

Developing a Connected PARTNERSHIP

WITH YOUR TRAIL HORSE



part two by **PEGGY CUMMINGS**

Trail Blazer is proud to introduce an exclusive new column that will help you improve your balance, ease and lightness in the saddle—and transform your trail ride into a journey of pure joy! Readers are invited to submit photos for consideration for use in the column, which will appear in both Trail Blazer Magazine and on TrailtownUSA.com. Please send your high-res jpgs to editor@trailblazermagazine.us

Posture: The Pivotal Factor

When you are “live weight” for your horse, every joint and bone in the horse’s body has freedom to move. If you have contact on a rein or lead line the horse will feel an elastic connection supporting and going with him as he is moving. Your joints aren’t stiff nor is your upper body falling behind the motion or forcing the motion.

When you are “dead weight” for your horse, your horse’s bones and joints don’t have freedom to move. If you arch or slump your back while you are riding or leading with contact on the rein or line, the horse will feel like you are pulling. There is no give and take, oscillations or “buoy” in your upper body; you are compressing and shutting down the elasticity available.

In this second in a series, Peggy’s commentaries reveal how we can be dead or live weight for our trail horses and how we can solve the “posture problem”.

The single biggest gift we can give our horses is becoming “live weight”—whether on the ground or in the saddle.

I often hear this: If a person does not weigh much, the horse can carry him/her. It is not so much the rider’s weight but how the weight is utilized that makes the difference. I have chosen two young people and one adult for examples in this commentary. The young people, Rider #1 and Rider #2, are noticeably lighter and smaller in stature than Rider #3, who is an adult.

What is the pivotal factor that can make the difference in the way the horses are moving? The rider’s posture. Does your skeleton (your bones and joints) move *with* the horse’s motion or not?

Imagine this: You are holding a balloon out the window of a car while sitting in the passenger seat. The car is at a standstill and you can barely feel the balloon on the end of the string. The car is then put into gear, and as it slowly begins moving forward you feel the balloon’s weight in your hand, which reminds you to hang on to the string.

The balloon suddenly feels much heavier because the force of the car moving forward applies pressure—force of gravity (G forces) on the balloon—the balloon became a DRAG! And it made you

react by “getting braced”, hanging on with tightness to the string. This is exactly what happens to the rider’s body if their skeleton is bracing against the forward motion of the horse.

Rider One

This young boy is showing what I describe as a “pocket-sitter” posture. The rider’s pelvis is tipped backwards. Men more commonly exhibit this. This posture is dead weight on a horse and creates a lot of heaviness and drag. The rider is always behind the motion. Notice the brace in the left front leg of the horse. Also the hind legs cannot “come through”; that is, engage and come under the horse’s body in order to push effectively. The rider is also holding on to the front of the saddle with a bent wrist, which adds a lot of torque and drag to his body. In order to counteract this force, the feet have to push forward in the stirrups.

Solution: The rider has to find a way of better alignment during movement and learn how to bend at the hip joint instead of curving the lower back. Experiment with the following: Stand in front of a chair and

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going hollow and tight during movement. The effect on the horse is not only drag but also places a lot of concussion on the front legs. This rider is using the reins to help counterbalance her body and has to tighten her legs and back to maintain herself. Notice that the horse is braced at the base of the neck and in the front feet, and the hind legs cannot come under.

Solution:

The same exercise as above: Find the position of bending at the hips, only this time the lower back has to soften and feel straighter and fuller. The knees have to be wide. Find the tiniest movement in

your bones as if your legs wanted to walk backwards towards the chair. In this case this is only possible with less tension in the back and legs and more bend in the joints. Once in the saddle the hand can hold the front of the saddle with a straight wrist and no gripping.

Both of these riders are affecting the horse's stride quite significantly because of the way they are using their bodies. This is hard work for both horse and rider.

Find the Wiggle

You can practice finding the minute movement at the walk, trot and canter. When you can initiate movement and change the movement of your bones while riding without it appearing that you are doing much of anything you will be on your way to connecting with your horse in movement and able to override the tendency to brace and grip with movement. I call this finding the wiggle in your legs. It is imperceptible to someone watching but your horse will notice the difference.

