

EXCLUSIVE TRAINING SERIES

Dressage Puzzlers

We tackle some of the most perplexing concepts in dressage.
This month: "Use your leg."

By Bill McMullin with Amber Heintzberger

Stand around the warm-up arena at any dressage show, and you'll hear instructors encouraging students to "use your leg." But what does "use your leg" actually mean? Give the horse a gentle nudge? Squeeze hard? Kick? Push with one leg? Your leg extends from hip to heel, so what part of the leg are you supposed to be using, anyway?

The rider's leg is one of the most versatile and fundamental aids. Its

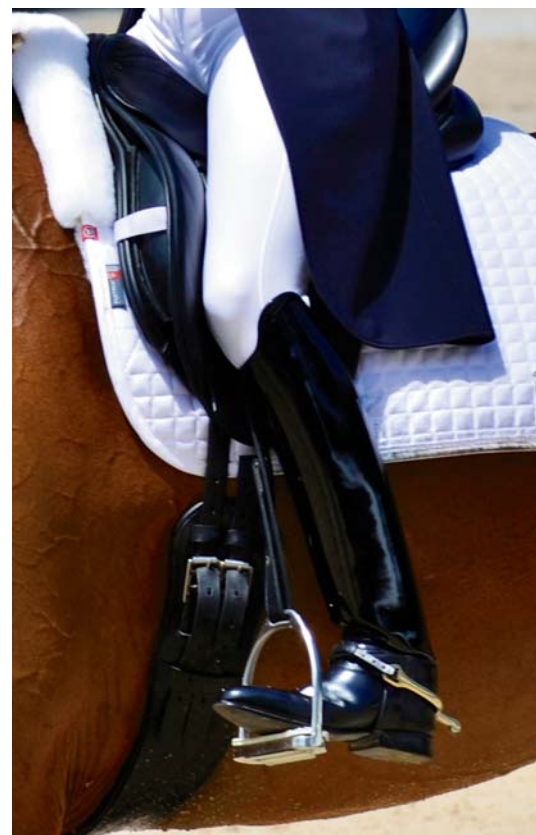
use and effectiveness are directly connected to another important aid, the seat. For help in sorting out the many meanings of "use your leg"—and to explain some common issues and how to solve them—we turned to Fourth Level USDF-certified instructor, USDF Instructor/Trainer Program faculty member, and USEF "r" dressage judge Bill McMullin.

Bill McMullin says:

The basic position of the leg is extremely important and very much related to the development of the rider's seat. Without a proper independent seat, it is nearly impossible to achieve the control of one's leg position necessary for applying the leg aids in the right place and at the right time. By "independent seat," I mean that the rider can effectively control her body parts independently while in the saddle.

If the seat and rest of the aids are not in coordination, the leg doesn't do much good. For example, if the rider is hanging on the reins while squeezing with the leg, the horse gets contradictory information. If the rider can't maintain an independent seat, she can't use the leg effectively. Everything works together and must be in harmony to be effective.

Leg-position basics. When the rider can sit evenly balanced and relaxed in the saddle, the thigh should then hang in a relaxed way from an open hip, resulting in close contact along the saddle to the knee without gripping. Then, from a slight bend in the knee, the calf is able to have the proper elastic contact with the bar-



THE "DRAPED" LEG: A correct leg position is balanced, with the leg hanging in a relaxed way such that it makes close contact with the saddle from hip to knee

rel of the horse, stretching slightly back and downward into a flexible ankle joint, which allows the heel to stay down without force. The rider's weight should be distributed evenly over each stirrup on the ball of the foot. The resulting position should be such that we could draw an imaginary vertical line through the rider's ear, shoulder, hip, and heel.

The stirrup leathers should be adjusted to a length that allows the rider to achieve the desired leg position comfortably. A more novice rider may benefit from the stirrup's being slightly shorter for a more secure feel,



EDUCATED LEG: Bill McMullin on Giovanni uses the forward-sideways driving leg to ride shoulder-in

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COURTESY OF BILL MCMULLIN; JENNIFER BRYANT

and gradually working toward a longer stirrup as her seat and balance become more independent.

