Becoming Masters of Movement With Connected Riding®

Peggy Cummings is a gifted horsewoman and clinician who generously shares her knowledge with the absolute conviction that her method, inspired by pilgrims of body awareness and movement, including Sally Swift, Linda Tellington-Jones, Moshé Feldenkais, M. Alexander, and the martial arts, teaches horses and riders how to move in synchrony.

By Peggy Cummings

Why is it that most riders are taught to sit up and sit still on a moving horse? Riders are encouraged to push, squeeze, and drive with their bodies as they seek the illusive mysteries of riding only true riding masters achieve. However, many times these methods lead to inconsistent performance, bridle lameness, injuries and discomfort in both horse and rider due to the effects of bracing and compression.

We all want to be effective in communicating with our horses and have a better relationship with them. By learning how to be "masters of movement" with our own bodies, we can support our horses in finding ease of movement for better performance and longevity.

In Connected Riding, riders learn how to synchronize with the movement of their horses by addressing two fundamental questions:

- *How do my riding habits affect my horse's movement?*
- *What is key to connecting to my horse's movement?*

It is optimal for horses to move from their hindquarters when under saddle. The impulsion generated from the hindquarters should be allowed to travel forward through a swinging back, to the shoulders, neck, poll, and mouth, where the energy is received through the reins. To create this "throughness" of energy, the horse's body is shifting weight from back to front, side to side, and up and down. What happens to the horse's movement when the weight of a rider's body is added?

As riders, we have "worked hard" by contradicting the laws of physics, and unconsciously undermining the principles of motion by learning to brace against the movement of the horse to find our balance. These riding habits actually inhibit the very things we seek as riders – connection, lightness, ease, and being with our horse.

Our bodies are assembled with bones, held together by joints, and strung together with ligaments and muscles. Bodies in alignment move with a minimum of effort. When muscles are braced with tension, our joints are stiff, and our bones cannot move with ease. The muscles work harder to create movement.

If, for example, the rider squeezes her knees on the sides of the saddle, this blocks free movement of the knee joints and inhibits movement in all of the corresponding joints – hips, ankles, and other joints throughout the body. Such "blockage," caused by bracing or compression in the rider's body, is immediately and consequently transferred to the horse's movement. The horse receives restriction in the rider's body as dead weight, which puts an additional load on the horse's back and joints. "As above, so below" is the principle of comparable parts; what happens in the rider's body has a corresponding impact on the horse's body. This principle is the keystone of *Connected Riding*. As riders learn to continually unlock and sustain the freedom of movement in their own bodies, they consequently free up and maintain the flow of movement in their horses' bodies.

The correct placement of the rider's seatbones in the saddle is the foundation to achieve the cycle of freedom in movement.

From years of research and experimentation, I have come to know that a Neutral Pelvis* position, one in which the hips are free to move independently, and core muscles automatically rebalance the rider's upper body in movement, takes the work out of balance in motion. Neutral pelvis is the only posture where the rider's extremities do not have to "hold on" to find balance. Once a rider's body is able to buoy and rebalance freely each stride, the horse is carrying the rider as live weight, allowing him to engage his hindquarters and lift his back without restriction.

If, however, riders are either Arched or Slumped* in their riding posture, they are dead weight on the horse and unable to balance in motion. An arched or slumped riding posture compresses movement in the rider's spine and locks the joints of the pelvis. This creates a downward cycle of resistance, compression, and restricted movement in both horse and rider, where mechanical and compressive aids are used to handle evasions and "fix" the issues. Horse and rider become stiffer, and ease and enjoyment get lost.

Connected Riding enables the horse to move and simply follows the laws of Newton: "In the absence of external forces, all bodies continue in their state of repose or movement, rectilinear and uniform, unless a force acts upon it and forces it to change such a state. For each action there is an equal an opposite reaction, as long as it keeps in balance."

If the force we undertake with our own body goes against the movement of the horse, we block the horse's movement. Our objective is to learn to ride with our bones and joints, free to be in constant movement. Riding becomes effortless and we appear to become one with our horse. A dynamic, free-moving posture is the key to the mystery in our riding. It is the difference between learning a rote method with mechanical cues, or riding in harmony with the biomechanics of the horse. This promotes safety, welfare and longevity for both horse and rider. We can each become conscious of how our movement affects the horse, and how we all have unconscious ways of using ourselves that block free movement in horse and rider. With *Connected Riding* we become the change that makes the difference!

