

Developing a Connected PARTNERSHIP

WITH YOUR TRAIL HORSE



part three by PEGGY CUMMINGS

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 TrailtownUSA.com. Please send your photos to Editor@trailblazermagazine.us

Question Of The Month:

If I asked your horse what you felt like on his back as he carries you, what would he tell me?

My passion is to help riders become better partners with their horses by synchronizing with them in movement. This means that through these articles you will “develop your eye,” by seeing contrasts between riders and horses. You will begin to understand the basic biomechanical principles in enough different ways so that something strikes a chord to further your understanding of how your posture has to be on a horse in order to be efficient and allow his movement to be the same. You will learn simple exercises to spark your interest so you can experiment with them on your horse.

The only thing I cannot do while you read my articles is give you a kinesthetic sense of what I am talking about. For this, you have to take the initiative to find the contrast in yourself by monitoring some of the repetitive things you do unconsciously (tighten your back, squeeze with your hands, push your heels down, grip with your knees, etc.) that get in your way and the horse’s way of maximizing your partnership potential.

You have to know what you do that gets in the way of freedom of movement and results in bracing, and when you notice this, consciously change it—if you stiffen your back, soften it; if you squeeze with your hands, soften them; if you grip with your knees and push your heels down, think wide in your knees and level your feet and move your bones (as described below) over and over again.

Why? Because we are creatures of habit and if you choose to change a habit you need to pay attention until the new habit feels so familiar that it overrides the tendency to do the old habit most of the time. This is always a process. Changing habits requires focus and determination. Many times you are driven to seek a change because your horse is not performing the way you think or know he could be.

My intention is that through these articles you will be enticed to look at pictures of yourselves riding in order to prevent soundness or behavior problems in your horse or physical problems, discomfort and frustration in you.

Herein lies a word of CAUTION: Every

rider needs to be able to discern what is correct information—and what is not—in order to synchronize with their horse in movement. This is your choice and possibility. In other words, just because your best friend does it doesn’t mean it is correct. Just because a clinician tells you to do it doesn’t mean it is the right way. Just because a saddle-maker sells you a saddle and tells you it fits doesn’t mean it will. What is the answer? Educate yourself and learn the biomechanical principles of movement for yourself and your horse.

This month as you study these pictures I would like you to consider more than ever the horse’s point of view. How do you feel on his back? Does your way of using your body give your horse a choice, or does he just have to put up with you as you go down the trail?

Rider One

The rider is pretty synchronized with his horse. I looked at many pictures of male riders and this was the best of the ones I looked at. The rider is carrying his upper body well and there is a nice bend in his elbows, which helps maintain integrity in his upper body and support his horse well even though one rein is looser than the other at this particular moment.

The only adjustment I would make is to remind him to have just a bit more bend through his knee that would allow his leg to

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RIDER ONE



PHOTO BY BOBBIE JO LIEBERMAN - WWW.BOBBIJO.SMUGMUG.COM

RIDER TWO



PHOTO BY BOBBIE JO LIEBERMAN
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be more under him. Actually just thinking “wider through his knee” as he posts up would be really helpful and would probably change the look of his leg immediately. I am not sure in this case if his leg is just a tad ahead because his horse is fairly narrow or that his saddle does not allow his body to hang in alignment which is a very common issue in many saddles, and riders have no way of knowing the difference.

There is a lightness and softness in the appearance of the horse. The horse is telescoping (extending) his neck, releasing his topline and “coming through” his back. He is round from behind the saddle to the top of his tail. His base, the area between his front legs, is up, and all these factors allow him to shift weight dynamically with each stride. This horse would be telling me this rider allows him to find ease going down the trail.

Rider Two

This horse and rider appear to be going in what many might consider a nice-looking outline or a more collected

frame. This is truly an illusion and one that many seek to emulate. The rider is sitting in a chair seat and I do believe in this instance that the saddle he is riding is not helping him find his balance over his feet. The rider's leg is in front of the girth. Even though his upper body looks to be stable and his elbows are bent and there is a nice line of contact from elbow to bit, he cannot come close to synchronizing with his horse, as he will always be behind the horse's movement.

The horse is clearly reflecting this imbalance, as he cannot telescope his neck. He is bent at C-2, the neck vertebra just behind the poll, and the position of his head is restricting his ability to intake air freely. The horse is wearing a martingale, quite typical of this false frame—horses such as this at times go “head high”, especially when excited or during transitions. This is why many riders use martingales.

