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DRESSAGE AIDS

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THE THEORY OF THE AIDS

Horses cannot talk (fantasy aside), so how do we let the horse know exactly what we want of him? People, just like horses, can communicate very effectively through body language and other non-spoken communications. As riders and trainers we have invented a simple form of non-verbal communication with the horse. This we call the rider's aids. Put another way, the rider's aids are the language of horsemanship - the language used by the rider to let the horse know what is required of it.

Like all languages there is a basic structure but it is emphasis and timing which lends expression and refinement. It is essential that anyone who wishes to ride well should understand the use, the reasons for and the effect of the aids before he tries to teach them to his horse. The horse must be taught in stages and with complete clarity until it appears that all the rider has to do is think for the horse to obey willingly. A rider or trainer who can combine intelligence with mental and physical control and co-ordination can produce a highly trained, alert and happy horse.

UNDERSTANDING HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE HORSE

In your partnership with your horse, you are responsible for doing the thinking - not him. You cannot expect him to sit back and work out what you are trying to say, you must find a way of making it easy for him to understand. If he does not, no amount of frustration or annoyance on your part will make it any better - only sympathy for how the horse thinks. If we wish to develop a language that we can use to communicate with our horse, an excellent starting point is how horses communicate with each other. It will be much simpler to train our horse to respond to our commands if they are based on something he already understands.

If you have the time and opportunity, find a herd of horses in a field - it doesn't matter how large the herd is - relax, have a cup of coffee, lean on the gate and just watch. You will learn more about the nature of horses and how they communicate quicker and more productively than hours spent in the saddle.

For example, why, as a rider is it so difficult to bring a horse off its forehand? The answer is in front of you. The horse is a grazing animal and spends most of its time with its head down eating grass - especially in this day and age when horses are not presented with predators. They no longer have reason to use themselves, their back legs and powerful quarters, to run away from the hunter.

In the main horses do not communicate with the voice. Ok, they nicker and neigh and even call to each other but the predominant means of communication is body language. Here I can give you another example. If your horse has an itch on his neck, how does he get his neck scratched? He will find another horse in the herd and nibble and bite the other horse's neck exactly where he himself has an itch. The body language is saying, "Scratch my neck there." The other horse will usually submit and scratch your horse's neck (it never knows when it might want its own neck scratched).

What happens when a new horse is introduced to the herd? Initially he will feel very uncomfortable. He will not know where he stands in the pecking order or the ranking and knowing who is boss is very important to a horse. The new horse will circle the herd and occasionally make faces and threatening gestures to the established members. The horses that back down will be ignored but he will find the lead horse, the boss, the horse that will not back down.

I guarantee the lead horse (the lead stallion in the wild) will not say to the new horse, "Now look here Dobbin, you're new here so I think we should have a counselling session." The stallion or lead horse will use violence instead. He will kick and bite the newcomer until he submits. From then on Dobbin will be a happy horse. No responsibility: he knows where his next meal will come from, he knows where his next drink comes from and, in the wild, if Dobbin was a mare - will even know where her next foal will come from. Horses live in a social structure where there is a strict order. They accept that they dominate those below them and that they are dominated in turn by those above them in the social scale. If they are not led, then they will do the leading. That's nature.

THE DISCOMFORT/REWARD SYSTEM

Happily, as riders, we do not have to copy the behaviour of a lead stallion in order to communicate with our horses. Once a horse is accepted into the herd, everyday communication is considerably less violent. Like most creatures (me included!) horses do not enjoy discomfort. If a dominant horse moves too close to another, the subordinate horse feels uncomfortable and simply moves away. Once it has moved it feels comfortable again - it's reward for submitting.

In the same way, from the earliest stages of its training, the horse will move away from the mild discomfort of a rider's leg pushing at his side. When your horse yields and responds to this pressure or goes forward, you must remove the pressure and that will be the reward. Easy! When you pull or take the reins, the horse will obviously feel discomfort in his mouth. He will learn that if he responds in a certain way, that pressure will be taken away. He will also learn, hopefully, that if he responds to these discomforts often enough and in the same way, they occur much more subtly and the rewards are in plentiful supply. You should be aiming for a time when the lightest of touches on the horse's side with your leg or a shift of your position in the saddle should produce a response. You have succeeded in finding a method of communicating your commands to the horse.

