

Universal Language

A Lesson

I am offering riding lessons to a new student, a trail rider who has had very limited exposure to formal lessons or training. Whatever type of saddle or possibly no saddle, it doesn't matter. Regarding bits or headstalls, generally any mild bit or headstall is OK with me. I will not teach where any severe bit or head restriction is being used.

As with all teaching, before proceeding, we must observe the situation. In our case, we must evaluate the condition of the horse and rider, both individually and as a team, before we can offer helpful instruction.

My first agenda is to evaluate the rider/horse team. In this case, I do this by asking the rider to warm up the horse for a few minutes. (Even when a student who has been working with me for a while, I ask the same.) This approach gives me a lot of information. I evaluate the rider's method of warm up. If she has no clue, I suggest using the whole arena for some walking, halting and trotting.

This warm-up gives me a glimpse into how the two communicate with each other, and I evaluate the crookedness of the horse and how the rider compensates for this crookedness. (see **Lessons** for more on crookedness.)

Once my appraisal is complete, I stop the rider and begin teaching the half-halt. This is a foundational piece. (Read **Checks & Balances: Teaching the Half-Halt** and **Conversations with Riders**) I explain how the rider can use her body to slow down and stop the horse, without pulling on the reins. For every rider I teach, this is new information. The first lesson usually involves just practicing the half-halt – from walk to halt and then from trot to walk to halt. I start with this lesson because it is imperative that the rider knows how to stop the horse and because it is the foundation of all riding.

If that lesson progresses well, I begin to approach the crookedness in the horse by asking the rider to start observing this from the saddle. Before I can offer corrections in this situation, the rider must begin to feel how the horse's crookedness influences the way she is sitting on the horse.

I instruct the rider to focus on where her seat-bones are located on the horse's back. The goal is to have the left seat-bone sitting on the left side of the horse's spine and the right seat-bone correspondingly sitting on the right side of its spine. However, as most horses are stiff on the left side and hollow on the right, we find that, on such a horse, the rider's left seat-bone is located far to the left of the horse's spine and the right seat-bone is located directly on the horse's spine, left of where it should be.

Synchronizing

Along with that, I ask the rider to pay attention to the rhythms of the horse's gaits and help her synchronize with the horse's movement – learning the horse's language. It may be just in walk and, maybe trot, depending on the rider's level of experience. The rider begins by feeling the left-right swing of the horse's belly in walk. This is key to discovering the timing of the leg aids, which, when done correctly, are linked to the movement of the horse's hind legs. The horse's motor is in his hindquarters, so that is what the rider wants to motivate – with her leg aids. There are moments in time when the leg aid is effective to move the horse forward. And there are moments

in time when the horse can respond. These moments happen with every stride. The rider must learn to feel these moments and learn to honor the horse's time to respond – the rider's reward to the horse.

Here, we are speaking of the early lessons in learning a language. In time, the rider will discover countless ways to communicate with the horse through a combination of the leg, seat and hand aids. This discussion is only food for thought. It only makes sense when the rider is aboard and is feeling the horse move under her.

The Aids

The leg aid for the walk is alternating calf – left and right – in rhythm with the four-beat gait. I ask the rider to feel the left-right swing of the belly against her legs. This swing corresponds to the alternating reach of the hind legs.

In trot, the leg aid is both calves together in rhythm with the two-beat trot. At first, this may be just a jog which might be comfortable enough for the rider to sit. However, if the horse trots faster or has a jarring gait, the rider can post. Posting helps the rider synchronize with the horse's rhythm.

Transition from walk or trot to canter is unique because the horse is moving from a diagonal gait (walk or trot) to a lateral gait. In speaking about the canter aid, we refer to the horse's leading side as *the inside* and the following side as *the outside*.

In the rider's beginning stage, to ask for canter, the aid is *outside* leg back on the horse's side. Even a horse with rudimentary training – given that he has at least been mounted and trained to go forward to the leg -- knows this language. The horse needs a signal in order to organize himself to move from the diagonal gait – walk or trot – into the lateral gait – canter. Many horses need a moment to begin to canter, and it is important for the rider to give the horse this moment to organize himself.

This elementary aid is tied to the horse's hips and thus, the rider's seat bones. When the horse moves in this lateral gait, he will naturally carry his inside hip on the leading side ahead of his outside hip. When the rider moves his outside leg back, she is also moving her outside seat bone back. This automatically places the rider in a position to follow the horse's hips in the canter.

As the rider progresses, her communication with the horse can become more comprehensive. The seat aids can be combined with the leg aids. This learning process goes hand in hand with the rider developing a steady seat that connects with the horse through her seat bones, with attention to the left seat bone to the left of the spine and the right seat bone to the right of the spine. The focus here is on balance, which requires the rider to develop a steady upper body that resists swaying left or right, forward or back as the horse moves under her. Where there is balance, there is no gripping of the thighs. This is an important point because the horse's longissimus dorsi and latissimus dorsi muscles lie directly below the rider's seat and legs. Any gripping will restrict the horse's ability to use these muscles in his movement. A horse reacts to gripping by shortening his stride, hollowing his back, raising his head. Thus, balance is the key to the rider's success.

Hand aids are the most difficult to teach. My first riding teacher told us, "Your hands belong to the horse."

She challenged us to treat the reins as "threads" that could break with too much pressure. The hands have two functions: one to guide the horse and the other is to receive the energy created by the half-halt. Correct hand aids

require a balanced rider. In the early stages, it is enough to ask the rider to follow the horse's movement with her hands and not pull on the reins for her balance. To prevent this unfortunate scenario, a pommel strap (English saddle) or horn (Western saddle) provides an emergency handle for the rider to gain her balance. This is why it is crucial to teach the half-halt early – so that the rider can experience stopping the horse without pulling on the reins. (See ***Checks & Balances: Teaching The Half-Halt***) It is very challenging to establish trust in a horse that has been abused in the mouth; however, it can be done.

The rider's two seat bones, two calves and two hands contact the rider to the horse. Through these six points the rider communicates the aids. Effective use of aids depends entirely on a balanced, steady seat. The rider's body cannot sway forward or back, left or right. At best, this requires a toned, strong core, able to absorb the horse's movement without disturbing him.

With a steady, balanced seat, the rider can then observe that her hips follow the horse's hips, and her shoulders follow the horse's shoulders. The rider's seat bones/hips, shoulders, legs and hands create a dynamic frame for the horse. Generally, the horse accommodates the rider, actually feeling safe and free to move in balance in this frame. If the rider is consistent, the horse will become consistent and will look for that security. Here is where the rider can communicate and build a vocabulary with the horse. This is fundamental to good riding.

These are the basic aids. Once mastered, they can be combined in countless ways to refine the ride and bring out the brilliance.

My goal is to create the optimum experience for horse and rider, to improve their quality of life together.

