

FINDING THE HOLY GRAIL - RIDING GAITED IN A SNAFFLE BIT

I was originally trained as a dressage rider in my early 20's, in the early to mid 70's. My instructor was a far better teacher than I was pupil. The top 10 rider and horse teams that try out are accepted for the US Olympics Team. Lois had place 15th in the try outs for the 1972 Olympics. Her accomplishment and that of her horse were particularly notable, as her horse was not on a Warmblood or other traditional dressage horse, but an American Quarter Horse gelding. She didn't have the money to buy a fancy dressage horse, but she made up for that with skill and hard work, and she definitely made a silk purse out of that Quarter Horse gelding.

By the time I met Lois, she was teaching at a stable at which the dressage horses were Trakehners and rehabilitated off-the-track Thoroughbreds. That is what I learned to ride on at the stable at which she gave lessons. The basic principles of dressage that I learned from her stood me in good stead for many years. However, I quickly figured out that competition and riding around in a circle were not for me. I wanted to trail ride. So in 1980, after I graduated from law school, I found an old trail horse. He was a 25 year old sorrel gelding that had not been ridden in several years, since the young lady that owned him had gone off to college. Her parents had paid the board bills on him for many years, but when they realized how dedicated I was to riding, with their daughter's blessing, they gave him to me, with the saddle and bridle. His name was Laddie. Laddie had been shown Western Pleasure when his owner had ridden him. Laddie was not real keen on now being ridden regularly after several years of loafing, but after an initial bout of refusal to go out of the yard of the stable, in the face of my determination that we were in fact going to leave the yard, he gave up, and off we went.

The more I rode Laddie, though, the more I noticed him doing something...strange. I found that if I sat just right, and held my hands just right, I could hear all these footfalls, and he was traveling along fast and smooth. I had absolutely no idea what he was doing, because all I knew that horses could do was walk, trot and canter. I finally figured out from talking to old timers in Wisconsin where I lived, that he was a "single footer." I did some digging, and found out that he was a registered Standardbred. He'd been on the track briefly, but I later realized that he had not been successful at sulky racing, because he would not hold a pace or a trot. He did whatever the heck it was that he was doing for me, that "single foot." The old timers said that their daddies mostly had plow horses, but always kept a single footer around to ride to town for market day, but heck, they hadn't seen one of those in years! So, funny as it now sounds, for some time I thought he was the only horse left in the world that did that! I'd seen Tennessee Walkers, but I thought they did whatever it was that they were doing because of all that junk on their feet. I wanted nothing to do with that! I wanted horses like Laddie, barefoot, and single footing away.

Then I saw Paso Finos at the Midwest Horse Fair in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1982, and I went nuts! A whole breed of Laddies! But in the 8 years I was involved in Pasos, I had difficulty handling the reactive temperament, and broke two teeth and three ribs going off of them. I got so discouraged at being hurt, that at one point I thought of selling my horses and just riding Laddie. And in fact, every time I got hurt

going off another Paso, I would climb back on Laddie, and that kind, gentle horse would restore my confidence again. But then Laddie died on December 5, 1989, just a few months short of his 35th birthday. My husband rode him on a trail ride in mid November, and he was fine. He died of heart failure in the pasture. He had been the only horse my husband had ever ridden. Pasos were too small and too hot for my not very horsey husband. I needed to find another Laddie. So in 1990, I went to Kentucky to look at one Mountain Horse. I bought 4, went back to Wisconsin and sold my Paso Finos, and have been a rider and breeder of Mountain Horses ever since.

I had a problem when I went into riding Pasos, that got worse when I began riding Mountain Horses. It seemed like everything I had learned in dressage was just thrown out the window. Instead of riding horses with sensitivity to the structure and function of their bodies, with collection and balance, in Pasos, the Columbian trainers taught me “restraint and impulsion” to “get” gait, that is, a very firm hand on the reins, with the head cranked back (restraint), while the horse would drive from the rear up into the bit (impulsion). The horses were first trained to the required head set with jaquima. Although bitless initially, it is nonetheless a very firm piece of equipment using a leather or a leather wrapped metal nose band, sometimes with ball bearings or other devices so the horse really gets the idea that it better get that nose in, and an alizador, or lifter, under the chin to bring the head up. It is very effective at getting the desired head set. Then a bit is added. The Paso Fino bits may look like they have short shanks, but because they are curved, there is substantial leverage to them. In the mid 90’s when I really delved into the mechanics of intermediate 4 beat gait, I realized that the horses are generally ridden with stiffened shoulders, hollowed backs, and driven up under themselves to “get” the gait.

