

Step No. 1

The first stone Nathan Piper lays as the foundation for his reining horse program is key to his plus-1.5-point turnaround maneuver.

Story and photography by Kate Bradley Byars

When Nathan Piper starts a turnaround, his first cue — moving his hand to the inside — should be reciprocated by the horse moving its inside foot to take the first step into the spin.

Step No. 1. How many recipes in life begin with that simple note? Whether baking a cake or building a reining horse's training foundation, there is always a first step, and for EquiStat Elite \$1 Million Rider Nathan Piper, the first step in the spin is the key to his show-pen success.

"There are so many tools for the spin, and I have them in my toolbox, but the first goal is that inside step and to teach a horse to want to do it," Piper said.

When Piper, of Pilot Point, Texas, won the Million Dollar Competition at the 2022 The Run For A Million aboard Shannon and Hershel Reid's stallion, Patriot, he not only plussed his spins, but he garnered plus one-and-a-half marks both directions. That bolstered his and Patriot's score to a 235, one of the highest scores in National Reining Horse Association (NRHA) history.

"Patriot is well advanced past 'step one' of my spin program, but all of the finishing steps depend on this solid step one foundation," Piper explained. "The final stage is a spin that begins off the outside rein only, with a totally connected response from the inside front foot, outside front leg, and a straight body to follow that neck rein. This is the finished product and the ultimate goal, but it all begins with step one, following the nose."

Piper credits two of his mentors, trainer James Davidson and NRHA Hall of Famer Dick Pieper, with stressing the importance of teaching a horse how to take the inside front step.

"It is very important for a horse to follow my hands. When teaching the turnaround, the first basic is getting that inside foot to step to my hand and follow my hand. I want the horse to reach into that lateral step as I draw my rein," Piper explained. "Instead of a cutter that wants more of a backward step, I want a forward-body position to the step. I spend a lot of time on that first, basic maneuver."

Not only vital to the turnaround, teaching a horse how to reach for the first step also contributes to the horse's response in the rollback and its overall understanding of having Piper's hand connected to its body.

Here, Piper outlines how he teaches a young horse to take that crucial step one toward becoming a champion reiner.



Starting a young horse means connecting his hand to the horse's response, and for Piper that carries over from the spin to other maneuvers. Here, his hands stay low and wide, with the expectation that the horse's front foot follows his reach to the inside.

1. Follow My Lead

As Piper begins to train a young horse in his program, the basic response to his cue from the inside rein will be crucial. His work on teaching a horse "Step No. 1" starts when the horse has had a few rides and is ready to start learning more than to go forward off his leg and give to pressure.

"The number one [thing I teach] is to follow my hand into the turnaround, following that direct rein," Piper explained. "That step isn't fully mastered until I can draw the rein past my pocket and the horse's body is connected — he is hustling and reaching with that inside step. I stress to people that are working on this goal that it doesn't stop with drawing the rein and the horse stepping to my hand, but with the further I draw, the further the inside foot reaches and takes that step. Ultimately, I want the horse to step that foot under my hand as I draw the inside [rein]."

He starts teaching a horse that by walking a circle, drawing his direct rein laterally to the inside and asking the horse to follow the rein not only with its nose and body, but to step laterally with the inside front foot.

"Borrowing from Dick Pieper, I think going into the turn it is nose, neck, shoulders, ribs and hips involved," he said. "I want a horse really straight and moving all together; I don't want the rib and hip in front of the shoulder, but [I want them] out of the way to make the turn."

"In the beginning, I'll get that first step and the horse will follow my hand if I am pulling only one or two inches," he continued. "But, if I continue to draw deeper, then I may lose the body [position], the rib, and that connection. The crucial thing is to first ask with only a little hand and if the horse steps in the correct direction, release the pressure on the rein a little to reward the move. Release before the connection is lost."



Whether Piper is showing a finished and award-winning reining horse like Patriot, left, or starting a young prospect like the horse on the right, the first step is nearly identical, with the cue refining to become more subtle through training. The next step connects the outside neck rein to the rider's inside foot.

