

Developing a Connected PARTNERSHIP

WITH YOUR TRAIL HORSE



part five by PEGGY CUMMINGS | photos by DEBBIE HOPPER

Are you looking to improve your balance, ease and lightness in the saddle, making the ride smoother for both you and your horse? Follow Peggy Cummings each month as she provides insights and commentary into the balance and movement of trail riders and their mounts. We invite you to submit photos for consideration for use in the column, which will appear in both *Trail Blazer* magazine and on www.trailtownUSA.com. Send your photos to Editor@trailblazermagazine.us

This month I have chosen to look at two riders on gaited horses. I consider gaited horses to cover ground like ATVs. I have ridden gaited horses up in the mountains on steep and narrow terrain and felt very safe. I know my trusted walk-trot horse would not have performed as well on that kind of terrain. I have also ridden some wonderful mustangs and other grade horses and mules that were extremely surefooted and trustworthy on a trail and when I was lost could find their way home. There is a smoother feeling sitting on a gaited horse. They feel as if they are covering the ground while rolling over it rather than stepping over it.

Improve Your Balance and Posture Riding Gaited Horses

Are you supporting the horse's gait or using it up? Are you sitting on and with your horse in motion or just letting the horse carry you along?

I would love to be a little voice in your ear saying: *The more attention you pay to releasing the tension in your body and getting in synch with your horse the better your ride will be!* Sound simple? It is! And yet, you need to know *what* to focus on and the difference between good riding and being a "drag" to your horse. Paying attention to how you use your body initially takes focus and then becomes part of what you do. It's as simple as putting the lid on a jar, turning the tap off, and putting the cap on the toothpaste tube! This means incorporating a habit that is useful. On a horse this helps you be safer, and results in less wear and tear on both your body and the horse's body.

A good rider has a better balance and gets less in the way of her horse. This means being aware of your posture and continuously releasing any tension or bracing. You'll be more often in alignment and your bones and joints can move freely as the horse is moving.

A rider that is a drag on her horse is in the way of the horse performing to his potential. This rider is out of alignment more often than not and is not aware of this most of the time, or they do not know how to change it. The bones and joints in this rider do not move freely as the horse is moving so it sets up a dead weight drag on the horse's back.

HOW DOES YOUR HORSE TRAVEL?

Initially consider the horse's way of going. Whether or not you are riding a gaited horse, ask yourself this question: *Does my horse travel more often in a "base up" or "base down" posture?* As I wrote in the May issue, a horse's base and thoracic sling have to go up and down every stride; in other words, they must have

freedom of movement to move efficiently and have less wear and tear on their body. A horse who is heavy on the forehand travels with his base down, limiting the functional ability of the thoracic sling while increasing stress and strain everywhere else. A rider that is in balance and sitting with her horse in motion can achieve and maintain "base up" in a horse more often.

The horse of a rider who is out of alignment will be more "base down" during the ride. The gait of a horse is supported when he can move with his base up and a rider in alignment. The gait of a horse is used up when the horse travels with his base down and the rider is out of alignment.

Unfortunately because gaited horses are usually more comfortable to sit on, their ability to gait and be smooth is taken for granted. Also in the gaited horse world as in other disciplines erroneous ways are taught to achieve gait and movement. One of these is to sit back on your pockets and push your heels down, which sends the foot forward, and hold the horse with your hands as you push the horse forward with your seat or squeeze him forward with your legs. Another way is to sit up, brace your lower back, hold the horse with the hands and drive him forward. The legs will be slightly forward with push down

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RIDER TWO

Photo A

"There is no such thing as being in balance all the time. To improve performance the rider's body awareness and posture needs to change. The idea of readjusting your position is a necessity!"

into the heels. Neither of these ways creates efficient movement and they keep a horse on the forehand with his base down.

Any horse in order to move efficiently has to be able to reach a *neutral* posture as he begins to be ridden. That is, he has been taught how to rebalance off the forehand and distribute the weight evenly on four feet with a fairly level head and neck that is not retracting or being pulled on during movement. The topline is released and not holding tension. As a horse progresses in training he needs to be taught to activate his underline (abdominal muscles). When the abdominals contract, the topline (nuchal and dorsal ligaments running along the spine) can stretch. This cycle begins with the "telescoping" of the horse's neck and a lifting of the base, raising the back and pushing from the hindquarters.

As we look at two gaited riders this month and read my commentary, the contrast between them should become evident. If you as a reader and rider do not see the difference in a photo, you cannot make a change in yourself, let alone your horse.

RIDER ONE

This horse is traveling head high with his neck inverted and his base down. Even though some horse's lower necks are set quite low, traveling this way puts undue stress on the entire musculoskeletal system over time. With correct training, horses will not travel in this way.

Sitting on this horse is not as smooth as it is on one whose neck is able to "telescope" and the base able to come up. This horse looks as if the bottom part of his neck is pushing down and out and his crest is dropping, even though his head is high. When a horse telescopes it looks as if the bottom part of the neck begins to make an arc and the crest and topline does the same. Horses have to be able to distribute their weight over all four feet and the base has to move up and down with every stride so that the body can rebalance and shift weight dynamically.

What is great about this rider is that she is not behind the vertical, as her head is above



RIDER TWO

Photo B

her hips. Think of the vertical as 12 noon, behind the vertical is 1 or 2 minutes behind 12 and ahead of the vertical is 1 or 2 minutes after 12. In fact, she is just a tad *ahead* of the vertical, which at this particular moment is more favorable than behind. Her elbows are nicely bent at her side, and she has a nice connection on the rein. Unfortunately her feet are in front of her, causing her to brace through the legs, thus preventing independent motion of the hips. This keeps the horse's base down, and keeps him on the forehand with his head high. The horse's back cannot come up, which further limits his ability to rebalance himself and carry weight efficiently.

