

# Developing a Connected PARTNERSHIP

WITH YOUR TRAIL HORSE



introduction by **BOBBIE LIEBERMAN** commentary 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](mailto:editor@trailblazermagazine.us)

# A Lifetime of Learning

Does your trail horse exhibit any of the following?

- Tripping or stumbling
- Won't go through water
- Unsteady downhill
- Wants to be competitive with other horses
- Bucks when held back
- Difficult to control at the start of a ride
- Unexplained lameness

What may seem like "behavioral" issues are actually, in most cases, rider-induced. Through monthly photo tutorials with real riders and real horses on the trail, you will learn how to use your body with less effort, to be in synch with your horse in motion so your horse can carry you with more ease and less fatigue.

Peggy Cummings is a transformer—one who changes how people ride, feel in their bodies and perceive their horses and life in general. She is an innovator and creator of exercises designed to help horse and human dance together... easily, efficiently and effectively. She is a master rider and teacher and has the same passion and perseverance for her mission as she did when she began teaching over 40 years ago.

She now "knows for sure" that promoting freedom of movement and reciprocity through an elastic connection between horse and rider creates the magic of being "in synch." It's the memory so many people have of being on a horse as a child. With Connected Riding, Cummings has found a way to help anyone recapture that feeling again.

Peggy has worked with many endurance and trail riders through the years, helping them discover riding with ease and lightness. To demonstrate how well her methods work, she entered and won an 80-mile endurance ride—and won Best Condition! Her methods are proof positive there is an easier and more efficient way to "ride the miles" for better outcomes.

Even as a high school student, Peggy Cummings knew—experientially and intuitively—that something was keeping the school horses she rode and worked with from expressing their innate curiosity, trust and freedom of motion. Although she often heard the words "lightness and ease" from her instructors and in classical texts, and had the opportunity to ride high-level horses, she saw that many horses were shut down and lifeless, going about their work in a mechanical, stiff way.

Helping her first horse King regain his trust, playfulness and self-carriage became the foundation of a lifetime of dedication to helping horses and riders achieve freedom from bracing patterns, tension, and shut-down movement that so often dampens the joy that attracts us to horses in the first place.

As she began traveling and teaching clinics, Peggy was beginning to chart her own path, teaching her students to ride with more awareness, lightness and softness in their bodies. Her mentors, Sally Swift and Linda Tellington-Jones, further helped Cummings shift the riding paradigm from "cramming and jamming" to a new model of horsemanship—one that honors horses out of knowledge and balance rather than fear or force.

Today in clinics worldwide and through her Web site and books, Peggy helps countless students discover their own "aha" moments, helping horses and riders get "unstuck", regain their elasticity, and learn what it's like to move without bracing patterns, compression and counterbalancing.

Thirty years after Peggy learned how to influence her horse King without even sitting on him, Connected Groundwork and Connected Riding became her answers to this universal riding dilemma. In this exclusive new column, Peggy helps horses and their riders find balance, ease and lightness on the trail and on the ground. Observing horses and riders in motion through Peggy's eyes will change the way you see and feel your horse and will improve how he moves, responds and goes about his work.

"The single biggest gift we can give our horses is becoming 'live weight', whether on the ground or in the saddle," says Peggy. "When we can learn to rebalance our bodies in motion while remaining upright over ourselves with our joints moving freely without bracing or clamping on the horse, we can truly be in synch with his motion. The same is true on the ground when we are doing groundwork exercises or working horses on a line. They can feel the difference if we're braced against or moving with their motion.

continued next page



Peggy Cummings aboard Liberale, a 14-year-old Lusitano stallion. Photo by Melanie Powell ([www.shybackstudios.com](http://www.shybackstudios.com))



photo by John Nowell | Remuda Photography

## Rider One

This horse and rider on an endurance ride caught my eye as they appear to be a good team. There is a softness and a lightness in their appearance. Notice that the horse's neck is telescoped, extending his neck in a smooth arc.

A horse has to be able to telescope the neck in order to use his back, stretch his topline and push from the hindquarters. This allows him to be more efficient in his movement, balanced in his body and independent in his limbs. The expansion throughout the spine during movement allows for accordion-like movement between the vertebrae and enhances freedom of movement, lightness and ability to recover.

Therefore, a horse that is moving efficiently has his weight distributed on all four feet and is better able to carry weight and rebalance with ease. The stride of such a horse lengthens and his fitness and recovery improves. A horse that retracts his head and neck while moving, as we will see in photo #2, is not efficient in his movement and remains on the forehand. This causes a compression in his body and a lot of concussion to the legs, less ability to recover and difficulty in carrying weight.

The horse's ears are forward and she has a pleasant look in her eye. The horse is accepting the bit nicely. The horse's front feet are extending in a natural arc without bracing. Bracing is what the rider does when her body

is stiff and not aligned. As the horse moves, the rider tightens more to attempt to maintain balance or direct the horse.

The left hind hock is well bent and the arc is matching that of the right fore. This means there is balance and dynamic movement between the front and rear of the horse, and the horse and rider are synchronized.

The tail seems to be free. If a tail is clamped it will really affect the stride and freedom of movement of the horse. It will also prevent the horse from using his back and neck effectively so there will be compression and stress throughout the body, and the horse will remain on the forehand.

Likewise, the rider is looking ahead and her head is balanced well on top of the upper body. The rider has a nicely

bent elbow at her side which helps maintain the integrity of her upper body and a soft lower back. The integrity of the upper body that I am referring to is the ability of the rider to have freedom in her spine, ribs and pelvis so that during the movement of the horse, the rider's core muscles automatically engage to help stabilize the body without affecting the independent use of the limbs.