If the connection is lost, Piper releases and walks the horse out of the spin. His entire teaching process is an exercise in pressure and release. He accepts that a horse may only achieve one or two steps in the lateral inside direction with good body position before losing the connection, at first.

As a horse learns, he will be able to take more steps until he can stay in there and maintain the correct steps for many revolutions, he said.

"I don't use a lot of outside rein or give them any help or a crutch to bring that shoulder over," Piper said. "I want the reach to be connected to the body. If needed, I will draw with the [inside] hand and follow through with my [outside] leg to say, 'Hey, bring your body to my hand.' I feel like if I introduce outside rein too early, I don't get that body-hand connection and the outside rib connected to that rein."

For Piper, this learning period has no expiration date or deadline. As it is crucial to his



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training program, he will stick with teaching a horse to move laterally off the draw of his inside rein for as long as it takes.

Many young horses want to take the step to the inside but poke the rib cage out to the outside, he said. That creates a rubber-necked feel and shows Piper the horse's body isn't connected to its head or his hand.

"It is a lot of pulling the rein, releasing, pulling the rein, releasing until the body comes and that horse fully understands that connection," Piper said. "I want the horse to

learn that the more I draw, the more it needs to hustle to my direct rein, my hand. Then the body is connected and that opens up that big first step. It becomes important in the show pen that when I lay that outside rein to start the spin, everything is connected in a way that allows for that solid first step."

2. Stepping Up

Once a young horse is stepping to the inside when Piper draws the rein and is continuing to take that step over and over, even after he has released pressure, Piper knows it has a clear understanding of the first basic step and is ready to move on to more advanced training.

"Once that is solid, the next step is connecting the outside neck rein to the inside foot," Piper said.

To accomplish this, Piper shares an exercise that he uses on a regular basis throughout the horse's training and show career. He starts by adding outside neck rein and seeing



When he sits balanced in the saddle with his feet underneath him (left), Piper's own body position isn't inhibiting the horse from turning properly. Alternatively, if he sits too far back, with feet forward, that can push the horse forward through the spin.

how the horse responds.

"If the horse just sits there, I'll walk forward and neck rein first," he explained. "Then, I draw the nose to the inside until they walk a small circle. I am indicating the horse move the shoulder, step to the inside, and look in. I do that until the horse willingly goes into a spin.

"I'll repeat until the neck rein is connected to the inside foot," Piper explained. "I won't help with leg pressure or with any other spin cues because I want the horse to respond to the neck rein only. When they do, I know the horse is thinking good thoughts whether they are 2 or 22."

When the horse understands how to respond to Piper's cues, the neck rein becomes a tool for him to use to align the horse's body position. All of the steps he takes work together to make it easier to train and show the horse, he said.

"The direct rein opens up the inside foot for the first step, and the outside rein lines

up the outside body to get the outside leg to cross deeper," he said. "If the horse is a little out of position and I need to line the body up, drawing the outside rein up can get the horse in a straighter position to get a better cross-over. This can be done one-handed with enough practice."

This ability to lift his hand and align the rib cage comes into play not only in the turnaround but also in loping circles and correcting direction in the rundown. The horse learns how to direct off Piper's hands and legs during this period.

"For me, the spin has two distinct parts: the inside and outside. Part 1 is the inside step controlled by the inside or direct rein [at first], and then later instigated with the outside neck rein only. Part 2 is the outside of the body controlled by the outside neck rein bringing the shoulders in and lining the ribcage up."

The indicator Piper needs to start advancing a horse toward the show pen is that it

wants to turn, takes the inside step willingly off the outside rein and continues to maintain proper body position.

3. Cadence, Not Speed

When Piper does begin to ask the horse to hustle to his hand, he isn't expecting a burst of speed. Rather, he wants the horse to reposition itself in an efficient manner.

"When I have the form consistent, I'll cluck a little in the spring and summer of the 3-year-old year, and then start to ask for the horse to really hustle," Piper explained. "I really want excellent cadence, excellent form and I'll ask the horse to step up, but it is not asking them to respond with speed — but [to] hustle to that body position."

