

CO-ORDINATING AIDS

NANCY WESOLEK STERRETT ASKS HOW CO-ORDINATED YOU ARE IN THE APPLICATION OF THE AIDS AND PROVIDES HELP TO PUT THEM ALL TOGETHER.

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NICKY POPE - FABARCHIE

We use corridors of aid pressures to create a feel in the horse of a shape we want his body to take. Refinements in the positioning, intensity, timing and release of our basic seat, leg, and rein aids convey information about gait, speed, direction and the degree of collection we want.

We aspire to the clear, precise coordination of aids that allows us to flow from one movement into the next, then the next, as we ride. In our daily riding sessions, however, “aspire” is more often the operative word than our actual experience.

Applying coordinated aid pressures is a continual riding challenge for several reasons.

First, we learn aids in theory – as though seat, leg and rein operated quasi-independently of each other.

Second, it takes hours in the saddle to transfer theoretical understanding of the aids into muscle memory that allows us to apply an aid correctly, modify it as the situation may require from moment to moment, and apply it with proper timing.

Third, even when the rider may be fit and skilful, the horse may lack the fitness or full understanding of the aids necessary to respond correctly.

Teaching Aids One by One

While coordination of a whole corridor of aids is the ultimate goal, we teach the aids individually because that is the easiest way to explain them and to learn them.

For example, when I teach the half halt, I start by explaining how to influence the horse with the seat, as this is the most difficult part for students to grasp. Once they understand how their seat influences a horse, we move on to leg aids and, finally, to rein aids.

The majority of riders like to do everything with their hands and the use of leg comes more or less easily to most people once they master the concept of not gripping with the thigh.

I teach rein aids last, because the majority of riders rely too heavily on rein aids to direct their horse. Either they use rein aids alone, or they use too much rein and not enough seat and leg. So, in the beginning, I do not focus on rein aids. Though I start with seat aids, eventually I want students to coordinate all three of their aids to achieve correct response.

Rider Understanding Versus Physical Ability

In reality, the horse always experiences our aids as a complete package of pressures, whether or not we are applying them intentionally and whether or not we are applying them correctly.

One rider may have a clear theoretical understanding of the package of aids for a particular movement, but lack the body awareness or physical fitness to apply or modify the aids correctly. Another may have no difficulty applying a corridor of aids at one gait but struggle at another.

Look at an example of what typically happens when theory meets the real world, as a rider attempts a circle to the right.

In theory:

- The rider starts by setting the rhythm with her seat then, simultaneously
- she drops the right hip to add more weight on right seat bone
- applies right leg pressure at the girth to activate the inside hind leg and to ask the horse to bend its body to the right along the arc of the circle
- lays her left leg against the horse's side just behind the girth to hold the horse's haunches on the circle and ready, if needed, to apply pressure to keep them from drifting to the outside
- opens her shoulders like a door while spiralling them to the right, turning only enough to stay in balance over the horse's centre of gravity and direct him along the 'straight' line of the circle,
- looks in the direction of travel along the circle as an aid to shape her spiralling seat
- slightly positions the horse's head to the inside with the right

rein and, if needed, uses the outside rein to adjust the degree of bend or to keep the horse's shoulders from falling out.

Whew! That is a lot to coordinate correctly. In actuality, most people drop their right shoulder or lean to the inside when asked to drop weight onto their right seat bone (think of staying on a balance beam—gymnasts must keep their shoulders directly over their hips or they will fall off the beam).

Sometimes riders spiral their shoulders too much or not at all which means they are not in alignment with the horse's shoulders. If a rider turns her shoulders too far, she throws her weight onto her outside seat bone (to the left, in this example). If she spirals too far, she is focusing too much on just one part of the corridor of aids.

The majority of the time, riders rely on the inside rein aid alone to turn their horses and do not use their seat or legs at all.

Horse feedback can be an invaluable training tool when a rider is learning to coordinate a full corridor of aids. Some horses give riders validation, like our Sassafra who turns obligingly from correct seat and leg aids alone with no rein aids needed. She can boost the confidence of a rider just learning to apply seat and leg aids, even if the rider is still making some mistakes with her reins.

Other horses, like Clyde, give riders fits. Clyde, a 35-year-old Appaloosa with camp experience under his girth, is a master teacher because he demands that his riders be 100 percent correct with a full corridor of aids before he acknowledges their requests. If even one aid is not quite right, Clyde chooses to ignore them all. He may refuse to come off the rail and just keep barreling forward. Or he may duck to the outside if his rider pulls on the inside rein (they may position the rein, thank you, just do not pull on it). If a rider does not keep the rhythm correctly with her seat, he runs off at the trot. If the rider's seat rhythm asks him to speed up or slow down, Clyde just keeps trucking forward at the same pace. Clyde's frustrating behaviour is what makes him a great teacher. Students must learn to organize all of their aids and time them correctly. Once they have worked through all of their problems, Clyde becomes very obliging and they experience the satisfaction of co-ordinating a full corridor of aids. Thanks to Clyde, they now own that corridor.

Horse Understanding and Fitness

Like riders, horses move along a learning curve as they develop an understanding of the meaning of individual aid pressures and respond to them equally well at every gait. No matter how knowledgeable, skilled and fit the rider, a green horse may simply not understand what a corridor of aids means. A horse which is unfit or dealing with other physical issues may be unable to respond. An uncooperative horse may decide to ignore the rider or to kick or buck in annoyance.

For example, the rider may only need to weight the right seat bone to ask a sensitive green horse to turn to the right. However, the horse's response to the rider's question is incomplete because the horse does not yet understand how to bend around the inside leg. The horse needs to learn and understand a more sophisticated response to a full corridor of aids in order to stay bent and balanced on the circle or turn.

This is why we work with instructors until we become confident about our skills. A knowledgeable ground person can help a rider sort out that age old question—is it me or is it the horse or is it a bit of both—and make the necessary modifications in what she is doing based on the horse's level of understanding and fitness.

In the beginning, riders focus on individual aids at individual gaits. We ask the horse to take a shape then answer his response with a modified request. We ride stride by stride, constantly adjusting our communication with our horse. As the coordination of our aids becomes more automatic or instinctive, we slowly reach the top of the riding tree where we are able to influence a horse.

In the meantime, remember that every rider and every horse is a work in progress and be patient.