Her arms are in a straight line from bit to elbow, which is very supportive with this length of rein. The movement from the horse's mouth can thus go up through the rider's arm and body to the horse's hind legs and back in a cycle of reciprocal movement. The horse's front legs are supported and the hind legs then can engage. If the rider's wrists are bent and the elbows are straighter or the reins are loose the movement cannot

go through from the horse to the rider in the most effective way to maintain the engagement of the hind legs. The horse will then move on the forehand.

There is a light connection between the rider's hands and the horse's mouth, and the rider's wrists are straight. This is vital so there is an elastic connection with the horse's mouth and the two sides of the mouth have an independent oscillating rhythm which allows the poll and neck to be free in movement and encourages telescoping.

If the wrists are bent or the hands are tight on the reins all the horse can feel is a hard concussive pull to his mouth and there is no oscillating movement from side to side. This causes the horse to lean or avoid contact.

The angles of the elbow, knee and ankle are well balanced and this will allow the joints and bones of the leg freedom of movement. This is the most powerful shock-absorbing system in your body besides the spine, helping the rider maintain alignment, lightness and dynamic movement with ease.

Her feet are level in the stirrups. When the feet are level the foot moves like a treadle, which acts like the base shock absorber and maintainer of movement that keeps the upper body light and able to rebalance. This also allows the ribcage of the horse to move from side to side and up and down without restriction. This is one of the key parts of the body that allows the horse's legs to move independently and lets the horse shift weight and maximize length of stride.

When the heels of the rider are down as is commonly taught there is a false sense of security to the rider. The horse's movement is really restricted as well as his breathing and there will be compression, concussion and stress in his body, keeping the horse on the forehand.

Both horse and rider are mirroring each other, by exhibiting efficient use of their body mechanics.

Trail riding in my mind is such a wonderful way to spend time on the horse and it requires that the horse be able to carry the weight of the rider in an efficient way. Over the course of these next few months I will speak about some of these very basic requirements that can make miraculous changes in the way horses move. When a horse goes an entire ride on the forehand and out of balance, this is very harmful to his body, mind and spirit. I am not asking any of you to be perfect riders. I am asking you to join me on an awareness adventure so that you will have more choices of changing the outcome of out of balance situations and have more fun, more success and more safety on the trail.

photo by  
Joseph Walsh



## Rider Two

I chose this photo to comment on the effect the rider's body has on the horse. There is hardness in the appearance of this pair. Many people might look at this photo and think that this horse is just being difficult to control or stop. What I want you to understand is that when a horse is on the forehand and the rider tightens her body and braces, it is almost impossible for the horse to stop unless they are forced.

This is not a matter of disobedience or lack of focus. It is imbalance being aggravated by a braced rider. This horse's neck is retracted—notice the bulge on the underside of the neck. The rider is asking the horse to slow down or stop; however, the way that is being executed is very hard on a horse's back, mouth and joints as well as the rider's. The rider bracing with her legs closes her upper leg and thrusts force downwards into the ankle and foot.

The effect of this is seen in the horse's left front leg, exhibiting brace and downward force into the ground versus the horse being able to extend the leg forwards to touch the ground and propel the body forward as the leg goes backward. In other words, what we are looking for in the legs of the horse is more swing with an arc rather than pounding. In this instance with the neck retracted it is physically impossible for the horse to lift his back and bring his hind legs under which would actually help him stop.

When the rider's hand closes on the rein and pulls back on the mouth with a brace in her back and legs, the horse has no choice but to lift his head and drop his back. Pulling on the horse in this manner is as effective as slamming your car brakes on ice. The horse may stop, but the damage done to his body and mind take longer to undo than finding a

more effective way of getting the job done.

Many times in endurance, competitive or recreational trail rides, horses get competitive when in a group or at the beginning of a ride. Since this is a beginning of a series, my aim is to help educate your eyes and give you more understanding as to why horses can be really difficult and at times dangerous. When a horse feels out of control in his feet, his attention goes to the herd, to looking for monsters out in the woods, or totally shutting down and becoming dull, stubborn or unresponsive.

Think of this situation: if you and your friend were in the water doing chicken fights trying to knock down an opponent, and you were the one giving your friend the piggyback ride, when you get close to your opponents your friend tightens up her body and squeezes you with her legs and is holding on so tight with her hands that you can barely think of where to go. What is your choice in that moment of extreme restriction? You can use your voice, dunk her in the water or stop playing the game. What is the horse's choice when the rider is so rigid that the horse cannot effectively do what is being asked and gets punished by the rider's body and blamed for the bad behavior?

## Solutions

Here are some ways to avoid the above from happening when the horse gets really stressed, competitive or hard to slow down:

1. Exhale through your mouth as if blowing a candle.

2. Comb the reins. This is the action of holding the reins in one hand (hand #1) while the other hand (hand #2) reaches forward about a foot and takes hold of the reins with the index and middle finger in between the reins. This forward hand (hand #2) then slides back along the reins towards the rider's body and when close to the other hand (hand #1), the first hand releases the reins and reaches forward to repeat the process while the second hand is holding the reins. This is a continuous motion that can be used as long as necessary to break up tension in the rider and horse and it encourages the horse to telescope into contact. It is very difficult to do this with rubber reins or reins that have stops on them.

3. Soften in your lower back, think wide and soften in your legs to prevent your thighs from squeezing and your heels from pushing down.

We really have to look at these situations and understand that the cause of a lot of these imbalances is the unconscious reaction in the rider and the rider not having the knowledge that is critical to totally changing this situation with a positive outcome.

*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](http://www.connectedriding.com)*



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