

Developing a Connected

PARTNERSHIP WITH YOUR TRAIL HORSE



“LIGHT” HANDS

They happen from the inside out: releasing tension, stiffness and bracing patterns throughout the body allows the incredible lightness of being in motion with your horse to emerge.

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part nine by PEGGY CUMMINGS

In the riding world, there seem to be many concepts that remain elusive to the average as well as more advanced rider, such as “deep seat,” “half-halt” and “light hands.” We all want to have “light hands” because we are taught they are kind to the horse’s mouth; “heavy” hands, in contrast, dull the horse and make him “hard-mouthed.” As riders, we spend countless hours seeking those fleeting moments of lightness. As a young trainer and rider, I worked very diligently to attain the lightness that I understood to be possible, only to encounter more stiffness and frustration the harder I worked at finding it. It took me many years to discover the sensation I was seeking in ways that ran counter to what I had learned.

“Lightness” is an internal sensation of feeling in one’s body. It is not something applied, per se, from the outside. It is learning to understand the contrast between tightness, stiffness and bracing versus lightness, releasing and expansion during movement. Which way would you be more successful carrying an egg in a spoon—with tightness or lightness? It is the same with your hands—they cannot be truly light if there is tightness somewhere else in your body.

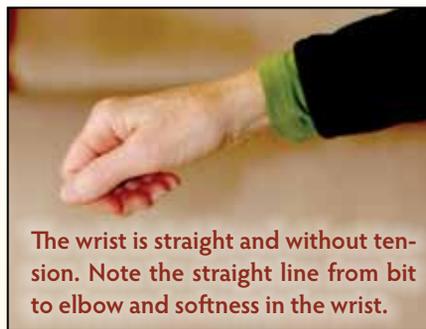
As I have written in this column and in my books, lightness comes from the alignment of any human or horse body that is using their biomechanics properly. This means that the joints, bones and levers of the body are moving in easy and effortless ways with a minimum of drag or bracing against movement. This is what allows ease and lightness—it is not “made,” it is allowed. Of course, therein lies the paradox for many riders—trusting their own bodies to move freely atop a moving animal. This requires a degree of balance, sensitivity and body awareness with constant internal readjustment. And, any novice to advanced rider can access this experience albeit with varying degrees of finesse.

NEUTRAL POSTURE: WHERE IT ALL BEGINS

Light hands originate from neutral pelvis and neutral posture, the place of all balance and alignment. Once the body is stable and balanced at its base, the extremities—the legs and arms—do not need to be utilized for balance and are free to be used for influencing the horse in a supportive manner. Riders from different disciplines are taught to use their hands in different ways, and what is really interesting to me is that many of the uses of the hands are not discipline specific.

Here are some of the different ways use of hands is taught and how they biomechanically impact the horse:

- ▶ Hold the reins softly in your hands and move the fingers as if rolling a small ball around in your hand. This is one of the techniques I was taught many years ago and it was intended to keep a horse’s mouth soft and flexed.
- ▶ Squeeze and alternately soften your hand in a rhythmical way to get the horse’s attention, in order to turn or stop.
- ▶ Close the hand to stop or to do a half halt or bend the horse’s head to one side.
- ▶ “Sponge” the reins.
- ▶ Separate your hands to get the horse to drop his head.
- ▶ Alternately squeeze one hand while taking back slightly on the rein and then the other to get the horse on the bit.
- ▶ While holding the outside rein firmly with a closed hand, lift the inside hand and get the horse to yield to the bit.
- ▶ Take back with the hand to turn.
- ▶ Pull back on the reins to stop.
- ▶ To keep your hands from bouncing, hold them quietly and close to the saddle.
- ▶ Hold the reins between the thumb and forefinger with the hand open



The wrist is straight and without tension. Note the straight line from bit to elbow and softness in the wrist.



This bent wrist creates tension in the arm and a pull on the horse. There is not a straight line from bit to elbow.

to create lightness.

- ▶ Ride with no contact or very minimal contact to stay off the horse’s mouth. If the horse is not prepared to carry the rider in a weight-bearing posture, lack of contact will feel like lack of support to the horse’s body.