Properly guided work on the lunge line is one of the best ways for a rider to achieve this progression. Work on the lunge with and without stirrups can give you the necessary time to focus and develop a better seat and leg position, and the strength to maintain them.

Work off the lunge without stirrups can also be very useful finding a more “stretched down” leg position without gripping, but must only be done when you are balanced enough from your work on the lunge line and are on a suitable mount in a controlled environment.

(For more about the benefit of lunge lessons, see last month’s “Clinic” with Jeremy Steinberg.)

An unbalanced riding position may lead to leg-position problems. Some people sit in what we call a chair seat: The seat is too far back in the saddle with the leg out in front, which makes for an insecure leg position on the horse’s side. An opposite problem, pinching with the knee, tends to make the rider pitch too far forward and takes away the effectiveness of the lower leg.

“Use Your Leg”

When dressage instructors talk about using your leg, generally we are talking about using the inside of your calf for one of three types of leg aids:

- Forward driving leg aid
- Forward-sideways driving leg aid
- Regulating leg aid (also known as the guarding leg).

There are distinct differences in each type of leg aid.

In the **forward driving leg aid**, the calf pressure is on or just behind the girth, with a nice elastic contact with the side of the horse—not gripping.

The **forward-sideways driving leg** (photo, p. 28) is necessary for lateral work and to help maintain the bend and the connection to the bit on a circle. Your inside leg remains near the girth, where forward energy and bend are developed. On the circle, your outside leg is placed slightly behind the



FORWARD DRIVING LEG: The basic “go forward” leg aid is elastic, not gripping, with calf pressure at or just behind the girth. Bill Warren rides Romantic in an image that was taken before helmets became a requirement; USDF advises riders to wear protective headgear at all times.

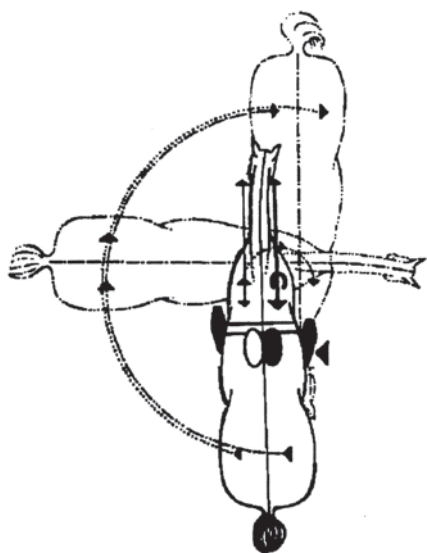
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TURN ON THE FOREHAND: *The horse steps around his forehand with his hind legs, away from the rider's inside leg. Pictured is a turn on the forehand away from the rider's right leg. The horse is positioned slightly to the right.*

girth as a **guarding leg** to prevent the haunches from "escaping" to the outside of the circle.

One of the best—and often overlooked!—exercises to help a horse and rider learn about the forward and sideways driving leg is the turn on the forehand (see illustration at left). Here's how to ride this exercise:

1. From a square halt, position your horse's poll and jaw slightly in the direction of the turn. For instance, if you want to execute a turn on the forehand away from your left leg, you'd position him slightly to the left.

2. Place your inside leg (in this example, your left leg) slightly behind the girth and use it to "drive" your horse, step by step, around his forehand. Your outside (guarding) leg prevents the hindquarters from moving too quickly, while your outside rein helps to keep your horse's neck straight and to prevent him from "falling" through his outside shoulder.

3. After making a 180-degree turn on the forehand, ride a forward transition to walk or trot in order to maintain your horse's willingness go forward from your leg to the bit.

The placement of your inside and outside legs is very important. Many riders want to bring the lower leg back too far; you get a better result with the leg at or just slightly behind the girth. Your entire leg should be lying against the saddle so that you feel it all the way from the hip, through the leg, stretching down into a flexible ankle with the heel lowered. As your horse turns and bends, your inside seat bone and hip are brought slightly forward while your outside seat bone and hip are brought slightly back to facilitate the corresponding leg position on each side. You have to be able to use your whole leg to keep the horse going forward into the bending and turning aids.

