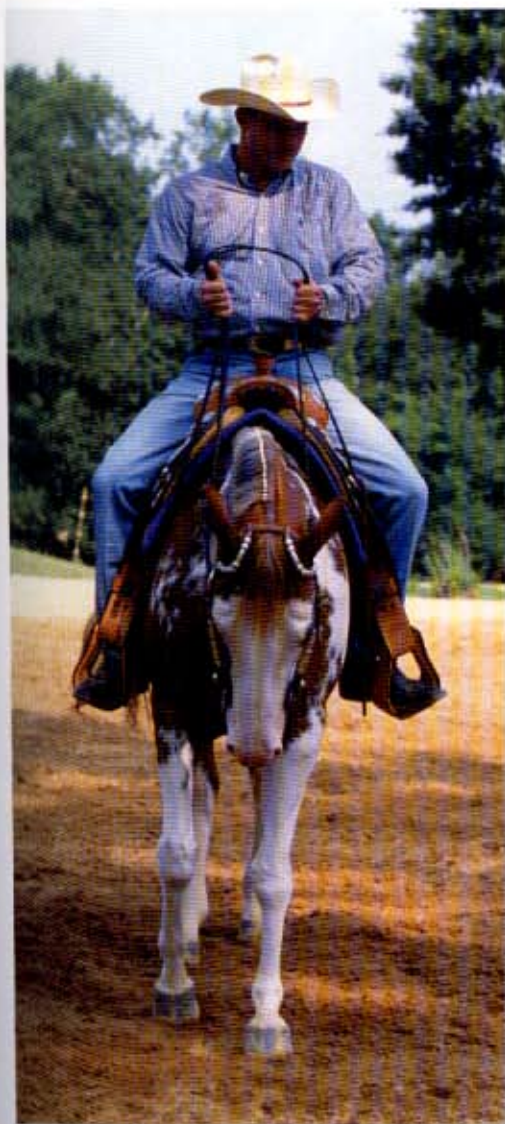
At this point, although Deas rarely removes his spurs from his boots, whether or not he uses them during the early stages of training depends on the horse.

"I introduce the spur from day one as much as the horse will tolerate it," he says. "If they won't tolerate it, then I may go along for awhile without using the spur. Unless it's a really scary horse, my spurs stay on [my boots], but that doesn't mean I'm using them."

"If the first time I get up on a horse I feel like I need to take my spurs off, then I probably haven't done my homework on the ground. I don't want to get into a storm with a green horse and accidentally bump it with the spur."

*Left and below: Deas demonstrates how the spurs are used to ask a horse to back up. When the spur is applied, the horse lowers its neck, raises its belly, making room for its hocks.*

*Bottom: Deas attempts to ask the horse to back without using his spurs. Note how the horse has hollowed its back and is braced against the bit.*



Deas warns against eliciting fear or anxiety in the horse.

"You don't want the horse to be afraid of your leg," advises Deas. "And you don't want to cause the horse pain. Pain is generally not very useful in training horses. If it hurts, the horse is not going to want to do it. It only invokes the horse's flight response."

"Horses don't like spurs in their belly. They don't like anything in their belly, so I want to keep them from hating my leg. I don't want them to get what is called 'bound up' on a leg, where, when you press on them, they just push back."

### Using the Spur

The spur is an extension of the leg, and leg pressure is applied to the horse from the top down. Therefore, the spur should be the last part of the leg to touch the horse.

"You don't want to apply the spur without first applying the other parts of your leg, from the top down," advises Deas. "First, you whisper; you pressure the horse with your upper leg. If you don't get the desired response, you speak louder to the horse, using your knee. If he still does not respond, you shout, using your calf, then yell, using your heel. The spur is the scream, but remember that everything starts with the whisper."

Deas calls this his flow chart.

"If I close my knee and the horse responds, there is no reason to go deeper," he says.

When the rider closes both legs on the horse, he is sending the horse into the bridle. The horse should respond by slowing down and lifting its back. If the horse responds by showing resistance in the bridle, the spurs are used.

"I go to the belly," says Deas. "This motivates the horse to give its face. It's a natural response, because

the horse can't raise its belly in response to the spur and raise its head at the same time. The belly comes up and the head comes down."

Deas can tell someone has skipped some steps in the flow chart if, when they close their legs on the horse, the horse raises its head, hollows its back and stops by bracing its front legs, pushing its neck up to stop.

"This horse isn't really broke in the face," he says. "That's not what we want at all. When you apply the spur, you want the horse to drop its neck."