What happens, though, when our subordinate horse does not move away from the dominant one walking towards it? The dominant horse will make gestures that insist or threaten - possibly even chase or bite the other to remind him of the pecking order. Equally, as riders we must back up our aids, our body language, to insist that the horse responds and to underline our power of leadership should he choose to ignore or question it (but only once he understands the basic language). Then we must utilise a method of increasing the horse's discomfort to encourage him to respond.

This is where the tricky subject comes in about whips, spurs and the like. Such things have a definite place in training and riding your horse but they can be abused dreadfully. Doing so is futile in communicating with your horse and shows a complete lack of understanding on the part of the person holding the whip or wearing the spurs if they think that they will help! You can only achieve what you wish if such aids are used correctly and based on an understanding of what you are doing. I will deal with this important topic shortly when we look at what aids are available to the rider and how to apply them in practice.

I will finish the Theory of the Aids with a question and story that made me realise what the aids were all about.

Q: What is the aid to bring a horse from full gallop to halt?

A: Just sit and touch your horse's side, on his right flank just behind the saddle! I'll explain...



Some years ago I was lucky enough to be friendly with a young lady whose father was extremely wealthy. He owned thousands of acres of land in Kent and he had, just for a hobby, a mile and half gallops in a dead straight line though some of his fields. Because I was a friend of the family I was allowed to use the land to ride over, to hack, including the gallops.

I remember it was an extremely hot summer that year and when I rode out over my friend's land I wore breeches and boots but just a tee-shirt on top. In those days I smoked but had nowhere to keep my cigarettes and lighter. So, I put a small pouch on the two metal rings just at the back of the saddle. Every time I wanted to smoke I stopped my horse, reached into the pouch, got out my cigarettes and lighter and had a smoke. By the end of the summer I could gallop full pelt (very fast) down the gallops and all I had to do to stop DARK KHAN (my horse) was to touch the pouch and he would come to a full halt. He had learned through that summer that when I went for that pouch he was rewarded by a rest and perhaps a graze. I had taught DARK KHAN, albeit by mistake and circumstance, a new aid!

The moral of this story? It's up to you, the rider to teach your horse the aids. They are cause and effect. Don't forget, your horse has not read the same books as you. You are his only teacher and you must teach your horse with effective aids.

“we must back up our aids, our body language, to insist that the horse responds and to underline our power of leadership.”

RIDERS AIDS

An aid is the signal or means by which a rider conveys his or her wishes to his horse. It refers to any action by the rider which results in physical or mental communication between horse and rider. These are divided into two parts: -

Natural Aids - The rider's legs, hands, seat and back, balance and voice.

Artificial Aids – Whips, spurs and any form of strap, rope or gadget (other than the reins) which control or position the horse with or without a rider. Examples might be standing or running martingales, draw or running reins. Only the whip and spur have a place in classical dressage, however, gadgets on rare occasions could be the only solution to a severe or even a dangerous problem and will be discussed in future articles.

NATURAL AIDS

The Legs

The major influences are to

1. Create forward movement
2. Activate the hindquarters
3. Indicate direction
4. Influence length and bend

Leg on the girth - Identical use of the Legs

The effect of using both legs on the girth is to encourage the horse to move forward. When first handled, any horse will react to human contact by withdrawing from it. As flight is their natural defence, when first mounted and feeling the legs of the rider against the rib cage, the reaction is to move forward and away from the pressure. This is the basis of all training. By constant repetition and training, the slightest pressure with the inside of the rider's leg will result in the horse moving forward (off the leg).

INDIVIDUAL USE OF THE LEGS

Once this reaction of moving forward is established the application of either of the rider's legs by the girth, or slightly behind the girth, will encourage the horse to move the hind leg on that side forward. Since it will also be instinctive for the horse to try to yield to the pressure on the ribs it will also tend to bring the leg behind the girth forward and slightly under the weight of the body before turning the hindquarters away from the pressure. This effect is used to move the horse laterally (sideways).