The lack of any acknowledgement of or adherence to dressage principals in riding gaited horses was worse when I got into Mountain Horses. The most common bit was and remains the so-called “broken snaffle,” which is in fact not a snaffle. It is a Tennessee Walking Horse bit, typically with a 6 inch shank, sometimes an 8” shank, a curb chain and a broken mouthpiece. Thus, with the shanks and curb chain, it is a curb bit. Another common bit is the “Wonder Bit,” a gag bit that both raises the head and tucks the nose. The horses are typically ridden in the same way as I found in Pasos, head cranked in, usually not as severely as Pasos, but still, with a lot of pressure on the bit, with stiffened shoulders and hollowed backs. They are not ridden with snaffle bits. In fact, I have never found a horse that was trained with that method that would hold gait without being balanced on the bit by the hands of the rider. I would retrain them to self balance and self correct, so that they would gait by themselves on a light rein, without depending on the bit to balance them in gait. Nonetheless, the body position that I would teach them was the same; they would just hold it themselves instead of relying on the hands of the rider to hold them in the correct frame. It was all I knew how to do, because it was all I had ever seen done.

At one point, I did a survey of the bits used in all the gaited breeds, Foxtrotters, Icelandics, Mountain Horses, Paso Finos, Peruvian Pasos and Tennessee Walkers. I found that they were all shanked curb bits. I learned all I could soak up from Lee Ziegler, but one thing I was never able to figure out was how to ride gaited horses in a snaffle bit as she insisted was possible. I resigned myself to just never being as good as her, because I was simply not able to get horses to gait in a snaffle bit. Along the way, I learned a bit about intermediate 4 beat gait, much of it from Lee. I served for a time as a Gait Judge for the North American Single Footing Horse Association, and since 1990, as an Examiner for the Kentucky

Mountain Saddle Horse Association, and since 2002 when KMSHA opened up the Spotted Mountain Horse Association, as an Examiner for SMHA, too. I had this vague feeling that something was wrong with the way I was riding and that I saw everyone else riding, but it seemed that was just the way it was, that what I had learned of dressage principals just could not be reconciled with riding gaited horses. But it bothered me. I read Dr. Deb Bennett's three little books on conformation several times, making my head hurt each time I did, not only because those three little books are the most difficult books I have ever read in my life, with more packed into them than is in much lengthier tomes, but also because what she had to say about the structure of how a horse's body works fit with what I knew of how I was originally trained to ride, but did not fit with what I "knew" from 25+ years of riding gaited horses and learning all I could from trainers and watching others ride. It was a puzzle that I was just resigned to being unsolvable. And the idea of riding a gaited horse and getting good solid consistent gait in a snaffle bit as Lee Ziegler advocated was in the same category as the Holy Grail, highly desirable, but not attainable.

In 2007, while at the Arizona Horse Festival as an exhibitor for the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse Association, I was on my way somewhere, when, in passing, out of the corner of my ear so to speak, I heard one of the clinicians say something I had been telling people about riding gaited horses for, at the time, 15 years: that not only is it not necessary to use a hard grip on a horse's mouth and head, it is entirely possible and desirable to ride a gaited horse on a light rein. He also said that it could be done in a snaffle bit. I kept walking for a few steps, intent on my destination, when what he said really penetrated my mind: riding gaited horses with a light rein, in a snaffle bit. The Holy Grail. I slowed, turned on my heel, went back, sat down and listened. More importantly, I watched.

