



LEG AIDS - GIVING CLEAR REQUESTS WITH YOUR LEGS.....

PHOTO: JULIE WILSON - RIDER: SUE HEARN



You hope to give your horse clear requests with your leg aids, there is no wiggling out of some basic work on your seat. Before you can apply leg aids correctly, you must be able to follow the motion of the horse's gaits with your seat, using strong core muscles to hold you in balance so that your lower body can relax and move in rhythm with the horse. It can take months, even years, of riding to achieve this.

All of your body parts are connected. Tension held anywhere from your jaw to your toes interferes with your ability to communicate clearly with your horse. Gripping thighs or stiff ankles bounce you out of the saddle. Clamping calves or feet braced against the stirrups make it impossible for your legs to move on and off the horse's sides in rhythm with the gait. These muscles must be relaxed so you can apply leg aids with many degrees of pressure.

It is hard to 'see' the degrees of leg pressures. So let's go to a visual of a whip, an easily observed artificial aid. Novice riders apply their whip only two light tap. Seasoned riders have

at least ten whip pressures available in the vocabulary they are developing with their horse. The first pressure is simply carrying the whip. The second is laying it against the horse's side. The third is just a very light on/off touch with the whip. The fourth is a quicker, crisper touch. The fifth is that light tap most people start with. The sixth is a firmer tap, the seventh is a medium tap and so on up until you get to ten. Ten is a shout, maybe even a bellow. Most riders will never need to use a ten. But understanding the range of

pressures available helps you use your whip aid in a way that is clear to the horse.

Horses naturally understand that pressure escalates when a request is ignored because they do it all the time among themselves. If you watch a group of horses in pasture, you will see them constantly exchanging subtle, small signals like a wrinkled nose or pinned ear or a cocked hind leg to convey a message. If the other horse ignores the initial message, the signals become more noticeable. It is not until the other horse continues to ignore the message that a mare may charge with bared teeth or turn and let loose with both barrels. Similarly, you want to use the least amount of aid pressure, and the least reinforcement of the pressure, that will get a response from the horse. But if the horse does not respond, you need to escalate and reinforce, then release the pressure when you achieve the desired result.

The degree of leg aid pressure the horse responds to will vary from day to day, even minute to minute. Many factors come into play. Does the horse live in a stall or out in a pasture? When was the last time he had turnout? Did he work yesterday or was his last work session four days ago? What is the horse's basic personality and what is the mood of the day? Is it 90 degrees or 20 degrees?

How consistently you applied your leg aids the last time you rode can also affect the horse's response during today's ride. Let's assume that when you last you rode your horse, you bumped with your legs to ask him to move on a little faster and nothing happened. You did not get the response you wanted but this often launch themselves forward from any sort of bump. Although it is hard to convince some riders that a very light, constant leg pressure will calm their reactive horses, a constant pressure does not chase or increase the energy level of a horse the way an active on-off pressure does. A constant pressure, like the pressure of the girth, gradually goes away after the horse first notices it. So, a very soft, steady leg pressure against their sides can be a comfort zone for these horses.

We discussed the feel of following the horse's motion at each gait in previous articles. The application of driving leg pressures that ask the horse to go forward also varies from gait to gait. At the walk, leg pressures alternate from side to side in motion with the swing of the horse's hips. At the rising trot, both legs squeeze simultaneously in the sitting phase and release on the rising phase (if you reverse this, you will be out of rhythm). When rising, you can only drive with your leg aids every other stride. The sitting trot becomes more aerobic because you can now drive at every stride with the swing of your hips matching the swing of the horse's hips. This rhythmic pulsing becomes a 'keeping' leg for the horse's forward momentum.

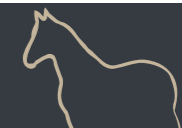
In the three-beat canter, you squeeze with both legs as the horse's back reaches its 'up' phase. As you feel your hips lift, your calves 'lift' the horse then release as the back flattens out at the beginning of the next canter cycle. This lift/release, lift/release leg pressure in rhythm with the horse's motion is often easier for many riders than the trot leg aids.

Again, unless you have developed a feel for the horse's motion and an ability to follow it with your seat, you will not be able to develop the correct feel for applying your legs aids under different circumstances or for understanding whether the horse's response to the aids was correct. Use your horse's feedback and keep experimenting with degrees of pressure and reinforcement to figure out what works for that horse, that day. Your goal is a calm, attentive horse that responds quietly to your aids as soon as you apply them.

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