



Gaited Horsemanship



with

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Ending Resistance by Improving the Aids

By: Larry Whitesell

Many riders have resistance problems with their horse. Their horses are buddy sour, spook, rush the bridle, are hard to stop or won't go at all. It is very common to do exercises to correct or punish undesired behavior. Most of the time there is little success or the horse becomes tense in his movements. Tenseness just creates more resistance which compounds the problem.

For example, let's take a look at horses that spook. It is very popular to see riders doing all kinds of things to desensitize their horse. Suppose I took you up to the sixth story balcony and hung you out by your legs to prove to you I wouldn't drop you. You can trust me now can't you? I don't believe you would because I put you in that situation just to show you I wouldn't drop you. That is kind of what we do when we desensitize a horse. We put a horse in a situation so he can learn to stand and relax believing that we will remove the stress. You cannot teach any living creature to never be afraid. Instead we should teach the horse how to relax and listen to our aids to allow us to guide him to safety. It is not possible for us to guide him out of his perceived trouble if he stands still. In reality, teaching the horse to stand still is me looking out for myself, not my horse. Teaching him to stand still does not make me his leader. We gain his trust by getting him out of a stressful situation not putting him into one. Many people teach the horse to stand still because they are afraid of losing control of the horse. However, if my horse understands my aids, I will not lose control and can confidently guide my horse to safety, making me a trustworthy leader.

Another example is a horse that is buddy sour. He is simply telling me he can count on his friends more than me. The typical rider will fight or punish their horse when he goes where they don't want him to go. They make their horse want to be with them less by fighting with him. Usually the struggle ends when he catches up with his buddies. This reaction just reaffirms to my horse that to get my hands out of his mouth that he needs to be with his buddies.

The real problem is he is not submissive to my aids. To be submissive it to come under the protection of someone you trust, not to be controlled by someone you are afraid of. How does the rider make their horse submissive? First, submissive does not mean subordination. If we are a team one of us has to be the decision maker and the other must feel good about following. The decision maker cannot be a bully (using the hands pulling on the face or

kicking with heels), and the follower cannot offer resistance.

What are my aids you ask? My aids are my hands, my seat, my legs and my weight which all work together to channel the horse where I want to go. When I use my aids properly, I don't use one louder than the other meaning I don't overuse my hands on the horse's face or kick his ribs. Most horses have trouble submitting to the aids because the rider is unkind with their hands and legs or uses one aid against another. Usually when a horse ignores the aids, the rider gets stronger instead of relaxing the horse and explaining how the aids work. If we would take a moment to listen to our horse, he'd tell us he simply doesn't understand what we're or worse, he's afraid of what we are asking him to do.

A horse that is submissive to the rider's aids is supple, happy and willing. A horse that is submissive seems to be as one with the rider. Horses that aren't clear about the rider's aids become stiff in the mouth and may get anxious or become dull. As the horse learns how the aids are applied they begin to balance more on the hind limbs and become soft to the hand. The horse learns that working with the rider is more comfortable because we are in balance with each other. Too many riders use conflicting aids which confuse the horse. The horse can't trust the rider. There can only be harmony when a horse has a clear leader that he responds to without question.

The horse's response can never be better than the rider's aids, and the rider's aids can only be as good as their seat. The correct position of the rider and the rider's knowledge makes the aids clear. If you want a supple and relaxed horse, you must have a supple and loose body without stiffening or sitting against the rhythm or motion. Then all the aids work together to channel the horse where we want to go. Otherwise it is impossible for the horse to be in balance.

Communication is key. We need to learn how to communicate with our horses effectively. Your horse needs to learn speed control from the activity in your seat not from the pull of your hands. Your seat must move with the horse's back. Speed is adjusted by changing the rhythm of your seat. It will be difficult without much of a response at first, but as you get better at asking and your horse get better at understanding that your seat controls speed not your hands, he will be happier and more responsive.

One of the best things we can do to work on our communication with our horse is to do a lot of transitions. Transitions from walk to halt to walk and transitions from walk to gait or trot to walk work well. Don't worry if the horse doesn't gait in the early stages of training. If the transition is walk to trot to walk, it will not hurt their gait later, it will actually make it better. Transitions build vertical flexion and impulsion, and both improve gait!! Don't let the transitions up or down be sudden or explosive. Soft, slow transitions build engagement. Quick transitions might be impressive to people who are watching but they build tension in muscles.

Keep in mind that transitions down are as important as upward transitions and should be carefully ridden. Down transition are ridden forward to the hands just like upward transitions. The rider just braces the back a little when riding down. It's like swinging in a

swing. Your seat follows the rhythm of the movement of the swing to keep it going and then we brace our back a little to decrease the swinging. If we stop swinging abruptly, we probably would fall right out of the swing. Likewise if we were swinging and we just sat on the swing and didn't follow the motion, it would stop and not very smooth. Too many riders just sit on their horse when it is moving so their aids block or work against their horse.

Another great exercise you can work on with your horse is leg yielding. Again its not your hands that do the talking its your seat. You can ride down the trail and move your horse one step left-straight-one step right. Over time increase the number of diagonal steps. It is very important not to muscle your horse sideways, but teach him to move lightly off your legs. If you lightly ask with your leg and get no response, don't hold or increase pressure, but release and ask again and again. When you get the slightest response, relax and walk forward. If the horse gives you the movement with any tenseness, the movement is not worth having. You must get the movement in relaxation, so don't worry how many times you softly ask to get a response. If you use muscle to move your horse off your leg, then he will run through it when his adrenaline comes up. Which is not safe for either of you.

During all work, be aware that the horse's mouth is sensitive, so the contact should be soft and consistent and the rein aids should be used with feeling. While we never want to pull on the reins, we also don't want to throw them away. People who ride on totally loose reins create too much activity when they pick them up and not enough feel when they are loose. When you constantly pick the rein aid up and throw it away, a young horse becomes confused about the aids. Loose reins would be ok on a horse that completely understands your seat and leg aids. He must also be very confident in them. However, even the older horse feels more confident if the reins are consistent.

Step by step your horse will learn that when he is submissive to the aids, he is comfortable and will be allowed to move freely. He will trust you, the rider, as his leader. When you have a horse that has learned how the aids work, and a rider that has learned how to utilize them it almost feels like the horse can read your mind. Just as much effort, if not more, has to go in to the rider leaning to give soft, consistent aids (hands, legs, seat and weight), all working in unison with each other. If we did this, most of the problems we spend countless hours trying to fix would just disappear. The horse could stop defending himself and start being a willing and eager partner. When you start becoming a rider instead of a passenger and use your aids properly, it can make your riding and your relationship so much more enjoyable!!

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