Piper watches how the horse balances itself in that position to see where he needs to work on perfecting its understanding. He says that a horse that sucks back needs to be pushed forward.

"The balance between cadence and speed



When the horse isn't turning around with balance or cadence, Piper lifts his hands and drives forward by bumping his feet, reengaging the horse by moving its body. Then, he returns to the work on step one.

and pushing them to gain the form I want — forward — is a challenge,” he said. “Most of the time, the position of the horse’s neck helps tell me where their center of balance is. I like it to be at the withers, which allows the neck to stretch out and be used for balance. The correct balance point brings their feet underneath them. Pushing a horse forward and getting that step helps to get the form.”

To ensure that his balance is in the right spot, Piper sits square in the saddle. He doesn’t look right or left, but rather straight ahead to start the spin.

“I use the [horse’s] poll to focus and use my peripheral to know where I’m at. And, I like my legs a little back, away from the shoulders to let the shoulders move,” Piper explained. “I’ve tried different positions in the past, and I found if my feet were forward, like a stop, I would get in the way. I’ve found if I tilt my toes a hair back and out, they are out of the way of the shoulders. The horses learn that when they feel me sitting square and I ask with the neck rein, it means it’s time to spin.”

When Piper looks right or left and applies the neck rein, that is when he’s trained a horse to expect a rollback, not a spin, so his position is vital to the horse’s understanding of what comes next. When the horse understands position — its own and Piper’s — then the real show prep begins.

“Once the horse knows how to hustle to the body position, then the speed will come. I can do that at the end with not much work,” Piper said.

4. Full Spin Ahead

For Piper, the show pen is where he wants his horses to do the best work, and his program is geared to save the horse for that time when it can shine. While he may check a horse’s hand/body connection before he goes into the pen, he doesn’t over-drill the maneuver.

“Most of the time, I do light riding to make sure the horse is there mentally,” he said. “I may check my start [to a spin], but I won’t hammer on them to be quick about any of it. To me, the warmup is a time to relax and get ready for the show pen. If that horse and I know each other well, most of the time I save it for the show pen.”

If a horse isn't firing like he expects and it has proven in training that it understands it should do so, Piper falls back to the all-important Step No. 1.

"If I have some issues with a horse in the show pen, more than likely it is my start. If they start good, they'll spin good. So, I'll work on that start," Piper said. "The horse has to understand the direction of the spin. That is a valuable tool, and when I get in trouble in the turn, I can go back to that tool if a horse is confused. I go back to work on the reach, the step, the direction.

"I want them to want it. Unless the horse wants to do the work, I can't drill it into them." ★

(right) If his warmup isn't connecting with the horse to result in a great spin, or if in training he isn't getting the step and hustle he needs, Piper returns to the cues the horse learned in its 2- and 3-year-old years — hands wide, directly showing the horse Piper's desired response to his cues.



Meet Nathan Piper

Nathan Piper's journey to more than \$1.5 million in earnings — \$573,123 of that earned in 2022 — had its peaks and valleys. Originally from Bryan/College Station, Texas, Piper began riding when his sister wanted a pony. He credits his Brazos County 4-H mentors — B.F. Yates, Dr. Doug Householder, John Edd Tucker, Carol Woods and Dr. Michael Martin — with helping put him on a path to become a solid horseman.

He attended Texas A&M University and thought about becoming a veterinarian, but that route quickly lost appeal. After graduating, Piper and his wife, Jean, headed to Todd Sommers's facility to apprentice in the reining trade. With multi-year stints in Madisonville, Aubrey and Pilot Point, Texas, the couple returned to Whitesboro, where they enjoy life on the ranch with their two daughters, Millie and Etta. Piper credits God and his wife for helping him achieve his successes, both large and small along the way.

(right) EquiStat Elite \$1 Million Rider Nathan Piper achieved a major milestone in 2022 when he and Patriot won the Million Dollar Competition at The Run For A Million. It capped off a stellar partnership for Piper and the stallion owned by Shannon and Hershel Reid.