Rider Three

As you look at these three pictures what strikes you when you come to this one? Does the overall impression appear smoother and softer? This rider is moving with her horse! This does not mean that a rider can maintain this synchronicity every step of the way. The goal should be to find this freedom at least 90% of the time. Her head, hips, and feet are in alignment, and



RIDER TWO

place your hands in front of your hip joints (instead of your hips); that is, in the crease at the top of your leg.

Begin the action of sitting down, and let your knees widen. At this point your upper body will be slightly forward and you should feel no strain in your back or legs. The back should feel flat if you move your arm up and down your lower back. Pretend that your legs want to slide back and touch the edge of the chair, which will trigger a tiny movement of "MOON WALK" inside your shoes.

If you attempt to do this movement with your back rounded, notice that the movement is more difficult. Back in the saddle: hold the front of the saddle by curling your fingers on the pommel without bending the wrist and tightening your hand. Assume the position that you did in front of the chair and find the ease of the tiny movement of your bones doing that "MOON WALK" inside your legs. Your legs have to be under your hips and your knees have to feel open in order to find ease in that movement. Notice that when you have found the ease in the movement, you can support yourself by holding the saddle without gripping.

Rider Two

This rider is exhibiting what I refer to as an "arched equitator" posture. This means that the rider's pelvis is tipped forward and the lower back is

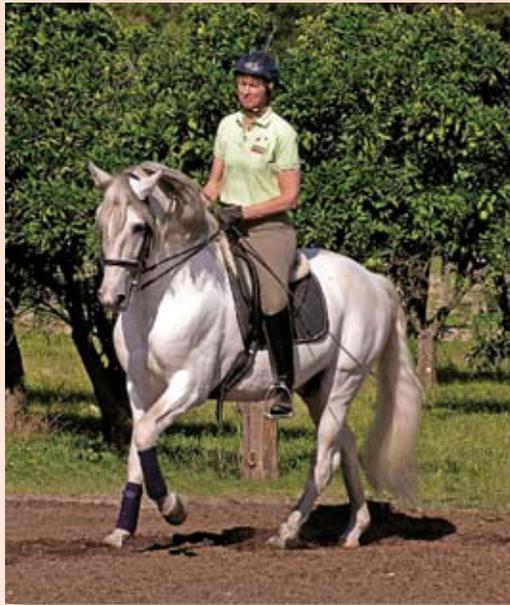


RIDER THREE

the angles of the elbow, knee and ankle are well balanced. Her wrists are straight so the movement of the horse can come up and through her body to the horse's mouth and back to build a continuous cycle of rebalancing and reciprocity.

There is softness in the reins and straightness from bit to elbow. Notice how this rider has a nice bend in the knee, and her knees are wide because her legs are not gripping. This allows her bones and joints to be shock absorbers, evident in the stride of the horse. The horse is extending (telescoping) his neck and his nose is extended and parallel to the extended front foot. The hind legs are coming through from behind.

There is a nice bend in the hocks; there is a balance and dynamic movement between the front and rear legs. The right hind and left forelegs are in synch. Both horse and rider are mirroring each other. This rider is giving her horse the biggest give of "live weight" in this photo.



Peggy Cummings aboard Liberale, a 14-year-old Lusitano stallion. Photo by Melanie Powell (www.shybucketstudios.com)

Peggy Cummings is the creator and founder of Connected Riding and Connected Groundwork, an approach to riding and handling horses that gives both horse and human more freedom, confidence and lightness in any situation. For further information, visit Peggy at www.connectedriding.com



Photos courtesy of
Debbie Hopper

www.DebbieHopperPhotography.com

What the Horse Wants from The Rider

The horse wants the rider's body to move with him and influence him through rhythm and movement—not squeezing, holding and bracing. The rider's bones and joints have to be free to move and be in movement in order to appear quiet. The only way that this is possible is for the rider to have neutral posture. This is the place where your pelvis is in a natural position in order for movement and correct mechanics to take place. It is the only place where you have independent motion of your limbs, and your joints absorb the force of movement. This means that the movement of the horse is going through your body. Your core muscles also activate automatically to stabilize the body. This is where you achieve more performance with less effort.

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