Figure 1

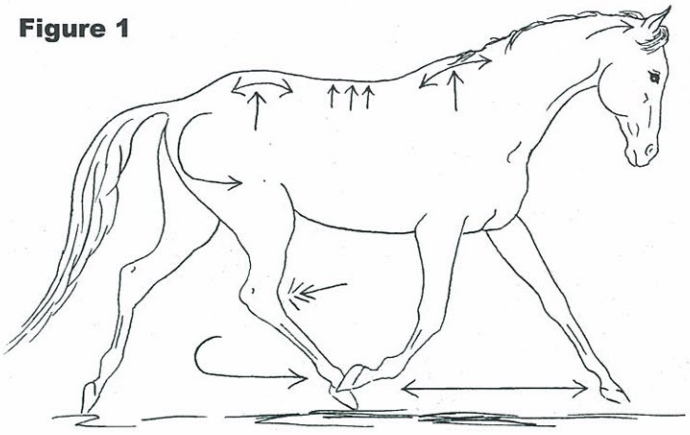

Figure 1: The correct cycle of movement

The engagement of the hindquarters, the rounding of the back, the lifting of the withers and consequent free movement of the shoulders, and telescoping of the horse's head and neck down and forward, are all a consequence of the release of the topline and engagement of particular muscle sets of the horse. This creates the posture where the horse has the most freedom in his movement, while carrying the weight of the rider.

Figure 2

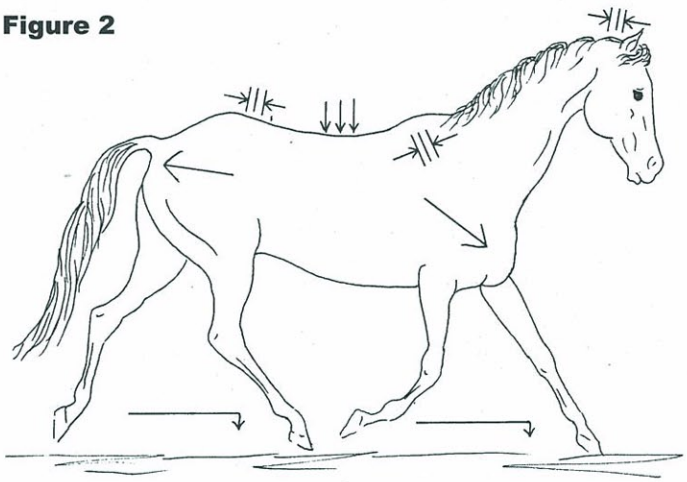

Figure 2: The movement inhibited by compression

At a quick glance this horse may seem to be the same one as in figure 1, but it is actually falling on the forehand.

This picture illustrates a horse with a tightened topline. The hindquarters are not engaged, the back is hollow, the withers are dropped, and the neck is inverted. This posture results in lack of free movement and compresses the horse's spine.

Figures 1 and 2 show free movement of the horse, and movement inhibited by compression. In order for the horse to be able to use its hindquarters and its back freely and naturally, it must be able to move with the rider's weight, and the rider must be aware of the use of his or her own body.

These figures are drawings by Nancy Camp from the book Connected Riding: An Introduction by Peggy Cummings.
*See Connected Riding: An Introduction - Rider quiz

Photo 1

Photo 2

Before and After Photos

Photo 1: Demo dressage rider in Girona, Spain asking his horse through in his habitual way.

Photo 2: Change of body use. Rider was released in his body and commented that he had not ever felt his horse this way, and the horse felt forward and not lazy at all.

Peggy Cummings was raised in El Salvador, Central America, and moved to United States to attend a private high school with an equestrian program where she set foot on her path as a horsewoman. As with many riders, by the age of 35, Peggy realized that the way she was riding was detrimental to her health as she was being counselled by a doctor to stop riding. She suffered from back and joint pain, and if she had not come up with a solution, she would have quit riding altogether. It was then when she searched for a way to feel again the joy of riding that she enjoyed during her childhood when she rode in El Salvador.

To complement her riding she trained with riding masters from Europe, then closely mentored with Sally Swift of Centered Riding® whose work is also based upon the development of body consciousness. Linda Tellington-Jones, creator of the TTEAM and the TTouches helped Peggy learn the concept that a horse can learn to think instead of react and override the instinctual reactions of flight, fight, freeze, faint and fiddling of horse and rider as a whole. She studied the Alexander and Feldenkrais methods, whose purpose is to move the body with the minimum effort and maximum efficiency. These influences helped Peggy to consolidate her own method, Connected Riding®. She conquered her own pains as an adult rider and went back to riding with ease, as she did when she was a child. More information at www.peggycummings.com