RIDER TWO

This horse is using his head and neck more efficiently, especially in the second photo. I believe it is important for you to see the process of improvement in the head and neck. In photo 2a, the horse has more tension through his front legs, which sends tension all the way up to his head. The horse picked up some speed and the rider braced so it took away from performance. In the second photo (2b) the pace was more regulated and the rider's legs are underneath him and the neck is telescoping and has less tension. I wanted you to see both photos as Rider 1 and Rider 2a have the same footfall; 2b shows a different footfall.

There is a better alignment in this rider's body. In photo 2b the rider is "on the verti-

cal": his head is on top of his hips and his feet are under his hips, which puts him in neutral posture. It is nice to see a man riding with a such a nice, long leg. It is often easier for a man's leg to hang down than a woman's, as the shape of the pelvis is different.

As with Rider #1, any bracing in the stirrups prevents independent motion of the hips. When riding with one hand, be sure to change the rotation in your body often (see sidebar, "Terms of Engagement," p.26). This rider is holding the reins in the right hand so the upper body is slightly rotated left. He has a comfortable contact with the horse.

SOLUTIONS

There is no such thing as being in balance all the time. To improve performance the rider's body awareness and posture needs to change. The idea of readjusting your position is a necessity. When tension builds, men need to readjust their seat bones in the saddle by scooting a sixteenth of an inch *backward*. Women need to scoot a sixteenth of an inch *forward*. The goal is to sit on the middle of your seat bones, the most stable place to sit. This allows your hips to have independent movement and all your bones and joints to have freedom to move as well.

If you have read my previous columns in this series, you may notice some things bear repeating. Because the solution for tension and bracing is movement, the movement I am

continued next page

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Terms of Engagement

“Combing” the reins is an exercise where the reins are held in one hand as the other hand reaches forward and reaches up and “combs” down towards the other hand. The index and middle fingers are in between the reins as you maintain a soft bend in the elbow. As the hand that combs down reaches the other hand, the first hand that held the reins releases them and reaches forward and combs down in a continuous motion that gives a steady oscillating rhythm to the horse. This encourages the horse to reach into contact and “telescope” his neck forward and down, thereby encouraging the base to come up. The combing action also helps the rider break up tension and holding.

Rotating your body is a helpful way to release tension in horse and rider. Imagine a shelf in front of your hands holding a large clock laying flat on the table. When you look at 12 o’clock you are facing forward. Rotate your upper body towards 10 for about three or four strides. Then rotate back to the middle and proceed in the other direction towards 2 and then back through the middle and so on. Changing rotation in this way helps get a horse off the forehand. Remember to stay soft in the

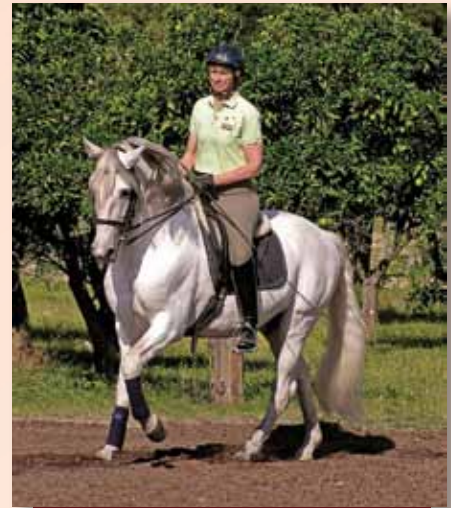
lower back and “think wide” through the knees to resist squeezing with the thighs. The stirrup needs to be behind the ball of the foot, which is easy in Western and endurance saddles.

“Thinking wide through the knees” is a way of overriding the tendency to squeeze with the thighs and push the heels down. It is the best way to stay securely in the saddle when a horse bolts or shies. When your thighs let go and “think” open the calf lightly rests on the horse’s side, and with your foot level in the stirrup the action during sudden movement is incredibly grounding. This is not a big visible change. It is more about changing the orientation of your legs, allowing all the bones and joints from your hips to your feet to move and provide shock absorption and stability.

“Telescoping” is a desirable posture in which the horse lets go at the poll and extends his neck out and forward from the base as it moves upward with each stride. In contrast, when a horse goes behind the bridle or “sucks back,” the base of the neck is down, the neck contracts and compresses and movement in the poll is constricted.

suggesting is subtle. To override the tendency of pushing the heels down and pushing the foot forward you have to do a minute motion during movement of sliding your heel to the back of your boot as if you were doing a microscopic movement of Michael Jackson’s “Moonwalk.” Also, imagine that you are breathing and expanding your rib cage as you are riding as if you were filling a balloon in that area especially in your lower back.

When you have a horse that inverts the head and neck, “comb” the reins (see sidebar, “Terms of Engagement,” above) and slowly change your body’s rotation. This is also a great to do periodically for someone who rides with one hand. The goal is to break up the tendency of the body to get static and thus behind the motion of the horse, which initiates bracing and a downward spiraling cycle of tension that breeds exhaustion and uses up not only your



Peggy Cummings aboard Libérale, 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 her website: www.connectedriding.com

body but the horse’s body.

Gaited horses are easy to sit on and an erroneous assumption can be made that they will always gait easily and consistently. When these horses travel on the forehand over hill and dale the gait can break down and become lateral (“pacey”). They also need support and maintenance from you. The best prevention while you are out there having fun is to gain the ability to release tension in your own body. Experiment with these different suggestions and know that they are in your awareness and sensation for you to use as needed.



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- Most of these things will allow the horse to let go of defenses such as: buddy sour, spooking and other vices

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