### Closing the wall

Once the horse completely understands the concept of moving off the rider's leg in each direction, Deas says it's time to teach the horse to back up by "closing the wall." It is in learning how to back up that the spur stop is re-



*Whether loping (top, right) or jogging (bottom, right), the spur check is a refined method of speed control. It is to the pleasure horse what the half halt is to the dressage horse.*



fined, because, if the horse is moving forward when the spur is applied, it must stop before it can back up.

Teaching the horse to back up is a process of teaching it to solve the problem presented to it. The horse is asked to move, but is prevented from moving forward with the hands. It is prevented from moving to the side by the rider's legs, so the only place left to go is back, and the second it does, the pressure is released.

When backing, the spur is used to lift the belly to make room for the hocks. The horse lifts its back and rolls its neck down.

"Once he tries to do what you want him to do, the pressure goes away, and horses pick up on this pretty quickly," says Deas.

#### Spur stop vs. spur check

The spur check entails applying the spur stop, but not stopping.

"A spur check really isn't about stopping the horse," says Deas. "It's about asking the horse to back up, but then not backing up. It's about thinking about doing something, but not doing it."

The spur check is to the pleasure horse what the half halt is to the dressage horse. It's a pause. Like the half halt, the rider has the ability to begin the spur stop and then let up.

"You make the horse begin to think about stopping, but you don't stop. It is the most refined form of speed control."

However, Deas warns against misusing the spur check.

"In training, you have to follow through completely," he says. "You have to ask the horse to stop. If you just use your spurs to slow the

*In this series of photos, Deas uses Zippo's Dixie Dolly to demonstrate the correct response to the spur. In the top photo, Deas is neutral. His hands are on the withers and his feet are away from her sides. In the middle photo, he lifts his hands and makes light contact with his spurs. The mare lowers her head and begins to raise her belly. In the bottom image, he applies the spurs and she responds by raising her belly and lowering her head. Note that his hand position has not changed.*

horse down, you are, in essence, just riding the brakes, and the horse will get dull.

"You have to have a release. Any pressure that is applied all the time requires more and more pressure. We want the horse to be always seeking that release."

And, he adds, "You have to have speed control already in place before you can ask for this added nuance of control. The horse has to be willing to come back to your hand. Think of your spurs as being connected to your reins."

According to Deas, much of this depends on the horse's natural ability to do what is asked.

"No matter what," he says, "if the horse can't jog and lope like we want, there is no amount of training that can correct that."

#### The bridleless pleasure horse

Ask D. John Deas his technique for showing a bridleless Western pleasure horse and his answer may leave you scratching your head. According to Deas, the bridleless horse should be ridden as if the bridle were still there.

"If you take the bridle off, the horse should still work as if the bridle is there," he says.

"It is the bridle that keeps the topline pretty and the motion forward. You still steer a bridleless horse with the bridle. The bridle is there, but it isn't there.

"I used to be really impressed with the bridleless [class], but a really good bridleless pleasure horse is one that is really good in the bridle."

#### Brainwashing the pleasure horse

According to Deas, the best pleasure horses are not just the ones that have the best spur control in the arena, but are the ones that have been "brainwashed" into thinking that their world is a very small place.

"Ultimately, you want the horse to think that their world is a very small, little world that you take care of," Deas explains. "Horses are herd animals. They want to be taken care of. The calm pleasure horse that will ride up and down the steps of the coliseum is one that has learned that if he does



Trainer D. John Deas of Gastonia, North Carolina, has been training horses for 23 years, during which time he has made numerous APHA Western pleasure Superior horses. A self-proclaimed Paint man, he showed at the APHA World Show for the first time in 1993, earning a top-five finish in Senior Western pleasure with Elegant Skip A Hit. In 1997, he earned his first championship, in the bridleless Western pleasure class riding White Stone, and a reserve world championship in the Western pleasure maturity, also with White Stone. In total, he has earned 21 top-10 finishes in Western pleasure at the World Show.

However, Deas says that his greatest accomplishments have been with the people he has helped.

"Every year, I've had people in the Amateur and Novice Amateur finish in the top 10. Shannon Curl won the high-point Youth exhibitor award two years ago."

Deas likes to quote the late Jerry Stanford, the father of the Western pleasure horse, when asked about training horses.

"Jerry once said, in a book he wrote about training, called *Sriding for Perfection*, 'As long as you are green you will grow. Get ripe and you will rot.'

"That's the philosophy I try to apply to training and life in general."

what I want, I'm going to take care of him. He lets me drive."

Although the spur does factor into this level of control, it is only one part of the picture.

"We use our spurs on a pleasure horse quite a bit because we want them mellow," says Deas, "and it's because we use our spurs so much that they are mellow."

The ideal pleasure horse, says Deas, should be something that mom can ride to the mailbox. [E][E][E]