

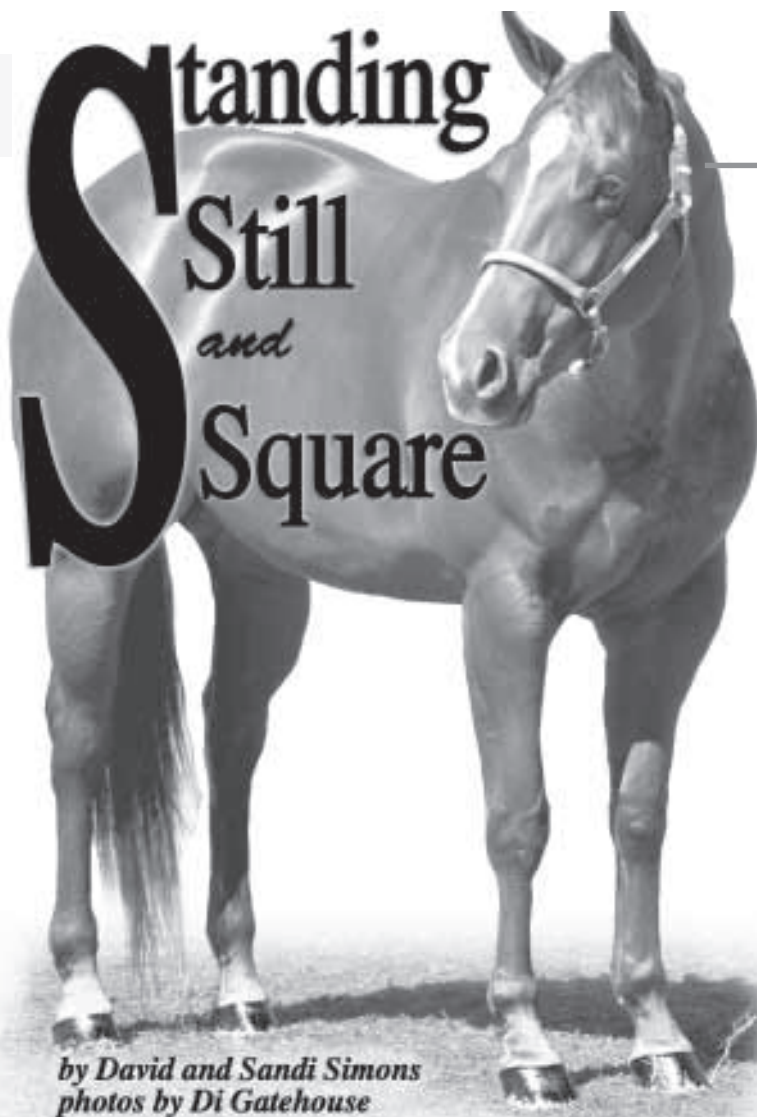
Building On The Basics

In this continuation of the **Building On The Basics** series, which deals with important areas of training for young horses - the focus is on how to teach the skill of standing still and square in hand.

When it comes to showing a horse off to its best advantage in hand, an exhibit that stands still and square when required - in the line-up, when being inspected and during the workout - is both a pleasure to judge and to watch. Unfortunately, however, 'stillness' and 'squareness' are not seen very often, despite these being qualities that are relatively straightforward to teach as part of a horse's early handling and training. Even if the goal isn't to show a young horse in hand in competition, the time spent teaching these lessons will prove to be more than worthwhile for numerous aspects of the ongoing education process.

Here, popular training duo of David and Sandi Simons explain their methods for teaching 'still and square', which not only focus on achieving alignment of the feet but also on something that is often overlooked - this being to encourage a relaxed state of mind in the horse. This, they feel, is essential, both when learning in the home environment and for coping with the distractions that will inevitably be faced once show day arrives. The calmness and confidence instilled by their training techniques also assist the horse to display a bright attitude and to be full of expression, as opposed to having uncontrolled exuberance, when the time comes to be judged.

In this article, Sandi is shown working with a 'green' Welsh Cob mare that is having her first lessons in learning how to stand still and square. As showing in hand usually requires that the horse moves out freely at the walk and trot in front of the judge, this aspect of training is also briefly covered in the following pictorial;



Teach the Calm Down Cue:

Apply downwards pressure on the horse's head via the reins. Wait until it gives to the pressure - that is, moves its head down towards the ground - then immediately release the tension and reward. Repeat these steps until the horse will relax and lower its head with only the softest of pressure every time it is asked.

Teach The Go Forward Cue:

Using a long whip or a lead rope, tap the horse on the hip to encourage it to move forward. As soon as this happens, stop tapping and reward. Repeat the same process until the horse is responding straight away each time a single, light tap is given. Now change your body position so that you are facing forward, as would be done in a led class, and go through the same process - ensuring that you are tapping on the same place as you did before. Also be aware of allowing the forward movement once it has been asked for by not having any pressure on the reins. Once the horse is well established to the go forward cue at the walk, progress to the trot.





Stop and Stand - Hips:

The first stage of teaching a horse to stand square involves gaining control of the hips by using the Hip Over Cue. Start by asking for forward movement as mentioned in the Teach The Go Forward Movement then, using the hand that is on the rein point the whip at the horse's hips to ask for sideways movement. Do this on both sides until you can control the number of steps that are taken, asking for as little or as much as you like.



Stop and Stand - Shoulders:

Using the Hip Over Cue, first ask the horse to move its hips then, after the required amount of steps have been taken, to stop. Then, with the hand that's on the rein, point to the front of the shoulder and ask the horse to move backwards - this is called the Shoulder Over Cue. When it does, release the pressure and reward. Repeat this until the horse will move backwards with the slightest amount of pressure every time you ask.

Combining The Cues:

Once the horse is responding willingly to all four of the cues you have established, they can be combined in order to achieve a square and still halt. For example, ask for 'go forward' then stop and ask the back legs (by using the Hip Over Cue) and/or front legs (by using the Shoulder Over Cue) to move into the desired position. Take your time and don't be concerned if you can't achieve a square halt straight away. As soon as the horse is square, however, apply the Calm Down Cue to encourage it to relax and stand still until you ask for something else.



Refining The Stance:

As the horse becomes more settled and obedient with this training, encourage it to stretch and arch its neck forwards - while still remaining still and square - by using an attention-seeking noise (clicking with your tongue) or a small treat in one of your hands. Avoid using the whip for this if possible, since it has already been used as a cue in the other exercises. If the horse steps out of its square stance, use your hip and shoulder cues to move the feet back into position then apply the Calm Down Cue before continuing with the neck-stretching.

Also experiment with using the end of the whip or your foot to point to the hoof you would like the horse to move - this being known as a Toe Back or Toe Back With Whip Cue. Of course, it takes some degree of time and effort to achieve responses to subtle cues such as these but anything is possible.

The final photo shows what SHOULDN'T be done to alter the position of the feet, even though you do see it sometimes!

Understandably, the attention level of most horses will change when they go out of the quiet home environment into the 'hustle and bustle' of a show so what may have been a perfect square, still halt every time can become anything but! Therefore, it is worth making the extra effort to go along to a local event without competing, on at least one occasion prior to 'the real thing', in order to prepare both the horse and yourself for the atmosphere and distractions likely to be experienced in the show ring. 🐾



David and Sandi Simons

will be presenters at **EQUITANA 07**
see www.equitana.com.au for the official program.



David is Australia's John Lyons Accredited Trainer and his soft, calm approach, that is easy to understand and apply, has helped many throughout the years. Sandi assists ladies with their fears, lack of confidence and anxiety so they can kick start their riding careers.