What each of these directives have in common is they tell the rider to do something specifically with their hands in order to affect the horse in some way, such as “getting” his head down. Techniques initiated from the hands become mechanical aids, because they often cause tightness or bracing in the rider and the horse, instead of allowing the movement to flow through each body.

IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT THE HANDS

The first step to discovering lighter hands is to experiment with a different perspective. Instead of focusing on your hands, start thinking of ways you can become lighter in your whole body. Sitting with your seat bones in “neutral” with your stirrups just behind the ball of the foot is one way to quickly lighten the body from bracing with the hands or other body parts. Of course, this position requires continual awareness and readjustment, since this is not a static position. We are looking to increase the amount of time we are in balance in the saddle, because we and the horses are always out of balance some of the time as part of a cycle of movement.

LIGHTENING YOUR BODY

As you sit in neutral posture, your legs are free and independent to do minute, alternating muscle flexions of the thighs as if they are marching up and backwards as they flex (like pedaling backwards on a unicycle). These flexions are almost invisible except to the trained eye and will feel as if your bones are moving and sliding with the horse’s movement. The reason I place the rider’s foot behind the ball and use the up and backward flexion motion is to ensure the joints are free to move instead of bracing downward against the stirrup in a place that locks the arch, ankle, and joints in the legs.

The joints in legs act as shock absorbers and as the legs move with the motion of the horse, the seat bones are alternately moved following the motion of the hind legs. This is the only way the upper body “buoy” is free to move with each stride, because the joints in the legs are also moving freely as they receive the motion of the horse. The body must be “unlocked” to receive and influence movement! Most riders

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have been taught to lock in and lock on to stay afloat. This does not allow fluidity of movement or throughness in the horse and rider.

“LIVE WEIGHT = LIGHT HANDS”

The most important byproduct of neutral posture alignment is that it turns the rider's body into “live weight” instead of static, braced, dead weight. In the neutral position, the hands become an extension of the arm and are used to hold the reins, rather than only agents of direct signaling to the horse. The rider's torso is the stabilizer, and the movement of the horse travels through her body aiding in uniting two bodies in movement.

Therefore, any contact on the reins becomes a connection through the rider's body and is used to support and rebalance the horse, contain and redirect energy from the horse to the rider and back to the horse. It is a continuous dynamic readjustment not unlike skiing, ballroom dancing and other athletic activities that require movement through space. When the body is relatively free of bracing and can meet the force of motion and gravity by using core muscles for stability, joints and bones are free to move in the moment; this allows a more fluid and elegant ride. This is the place of light hands.



Peggy Cummings aboard Liberale, a 14-year-old Lusitano stallion. Photo by Melanie Powell (www.shybuckstudios.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. Her latest book, “Connect With Your Horse From the Ground Up,” is available from Trafalgar Square Books.

Helpful Suggestions to Lighten Hands

You can encourage light hands by maintaining a bent elbow, straight wrist and soft hold on the reins.

Comb the reins periodically. Combing the reins is an exercise in which the reins are held in one hand as the other hand reaches forward, maintaining a soft bend in the elbow, and reaches up and “combs” back down toward the other hand. The index and middle fingers are in between the reins. As the hand that combs down toward 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. You may also comb just one rein at a time to offer the horse a different sensation. The combing sensation 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.

When adding contact on the rein, minutely move your elbow back by engaging the muscles in your upper arm while engaging the muscles of your forearm upwards as if you are taking contact on the handles of a wheelbarrow preparing to lift. Simultaneously keep your upper body “thinking forward” (resisting the urge to go backwards) and consciously allow your back muscles to stay soft. Practice alternately engaging the arm muscles and softening in a quick succession for about 10 seconds.

You can do this while sitting on the horse and hooking your index finger on the mane or taking contact on the edge of a table or shelf so that you can notice the elastic sensation this movement creates. I refer to this movement as “stretchy” or “bungee” elbows. This movement keeps the horse from hanging; keeps your hands light and often will help slow the horse down without pulling. If someone were watching, they cannot see what you are doing and it definitely overrides the tendency to “pull back” on the reins.

- ▶ Make sure your hands always hold the reins with **softness versus tightness**.
- ▶ Make sure your wrists are **straight and without tension**.