Applying the Leg Aids

1. Applied with changing pressure and not a constant squeeze
2. Not used in time with the horse's stride as the constant kicking /urging forward will make your horse dead to the leg/ignore the leg and thereby the driving forward/creating impulsion effect will be lost
3. Applied as lightly as possible, since heavy thumping or kicking with the legs, heels and spurs, will also cause the horse to become dead to the leg, will learn to ignore the leg and will stop going freely forward.

THE HANDS

The major influences are to;

1. Contain the impulsion created by the rider's legs and seat
2. Control the speed (the tempo of the gait)
3. To ask for bend in the neck
4. To balance

The hands are only supplementary and complementary to the seat and leg aids. Except for the very young horse where the hands and reins are used to guide and lead.

Applying the Hand Aids

Through the reins and the bit the hands are a direct connection to the horse's brain and their use has a paramount effect on its mental and physical attitude. To be most effective the hands should:

1. Never pull backwards
2. Remain still in relation to the movements of the horse and entirely independent of the action of any other part of the riders body (independent hands)
3. Maintain a consistent, light, sympathetic but elastic contact with the bit (except when riding on a loose rein). The horse loses his sense of security and communication with the rider if the rein contact is inconsistent.

THE VOICE

The voice by its tone can encourage, correct, soothe or reward. It is also used to give commands, particularly on the lunge and with a young horse when it is first ridden. The horse learns that the sharp quick commands 'walk-on,' 'trot,' and 'canter' mean to go forward and low and drawn-out 'woah,' 'waalk,' and 'teerrot' mean to reduce the pace.

ARTIFICIAL AIDS

I have already covered some of the theory of using whips and spurs in 'The Theory of Aids' but I will expand a little in this chapter. The first things to remember are these:

- The whip or spur must never be used in anger or frustration.
- They must never be used to punish a horse that has misunderstood the lesson or what is being asked of him.
- The whip must never be used as a substitute for bad riding.
- If they are causing extreme tension or fear in your horse, you are misusing them or they have been misused in the past.
- If you use these aids correctly, you will hardly ever have to use them at all.

- If you ever have to explain their use to a child, make sure the parents are there and that they understand the lesson.
- They are only used to back up your leg - not your hands or your balance or lack of intelligence!

THE WHIP

The whip helps to reinforce the leg aids should they prove insufficient.

Application

When the whip is not in use, carry the whip across either thigh, mid way between knee and hip. It will help you to control the whip if you hold the whip with your thumb up the shank or handle. It should be used behind the leg to emphasise the aid or to ask for more attention.

Holding the schooling whip – the schooling whip is used for schooling on the flat. It should be between 0.9 metres (3ft) and 1.2 metres (4ft) so that it is long enough to apply without taking the hand off the rein. The wrist and forearm is flicked to result in a tickle or a tap whenever required, behind the rider's leg. The strike must be behind the riders' leg so that your horse can associate the whip and leg. The shorter whip, used for jumping, must not exceed 75cms (30ins). The whip hand should be taken off the rein and both reins held in one hand and the whip applied behind the leg. The rider should practice this action and the ability to change whip hands.

THE SPURS

Like the whip the spurs help to reinforce the leg aids should they prove insufficient.

Application

When used, the spurs should only brush the skin. Spurs are a refinement of the aids and should not be used as a sole means of creating impulsion. Consequently, the rider must be able to apply his legs without the spurs touching the horse.

Spurs are rarely used in the early training of a horse and are not suitable for use by a novice rider.

The type of spur you use must be personal preference. I prefer those with about a 1 inch shank and a smooth rowel that can just roll up the horse's side and not dig in. Spurs with sharp toothed rowel or pointed shanks have no place in classical dressage so will not be discussed.

Remember - the artificial aids are ONLY brought into action if the legs are not effective.

About the author:

Roger Taylor's specialty has always been dressage and training horses for all disciplines with balance, subtleness and obedience as the starting point for any successful horse and rider combination. Only in recent years has this way of riding been recognised by the general equine public and has been labelled Classical. Roger has studied the works of the classical masters and applies this knowledge in his everyday training. He has ridden and studied in Germany, Spain and Portugal.