

EXCLUSIVE TRAINING SERIES

Refine Your Riding

Part 4 of our series on developing sophistication of the aids.
 This month: Learn to use your seat as an aid, and teach your horse to be “in front of your seat.”

By George Williams with Sue Weakley
 Photographs by Sue Weakley

Last month, I shared exercises to test your horse’s willingness to be “in front of the aids.” We used transitions to encourage forwardness and leg-yields to reinforce his acceptance of your leg aids. We worked on the light, subtle use of the whip as well as the other driving aids—your seat, legs, and spurs—to help engage your

horse’s hind legs under his body, with supple hips and a swinging back.

This month, let’s spend some time examining the often-heard (and confusing) dressage term “in front of your seat” and delve into refining the important use of the seat and the subtle application of the spur as driving aids.

In Front of Your Seat

The rider’s seat can be an effective driving aid. Your horse should be in front of your seat and “on your seat” at all times. (I’ll talk more about keeping him “on your seat” later in this series.)

Using the seat as a driving aid is a difficult skill that must be developed. It is tricky because you must train yourself to be effective and to “produce correct dynamic influence,” as the USDF Glossary puts it, with minimal discernible movement. This requires tremendous body control of your pelvis, spine, rib cage, shoulders, and core musculature.

In his book *Riding Logic*, Wilhelm Museler writes that the necessary bilateral tightening of the rider’s back muscles is similar in action to being “on a swing where the back is braced for the forward swing and slacked for the backward swing”—a description I have always found helpful in understanding the mechanics of using the seat. Museler also describes the “unilateral tightening of the back muscles (pushing forward one hip or one pelvic bone).” However, in riding you don’t want to rotate your hips as far as you might while on a swing, such that you’re sitting on your tailbone in a “chair seat” with your lower back rounded.

The key to the use of the seat is that while its action should be imperceptible, its effects are noticeable both to the horse and an observer (including the judge!). When your horse feels the forward push of your seat along with a slight downward and backward (but not behind the vertical) movement of your shoulders, he should be willing to move forward more energetically, with a longer stride. When he responds in this manner, he is “in front of your seat” and you have learned to use your seat as an effective driving aid.

Here are two exercises that can help teach your horse to stay in front of your seat.

Exercise 1: Teach your horse to respond to your seat. This is a three-part exercise. Do it sequentially (you don’t have to do all three parts in one session). Get comfortable with each step before you move on to the next.

1. Establish a 20-meter circle in a rhythmic rising trot. For three steps, sit the trot and use a bilateral tightening of your lower-back muscles to resist your horse’s forward movement, supported by a gentle closing of your hands to ask your horse to slow down. Your goal is to balance him so that you can keep his hind legs further underneath his center of gravity, which ultimately will encourage him to carry more weight behind.

Repeat this exercise several times until your horse is truly attentive and slows down primarily from your seat within three steps.

2. Once you’re able to slow your horse with your seat, try using your seat to influence the way he steps with his inside hind leg. Start on a 20-meter circle in rising trot. This time, sit the trot for three steps and ask your horse to enlarge the circle by weighting your inside seat bone and squeezing with your inside calf. You may have to repeat this several times until he understands what you want. If he doesn’t seem to be getting the idea, walk on the circle and leg-yield away from your inside leg for two steps. You’ll know he’s responding correctly



POWERHOUSE: As your aids become more sophisticated, your horse becomes increasingly responsive to your seat. Caprice, a nine-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding owned by Robert Stark, is going powerfully forward from rider Noel Williams’ seat. Note the softness of her leg and the elasticity of her rein contact.



FINE-TUNING THE SEAT: *The action of the seat should be subtle: If movement is obvious, you're probably not doing it right! In photo 1, Noel has momentarily tightened her lower-back muscles and gently closed her hands on the reins to ask Caprice to shorten his stride. Compare the position of Noel's seat and upper body to that in photo 2, in which she's asking him to take longer strides with a slight forward push with her seat and a slight downward-backward movement of her shoulders.*

when you feel him lower his inside hip slightly and step forward and under his body with his inside hind leg going toward the hoofprint of the outside

front foot—all from your seat.

