



ETHICAL EQUITATION

PART TWO – GO AND STOP

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In order to have full control over your horse, four critical signals need to be fully installed – these are GO, STOP, TURN (of fore-legs) and YIELD (of hind quarters). In the last issue we talked about the eight principles of Ethical Equitation and this issue will discuss how we apply these principles to the first two of the four basic signals, go and stop.

When we talk about the Go signal – this includes all the aids to **accelerate** the horse – including go faster, take longer strides, and make upward transitions. The Stop signal does the opposite – it **decelerates** the horse ie slow down, shorten, stop, step back and downward transitions. By using the words ‘stop’ and ‘go’ we are able to clearly establish in our minds what we are trying to achieve by the use of our aids. Once we understand what we are using a particular signal for, we can begin to use it in a way that does not confuse the horse. Stop and go, when used correctly and in balance, result in a horse that maintains its own rhythm and line/direction. It is imperative that because we are riding a flight animal, we gain control of the horse’s legs before we concern ourselves with the position of its head and neck.

The horse needs to recognise that the primary role of the reins is to slow the front feet. The primary role of the rider’s legs is to accelerate the horse’s hind legs. Devices such as draw reins, which purely focus on the position of the horse’s head, disassociate the reins from meaning slow down – therefore the horse learns reins are primarily there to make him rounder. Unfortunately it then becomes increasingly difficult to control the legs of the horse and therefore ensure calmness.

Being a flight animal, a horse whose legs are under our control is less fearful and therefore a much safer ride.

When revisiting our eight principles of ethical equitation, we can apply the go and stop signals in a way that is both humane and simple for the horse to understand.

The *Pressure Principle* is applied to stop and go via the process of negative reinforcement (pressure-release). Remember, that pressure motivates the horse to respond but the release of pressure is what trains (rewards) the response. For the stop signal, the rein aids are applied until the horse gives the correct answer (such as slow down, or step back). The rein pressure is then softened back to that of the lightest possible contact. If we fail to release the pressure on time, the horse will often become dull in the mouth – and the same is true if our contact is stronger than just a light, straight rein. The last thing we should want to do is habituate the horse to strong rein pressure. **Rider’s who say their horse “like’s a strong contact” are just covering up for the fact that their poor horsemanship has rendered their horse’s mouth dull and unresponsive.**

When applying the go signal we must ensure we only release our leg pressure once the horse has responded correctly with all four legs ie it has accelerated to the required speed/gait. We must take care not to remove the legs for responses such as kicking out or pig-jumping, as taking the leg off at this moment will reward that particular behaviour, thus making it much more likely to be repeated.

Pavlov’s Principle is that of associative learning and it explains how the seat and voice cues can be trained to signal the horse to go and stop. It is crucial to understand however that these aids are reliant on the pressure-release aids that lie beneath them. The way to train the seat or voice cue is to apply that signal just before the rein or leg aid is used, so the horse associates the two together. A well trained horse will be efficient in responding to seat and weight aids but will also know absolutely about the pressure aids so, in the event of the lighter aid not being effective, the pressure aid can be applied with success. If too much emphasis is placed on using the seat to slow the horse in early training the horse may not fully understand the rein aids and, in an emergency situation, the rider’s safety may well be in danger.

The principle of Exclusivity tells us that the horse must be rewarded for only one response per cue. A rider can have several signals to say slow down but each of these signals must only have one answer attached to it. Therefore using your legs when you want the horse to slow down, as well as when you want to go, is fraught with difficulties for the horse. This principle also explains that horses can’t possibly respond to both go and stop cues being placed on at the same time. The old French classical adage of “legs without hands, hands without legs” reminds us to keep our aids separate.

Shaping of the go and stop response is done by refining crude attempts until they are light and obedient and the horse is relaxed and in rhythm. At this point, you can shape in that the horse remains on your line during stop and go transitions and, once the legs are totally under your control, you can concentrate on the outline of the horse. Without the Shaping Principle being applied, horse training is akin to wrestling with the rider forcing the horse to keep its frame and direction and speed with constant use of the aids.

The horse also needs to understand that when a bigger signal is used, a bigger response is expected. This should not be through fear or stress but merely because the horse knows that an increasing pressure means do more.

It is important that, as a rider, we are aware of what we expect from each signal and that we refine our signals to have a different one for lengthening as opposed to going faster and shorten as opposed to slow down.

Essential to the horses continued welfare are constant checks for self carriage to prove to ourselves that the horse is maintaining its rhythm, outline and frame for itself. This is necessary for a happy and comfortable horse.

Remember the Fear Principle? It states that the horse is a flight

animal and is hard-wired to run from danger. By correctly using the rein aids we can diminish the flight response to such an extent that the horse becomes calm. Think for a moment about an uptight horse in a hollow frame. Most riders are apt to putting their leg on and driving the horse forward. However the legs of an uptight horse are already moving too quickly – even if the horse is not going forward - so slowing the horse with the reins is the way to diminish the flight response, rendering the horse calm. Once the legs of the horse are under our control and the horse holds himself slow, the rider can then put the leg on to increase acceleration but not at the expense of rhythm and relaxation.

Probably the most important principle to have in your mind is that of Mentality. Remember your horse has not asked to be trained nor would he chose to be there of his own free will. We must appreciate his brain does not function like ours and that at the end of the day he is a grazing animal with a huge ability to form habits, make associations and remember fearful situations but his ability to reason is severely limited. He truly is a blameless participant in our training regime.

Finally, we’ll leave you with a few questions that will determine whether your horse has good stop and go responses:

- Do your downwards transitions occur in excess of 3 steps of the front feet?
- Does the horse lengthen its neck and therefore pull you out of the saddle or drag your arms forward in a downwards transition or half halt?
- Does your horse buck or bolt; is it tense or constantly heavy on the reins?
- During a go or stop transition does the horse come ‘above the bit’?

If any of these questions resulted in yes, the crude pressure-release responses to your go and stop signals can be readdressed to gain a happier, lighter horse.

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