The issue is not that the horse tends to carry his head high but that his back is not able to work efficiently, so the horse raises his head when the core issue is that he is really out of balance. Since the horse is wearing a martingale this pre-

Solutions

It is critical, in order to improve the shock-absorbing ability of your joints over the uneven ground on a trail, that your hips, knees, ankles and arches are in vertical alignment and have the ability to absorb the movement. For this it is essential for your seat to be over your feet (except in the case of a jockey where the stirrups are so short that the angles formed by the legs as they are galloping allow for shock absorption).

Experiment with the following exercise: Put your right foot against your left as if you were positioning yourself to pull a boot off with your heel. While keeping your entire foot on the ground engage your thigh muscles and flex your leg as if you were pulling the boot off. Since you are keeping your entire foot on the ground the movement is small, but you will notice how your thighs initiate the movement.

Once you have figured out this simple movement, put your heels together with your toes pointing out, making a “V” shape with your feet. Place your hands on your thighs and press down and alternately

flex your legs. When your body is in alignment (it can be slightly forward) and there is no tension in your back, the movement is incredibly simple and you will notice how strong and efficient your thighs are. The position will feel as if you are slightly squatting with your knees wide.

If your spine, pectoral muscles or shoulders have any tension this exercise will feel very difficult, and the movement in the legs will be forced and the thighs will be lacking power. The exercise is impossible to do with an arched (hollowed) back, a rounded back (pelvis in a “pocket sitter” posture) or a chair-sitting posture.

This exercise is intended to give you a sensation of being able to move your bones with ease. This is a rhythm and motion that should be taking place while you are walking and trotting your horse that is equal and alternating. The walk rhythm is obviously slower than the trot rhythm. The canter rhythm differs, as it is a short-long rhythm. The long rhythm is in synch with the horse's lead. The movement of the bones is not forced. The movement

of your bones needs to be at first allowing and in rhythm with the movement of the horse.

The major thing to remember is to think wide through your knees. Your calves will automatically be on the horse's sides, providing a stabilizing anchor for your upper body. Your feet must be level and the stirrup not too long, allowing the foot to adjust to the flexion required in the joints.

As you become aware of the ease this can create, you can accentuate the rhythm by adding more intention to your legs (a “wobbling” sensation that invites the horse to pick up the driving energy in his hind feet) or slow down the rhythm, which will slow the horse down without you having to use your hands.

Mastering this exercise eliminates ever having to use both of your legs at the same time. Remember you are riding a horse, not a kangaroo or rabbit! I will continue this discussion in another issue. It would be also helpful to review last month's exercise on “Moon Walk”.

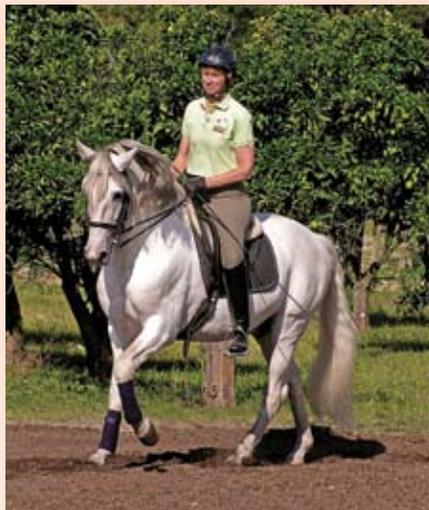
vents him from traveling with his head high so the next way for the horse to cope with the compression going on in his body is to bend his neck at C-2 instead of the poll.

He is traveling "base down", which keeps him on the forehand. When the horse travels base down he is not able to shift weight efficiently and there is a lot of stress in his neck, pectoral muscles, all of his legs and his lumbosacral region. His legs appear to be covering ground but there is more brace in the right front and there would have to be in the left hind as well, although I cannot see it due to the cropping.

Although his legs look similar to the previous horse's, because of the brace visible on his right fore which would match the left hind and the compression in this body this horse is really working hard. This really speaks to this animal's heart, incredible athletic ability and potential. It is an untapped gold mine.

The area behind the saddle on his back is dropped and there is a marked peak just above the point of the hip, which indicates that the horse is unable to use his back effectively. This horse would be telling me that he wished his rider would find some ways of making his job easier.

Happy trails and "remember to remember" your horse can be a better partner when his job of carrying you is made easier.



Peggy Cummings aboard Liberales, 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



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