3. On a 20-meter circle in rising trot, sit for three steps and ask your horse to go forward for those three

steps from your seat and legs. He should soon associate your seat with going forward correctly in a balanced manner (learned from exercise 1),

Signs of Poor Saddle Fit by Jochen Schleese CMS, CSFT, CSE

Poor saddle fit impacts your horse's reflex points and causes simple instinctive reactions rather than conscious behaviors. If you notice physical or behavioral changes in your horse, it may have more to do with the fit of your saddle than anything else. These are just some of the indications that your saddle could be bothering your horse:

- A dip in the muscle just behind the wither
- Incorrect development of the neck ("ewe" neck)
- Tail hanging crooked, "pinched in" or swishing
- Hollow, unengaged back
- Whites of eyes showing
- Excessive chomping of bit when ridden
- Ears laid back
- "Girthiness" (bloating when the girth is being done up)
- Stumbling or tripping
- Four-beat canter/pace
- Bucking or rearing
- Resistance to going forward
- Refusals at jumps
- White hairs or blisters at wither area
- Poor work attitude, general "bad behavior"

So let's listen a little more to what our horses are trying to tell us – they can't speak, but their behavior speaks volumes! Ensure a certified saddle fitter/saddle ergonomist analyzes your fit – someone who at least has a basic knowledge of equine anatomy and biomechanics, and knows the causative issues behind some of the problems you're experiencing, so he/she can help you figure out a solution for you and your horse.

Book your 80-Point Saddle Fit Evaluation today!



The female Saddle Specialist
 Infinitely Adjustable for Optimal Comfort

saddlesforwomen.com | info@schleese.com | 800.225.2242    

Treating Ammonia: The Necessary Health Requirement



Sweet PDZ HORSE STALL ReFresher®
#1 Stall Deodorizer, 32 Years & Counting.

Ammonia is a serious respiratory health risk to your equine companions and it robs them of their vibrancy and competitive spirit; but most importantly it can inflict damage to airway passages and lungs.

The treatment of ammonia is an absolute health care necessity. Sprinkle a little Sweet PDZ in your stalls regularly and confront this toxic odor head-on.

MADE IN USA For more information or a dealer near you:
www.sweetpdz.com
800-367-1534

OMRI LISTED For Organic Use



The Role of the Spur

The spur is a supporting player in your cast of forward driving aids. Teach your horse to respond to the leg and seat as primary aids; the spur reinforces the leg when necessary.



REINFORCEMENT: *The spur reinforces—but does not replace—the rider's leg. Before you can wear spurs, you must gain absolute control over your legs.*

Just as your horse should not fear the whip, he should not be made afraid of the spur. In order for this aid to be clear, deliberate, and nonthreatening, the rider must have total control over its use—which requires absolute control over the leg. A good rider knows when the spur is touching the horse and can touch him with it quickly in order to produce a quick reaction. The spur can also be used to help supple the horse, with slight pressure helping to create more bend through his body.



P.R.E. Horses



www.COVESDARDEN.com




Straight from the Breeder

with a supple inside hind leg (exercise 2) that—assuming the contact is correct—allows him to swing through his back.

When you and your horse become comfortable with these exercises, try them on a straight line or in corners, as well.

Exercise 2: Use your seat to ask for a bigger stride. In rising trot, ride a diagonal line M-X-K or H-X-F and ask for a “strong trot” (a lengthening or a medium, depending on your horse’s level of training). When you reach X, sit the trot and ask for a longer stride by using your seat as a driving aid. At the end of the diagonal, make a downward transition to working trot, using your seat to slow the trot; then resume riding rising trot.

Variation: Start in sitting trot. At X rise to the trot and ask for a bigger stride; then sit the trot for the downward transition.

Although both versions of this exercise teach the horse about your seat, their effects differ slightly and can address different issues. For instance, is your horse reluctant to use his back? If so, then I would start the diagonal in rising trot to encourage him to lift and come over his back. Does he push enough with his hind legs? If not, it might help to start the diagonal in the sitting trot to encourage him to keep his hind legs more under his body. Does he change his longitudinal balance? If he has a tendency to get more and more on his forehead, I would try introducing the sitting trot at X to help rebalance him and get him to carry more weight behind. Returning to the three-part exercise I gave you in exercise 1 could be beneficial, as well.

Be prepared to experiment to see what method best helps your horse understand what you want and how to do the movement.