The **guarding outside leg** can be positioned a little further back. The calf stays a little further back to prevent losing the haunches to the outside of the circle, and to direct the horse straight forward as you come out of the corner onto the long side of the arena. This is a regulating leg aid.

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USDF ILLUSTRATION

Getting the Horse “in Front of the Leg”

Dressage riders say that a horse is “in front of the leg” when he is carrying forward the energy created from the rider’s leg, engaging his hind end, and responsive to the leg aids. You have the feeling that he is carrying you up and forward into a steady contact. Conversely, we say that a horse is “behind the leg” when we feel a lagging in his energy, a heaviness on the forehand, and the sense that his hindquarters are trailing out behind him rather than pushing forward and bringing his hind legs underneath his body.

If the horse is not responsive to the leg aids, you can use the whip and the spur to reinforce the leg. These artificial aids must be used correctly and conscientiously so as to encourage the horse forward rather than punishing him for being unresponsive. It’s important to note that a rider must have an independent seat and good leg control—able to use the forward-driving,

forward-sideways pushing and regulating (guarding) leg aids in a consistent way—before wearing spurs. Spurs should be used only for refining the leg aids, not for creating impulsion.

The same prerequisites apply to the use of the whip. The proper touch of the whip behind your leg will help to reinforce the leg aid to produce more activity from the hindquarters. It should be used along with the leg aid or immediately afterward as a reinforcement, such that the horse becomes more responsive to a lighter leg aid without the use of the whip.

One fairly common problem is that the rider uses the leg too much and too often, and the horse becomes dull to the leg. The result is that you end up using your leg all the time without getting a result—just kick-kick-kicking. Not only does the horse learn to ignore your leg; it also doesn’t look so pretty when the leg is banging on the horse’s side all the time.

The dull-to-the-leg problem ties

into using the whip to reinforce the leg aid. That also ties into developing an independent seat and leg, and refining the leg aids so you don’t have to use your leg so much.

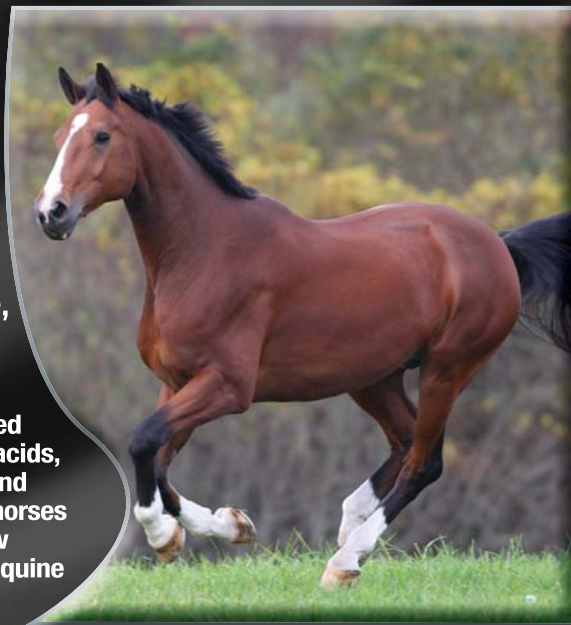
Adapting the Leg to Different Horses

Different types of horses react differently to the leg aids. As with everything in dressage, developing a balanced riding position is the first step in dealing with this issue: If you have the body control and the sensitivity, you can adapt your riding from one kind of horse to another. If you usually ride only one horse, and especially if you are a green rider on a green horse, you may have more difficulty learning how to adapt your aids.

Inexperienced riders tend to assume that a green horse is going to overreact to the leg. More often than not, however, the horse doesn’t understand leg pressure and needs to learn that leg pressure = go forward. That under-

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standing can take a long time to develop. Correct introductory training on the lunge helps the horse get accustomed to the command to go forward. If you can combine work on the lunge with a rider, using the leg and voice to reinforce the aids given by the longeur, you can get the horse used to the weight of the rider without confusing him. This work has to be done carefully and in a logical progression, and helping the green horse to understand the leg aids is an essential part of his training.

