



Beginner riders say a million things to their horses at the same time. Their seat bounces all around in the saddle while they pull, grab, grip and slap with their hands and legs. At this point in a rider's education a golden oldie school horse that ignores these beginners' mistakes and just keeps travelling along the rail in a nice rhythm really is truly priceless.

Once you can follow the motion, your body understands the basic feel of your seat aids. Now you can practice applying them in ways that feel clear and meaningful to the horse.

As an oversimplified example, if you are following the motion at the walk and you stop following it, your horse feels the difference and stops. You can use your seat aids (or some books refer to them as weight aids) to ask your horse to start, stop, or back up. As your communication becomes more sophisticated, you can also ask him to move sideways, adjust his speed within a gait or adjust his degree of suspension within a gait. Start by practicing some simple exercises in co-ordinating your seat aids with rein and leg aids at the walk.

Stopping your Horse - As you follow your horse's motion at the walk, feel your hips swinging in rhythm with the horse's footfalls.

As the horse's barrel swings left and right, your lower legs alternately pulse left and right to encourage the horse forward. As your reins maintain a light and steady contact with the bit, your hands oscillate forward and back as they follow the bobbing rhythm of the horse's head.

Some authors talk about 'burdening' the seat or 'bracing' the back. I dislike the latter term because it implies muscle tension. You use muscle strength, not muscle tension. You should feel like you are relaxing into the saddle and sitting deeper into it. Sit straight up in a chair with your hand on your lower back. Now take a deep breath and release it while keeping your back muscles relaxed (keep sitting straight!). You will feel your lower back belly out a half an inch or so. It is a very subtle change but one the horse completely understands as a feel that means 'stop.' If you fall behind the vertical, round your shoulders, or collapse your middle, you garble your request. Your hands do not pull back, even an inch. Your legs simply stop asking for forward as your hands stop following the bobbing of the head.

Walking Off - To ask your horse to walk off, begin pulsing with the legs, lighten your seat bones by breathing in, and resume following with the hands and pulsing with the legs. With a trained horse, the sequence starts with the leg aids. However, coordination among the aids for 'walk on' may depend on the horse's training level and on whether he is lazy, excitable or somewhere in between.

If it is hard to lighten your seat bones without tensing your back or lower leg muscles, think of 'growing tall' or stretching your neck to the sky as you breath in. Keep sitting straight and don't stand in your stirrups or arch your back. If you 'overburden' your seat bones in asking for a halt, you risk falling behind the motion when you ask your horse to walk off.

## “Following the horse's motion at the walk, trot, and canter enables riders to coordinate their aids and take communication with their horses to new levels.”

Speed Adjustment - If you want your horse to walk out faster, pulse or squeeze your legs in the increased rhythm you would like and immediately allow your hips to follow with an increased swing. If your hip swing does not match the request from your legs, the horse gets a mixed message and will not extend his walk. At the same time, your elbow joints open and close a bit more as your rein contact follows the increased motion of the horse's head.

As your legs ask 'more forward,' your seat and hands must immediately follow the increased motion with 'more forward' aids as well. Otherwise, the horse gets conflicting signals. Depending on his temperament he may ignore them or express frustration.

To slow the horse's walk, slow your aids. Depending on your horse's training and temperament, pulse or squeeze your legs in a slower rhythm or momentarily stop driving altogether until the horse's speed matches what you want. At the same time, slightly burden your seat without ceasing to follow the motion completely as you would when asking for a halt. Gradually slow the swinging motion of the seat until the desired rhythm is achieved. Your hand oscillation should slow as the horse's head motion slows.

Be careful not to fall behind the vertical rather than lightly burdening your seat bones. Rather than pulling back on the reins to slow the horse, just slow the oscillation of your hands forward and back as they following the bobbing of the horse's head.

Following the horse's motion at the walk, trot, and canter enables riders to coordinate their aids and take communication with their horses to new levels. When you have a solid foundation for your seat aids, you can then become more conscious of what you are actually saying to your horse with your rein or leg aids and of how the horse is responding to subtle adjustments in any aid. As you learn to coordinate your seat aids with leg and rein aids, your communication with your horse will take a quantum leap.

When you want the horse to halt, you take in a deep breath. As you let your breath out, sink into your seat bones, stop following with your hips, stop pulsing with your legs and stop following with your hands. Without any dramatic gestures on your part, your horse will feel the cessation of following movement and he will halt.

# TALKING WITH YOUR SEAT

UNTIL YOU CAN FOLLOW YOUR HORSE'S MOTION ...

Until you can follow your horse's motion at the walk, trot, and canter (the subject of our last three articles), the feel of your seat aids on his back does not convey a clear request to your horse. You also must be able to follow the horse's motion before you can quietly apply rein and leg aids in coordination with your seat. You need strong core muscles to hold your upper body erect and flexible hips to follow the rhythm of the horse's back as it lifts and rolls in a different motion at each gait. When you can follow the motion, you are ready to apply your seat aids without 'noise' in a way that is meaningful to the horse.



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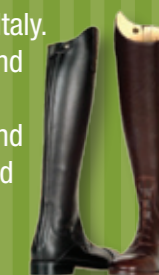
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### NANCY WESOLEK-STERRETT

Dressage Department Head, Meredith Manor International Equestrian Centre in Waverly, West Virginia, USA. Nancy holds an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) Degree with an emphasis in Equestrian Studies from West Virginia University at Parkersburg.