As Little as Possible, as Much as Necessary

A primary goal of dressage training is to teach the horse to respond promptly and willingly to light aids. Although occasionally an aid needs to

USDF Sport Horse Prospect Development Forum

October 22-23, 2016
Pineland Farms, New Gloucester, ME

With Scott Hassler and Willy Arts

Internationally Respected Experts and Educators from Breeding to FEI Dressage

- Building a fundamental system for a correct foundation in the young equine athlete, with emphasis on three year olds and the transition from in-hand to under saddle.
- For trainers, breeders and owners nationwide, presented in a live and interactive forum. Open to auditors and selected participants.



www.usdf.org

shprospect@usdf.org
859-971-2277



YOUR CONNECTION TO THE
AMERICAN
DRESSAGE COMMUNITY



Jane Heart
JEWELRY

Ravel
licensed designs



janeheart.com 1-888-703-0503

Thank You for Supporting USDF



Great American Insurance Group/USDF Regional Dressage Championships and Great American Insurance Group/USDF Breeders' Championship Series



800-974-9247
www.adequan.com



800-942-4258
dietrich-insurance.com



800-989-1500
www.doversaddlery.com



800-303-7849
www.dressageextensions.com



402-434-8585
www.dressagefoundation.org



www.equisearch.com
www.dressagetoday.com



888-637-4251
us.merial.com



800-553-2400
www.platinumperformance.com



800-611-6109
www.dressagearena.net



800-461-8898
www.smartpakequine.com



800-398-0819
standleeforage.com

be “louder” to elicit a reaction, always go back to the lightest possible aid. Otherwise your horse will not learn to be sensitive to light aids or to go in self-carriage.

Overuse of the aids is like using swear words all the time: They pack a punch when used sparingly, but they quickly lose their impact if they become a staple of the conversation. So refuse to drive your horse forward at every stride. Continually monitor his acceptance of the aids, but don't nag. If he thinks about getting behind the leg, correct him immediately with one quick, clear aid; then be light. Your lightness is his reward for going forward.

There are times when your voice (“Good boy!”) or a pat on the neck is called for, as well. Too much babbling isn't helpful, but don't be stingy with your rewards.

Strive to make your aids clear, well-timed, and consistent. Clear aids are vital to your horse's understanding of what you are asking of him, and therefore also to his confidence. Busy or sloppy aids create static in the connection and are difficult for the horse to understand.

Finally, an important part of teaching a horse to “think forward” is keeping him attentive and interested. I believe that a change of scenery is important in keeping a horse happy in his work. Vary your rides—ride outdoors, ride in fields or on trails, do hill work—to keep your horse fresh in his body and his mind. These kinds of sessions will also help to get and keep him physically fit (see “Horse-Health Connection,” July/August, for more on dressage-horse fitness), which will give him more energy and encourage him to “think forward,” as well. ▲

Next month: We'll conclude the series by examining the top three building blocks of the pyramid of dressage training: impulsion (which includes “throughness”), straightness, and collection; and we'll combine the aids to envelop the horse in order to achieve those goals.

Meet the Expert

George Williams needs little introduction to the USDF

membership, having served as the Federation's president since 2009. He is a veteran international competitor with many Grand Prix-level wins and championships, including representing the US at the CHIO Aachen (winning team bronze) and at the FEI World Cup Dressage Final in 2003 with the famous mare Rocher.



At 18, the native of New Hampshire traveled to Germany to study at the *Reitinstitut von Neindorff*, where he earned his German Bronze Rider Medal. On his return to the States, he began working with legendary Spanish Riding School alumnus Karl Mikolka. Later he apprenticed under Mikolka at the Tempel Lipizzans and eventually became director of Tempel's equine program.

Since the 2000s, Williams, his wife, Roberta, and their daughter, Noel, have operated Williams Dressage LLC and have been based at several prestigious dressage facilities in the Midwest and Florida. They currently divide their time between Ravenna, OH, and Wellington, FL.

Besides serving as USDF president, George Williams is the United States Equestrian Federation's national dressage youth coach. He is also a member of the USEF Dressage and High Performance Dressage Committees, and chair of the USEF High Performance Eligible Athletes Committee.

Back on Track®

Celebrating
15 Years of
Customer
Satisfaction



With more than 1,000 reviews in 2 years with Trust Pilot, Back on Track has a rating of "Excellent" with a score of 9.2 on scale of 0 -10 !

"I was very skeptical at first, but met a woman who swore by Back on Track. I ordered 2 knee braces... and wore them for 2 hours the same day. I expected to use painkillers or topical applications: what a surprise, I didn't have to! An amazing product: I would recommend Back on Track to others. The best product out there: don't waste money buying anything else! ...Worth the price. Thank you, Back on Track!"

All Back on Track Human Braces are FDA Approved

USA ~ www.backontrackproducts.com ~ 1-888-758-9836

Canada ~ www.botcanada.com ~ 250-851-0191



Ride a registered Thoroughbred?
Win awards and prizes!

A list of T.I.P.-sponsored dressage shows and year-end award information is available at tjctip.com.