I watched as Larry Whitesell sat on the back of what I could immediately tell was a very reactive, indeed, potentially highly explosive, bay Paso Fino filly. The man was speaking my language. The language of collection and balance, and showing how, in applying those principals to the very reactive and potentially explosive horse he was sitting on, she didn't. Explode, that is. He does not use the word dressage, but collection and balance are the heart and soul of dressage. I felt like 35 years fell away, and I was listening to Lois, except now, applied to the gaited horses that I ride. He spoke the same language as Lois, and more importantly, the horse under him heard and understood what his body said to the horse. She was attentive, quiet, and safe, in a snaffle bit, gaiting up a storm. He showed how by just changing what he was communicating to the horse a little bit, she would, in his words, immediately "go insane." I recognized that insanity. I'd sat on it, and I had gone off of it, without understanding why the horses under me went insane. That first time I saw Larry ride, I didn't know exactly what he was doing, but what I did know is that what he did produced results that I, with all of my experience in riding gaited horses, would not have been able to produce, because I had not been able to safely ride Pasos like the one that Larry was sitting on, in the 8 years that I was involved in them. And if what he had to teach would work with Pasos, then it would surely work with horses that were not so prone to insanity in the first place!

I stored what I had seen in my head, but did not immediately act on it. I couldn't forget it, though. He was back at the 2009 Horse Festival, and I watched him again, doing the same thing, with another very reactive, potentially explosive buckskin Paso Fino filly. And again, when he very subtly changed what he

was communicating to the horse, she too started to “go insane.” Then by changing what he was communicating to her, back to what he had been doing before, she immediately came out of the insanity and calmed down, just as the other filly had two years earlier. I also watched while he worked with a horse I had bred, a high energy filly that is a daughter of my high energy senior stallion. In a few minutes, of just getting her body into a particular position, when he said “There!” I could see the change in the horse. Suddenly, she was balanced, and when she came into balance, her entire demeanor changed. She immediately became calmer. She came right back out of it, because it takes more than 30 seconds for either the horse or the rider to “get it” so that it is maintained. But it really is that fast, when the horse comes into the balanced body position, as a result of the cues by the rider, suddenly, the horse’s entire demeanor and attitude changes. I recognized that state in the horse, of alert, yet calm, balanced focus. I’d seen it before and experienced it; it was the same “zone” that I had occasionally achieved when I had worked with dressage horses 35 years before. I signed up for Larry’s 3 day clinic.

I got a great deal out of that clinic. It was the best 350 bucks I ever spent. He packs an enormous amount of information into 3 days. I took it home and started applying it. It worked, but I knew I needed more information, and more training in how to apply what I had learned. I tried to sign up for the 5 day clinic in the spring of 2010, but it was full. However, that got me on the waiting list for the 5 clinic in the spring of 2011. That was \$950. Also the best money I have ever spent. As it turned out, I had a 4 yr old filly that had come out of light training with a fine trainer in Texas. She was ready to be finished, and what she and I learned at Larry’s 5 day clinic was exactly what we both needed. Some of what Larry taught was a bit counterintuitive for me. It took a while of practicing it to get the hang of it. But the incentive is that when I go back to my “old” ways of riding, and my horse does not do what it is that I am asking, and then when I remember and apply what Larry taught us, and she does what I am asking, immediately, it reinforces that what I used to do worked ok, but not nearly as well as what I have learned from Larry. Horses “get” what is being asked of them so much more readily than the way I was riding before. And many, many people had told me that I was a very good rider, including top trainers in both the Paso Fino and the Mountain Horse worlds. Some had remarked that they wished I lived close enough to them to exercise their horses, because I was so natural at riding gaited. But it was not on the same level as I am riding now, not by a long shot. Now I am finally riding as I have always dreamed of being able to ride my gaited horses. And it is so incredibly effortless. Larry says you just have to think about where you want to go, and the speed at which you want to go, and if you apply the cues he teaches you, that is in fact exactly what the horse does. I think, now, “I want to ride my horse at this speed, and I want to go in that direction,” and that is in fact exactly what happens. I am almost 60 years old, riding a 4 year old filly that has been under saddle only a few months. More than once I have thought to myself “What the heck am I doing on this young horse, I am too old for this stuff!” or something along that line. But when my filly does exactly what I am thinking, at the speed at which I am thinking, and in the direction I want to go, because she understands and responds immediately to my cues, and if she gets excited, just applying those cues cause her to calm down and focus on what I am asking for, it gives me confidence that I will be riding her and other horses for many years to come, because this method works. My filly is also gaiting like a clock. Ticky-ticky-ticky-ticky, nice and even, in a snaffle bit, barefoot. She’s never had a set of shoes. The French link snaffle works just fine, thank you. The Holy Grail.