If a green horse doesn't want to go forward, kicking him harder is not the answer. Doing so can make him shut down completely and learn to resist the leg. Adding a spur at that point is also not necessarily the answer. Try coordinating with a ground person to lead him forward, or work him on the lunge, to help him understand that he must go forward when the leg is applied.

Some sensitive, "hot" horses have the opposite problem: They dislike the feeling of the leg and tend to rush forward, overreacting to leg pressure. Although we want the horse to "think forward," this type of horse still needs to learn to accept the feel of a quiet leg on his side. It's important that the horse doesn't talk us into keeping the leg off his side. I like to say that the weight of the rider's boot has to be on the horse's side.

With a horse that tends to be lazy and dull to the leg, teaching him to be a little more sensitive is beneficial. Sometimes you need a firmer, sharper leg aid—reinforced with the whip, spur,

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or both—one time to get a reaction. The next time you use a light leg aid, you expect he'll be more obedient to the aids, but be ready to back up the leg with the whip again. Transitions from walk to trot and from trot to walk, encouraging the horse to react promptly to the leg, can be very helpful.

Here is an exercise I like for making the horse more responsive to the leg. From a solid working trot, make a downward transition to medium walk for five steps; then go back to working trot. After you can maintain the forward connection to the bit during the exercise, repeat the exercise while gradually reducing the steps of walk from five, to four, to three, to two, and eventually to one. If needed, reinforce the forward response with the whip until your horse goes forward readily from a light leg aid. When you and your horse have mastered this exercise, then you can think "almost walk a step" while maintaining "forward thinking" hind legs. Doing so paves the way for a better understanding of how the half-halt is executed.

Effective and Correct

In thinking about your leg position in the show ring and how it affects your score, consider that it reflects directly

on two of the collective marks in the USEF dressage tests. A rider who sits impeccably may earn a high score for the collective mark Rider's Position and Seat (alignment, posture, stability, weight placement, following mechanics of the gaits). And under Rider's Correct and Effective Use of the Aids (clarity, subtlety, independence, accuracy of test), in order to earn a high score the rider must show throughout the test that the horse remains in front of the leg in order to execute the requirements of the level with ease. This also ties in with the collective mark for submission.

Correct leg position is not just about looking pretty. A horse that is accepting and responding correctly to the rider's leg aids is a horse that you can develop progressively and correctly in his dressage career. ▲

Amber Heintzberger is an award-winning equestrian journalist and co-author with Anna Ford of the 2009 American Horse Publications book of the year, Beyond the Track: From Racehorse to Riding Horse (Trafalgar Square, 2009) and of Modern Eventing with Phillip Dutton (Trafalgar Square, 2013). She lives outside New York City with her husband and children.

Meet the Expert

Dressage instructor and trainer Bill McMullin divides his time between Drywater Farm in Stoughton, MA, and Wellington, FL, where he and Bill Warren operate Warren-McMullin Dressage (warrenmcmullindressage.com). McMullin is a USDF bronze and silver medalist, a USDF-certified instructor and Instructor/Trainer Program faculty member, and a USEF "r" dressage judge. He is currently enrolled in the USEF "R" judge-training program.

A strong believer in continuing education, McMullin works closely not only with Bill Warren, but also with the legendary German trainer Conrad Schumacher, who makes several visits a year to both Massachusetts and Florida. George Williams rounds out the training during the year with clinics in both locations. McMullin feels that all of these experts share a similar philosophy in the training of horses, which is based on classical methods and is always concerned with the welfare of the horse.



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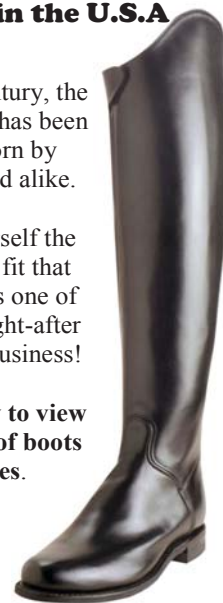
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