

You Have To Listen, Too



Horses are remarkable. They are forgiving, quick to learn, quick to re-learn, willing and intelligent.

After 40 years of teaching and working with over 1,000 riders through those years, I have seen many combinations of skill, sheer guts and assorted fears. The thousands of horses that have touched my life have taught me that no other art (or sport) could possibly influence a human being in a more positive way.

To communicate with “another life form” is a two-way street. When you, as a rider, learn to aid clearly, to prepare your horse for all his movements and shape him into something beautiful, you have mastered half of the communication skills necessary to become an artists. The other half – the *listening* – is essential.

Your horse is a living, feeling, thinking creature like you. He surrenders himself to your will in a way, I dare say, you yourself would refuse to do with another person. If he is treated *fairly* and *with compassion*, he will give to you all his life long. If he is misunderstood, ridden inconsistently or abused, his confusion will manifest itself in varied degrees of resistance.

To become aware of your horse’s point of view, to *empathize* with him, you can consider and observe his daily life. Watch him eat, play and interact with other horses. Become aware of his personality traits. Since no two horses are alike, get to know yours as an individual... Is he dominant? Timid? Does he eat fast or slow? Does he doze through the day? And so forth.

Knowing something about him as an individual will help you establish a bond of communication with him. When you ride, you can work to discover new ways of influencing his behavior and controlling your own. Each time you mount, have him stand for a few moments as you compose yourself and tune into *his* feelings.

Then, when you move off, think of your aids and requests as a liquid that flows through a tube from your mind to your horse’s mind. Position your body and apply your aids as usual to *influence* your horse, but keep the liquid thoughts moving from your mind to his.

After a few days of this, you will find his responses softening. He will react almost “fluidly” to your aids. Your concentration deepens and he will concentrate more, too.

Next, you envision the connection between your minds as a carrier of light that can flow in either direction. This is simply an exercise in visualizing your communication to and from your horse – I’m not telling you to become telepathic; I’m giving you one of many possible ways to expand your awareness *of* the horse (which will make him more aware of you).

Light moves pretty fast. As you begin to connect your thoughts with your horse’s feelings through an imaginary tube that transports them back and forth instantly, you will forget about the tractor in the field next door, the wash hanging on a neighbor’s clothes line or the other riders in the arena. And, in turn, your horse will ignore them, too.

Soon you will find yourself anticipating what your horse will do next. You become more able to *prevent* a resistance instead of having to *correct* it after the fact. You will find your horse responding to the “lighter” aids. He will react to every movement your body makes – the ones you mean *and* the ones you do not mean. You will take on more responsibility for your horse’s performance and you will have to concentrate even more to prevent your own “miss-cuing” of him. It is an exercise in self-discipline.

You will not want to always ride this intensely. It is not a good idea to always school seriously in an arena and to relax when riding out in the field or on trails. Your horse will easily realize that in the dressage court you mean business, but out on leisurely rides he can look around and listen to other things.

You may wonder about the physical part of training your horse. It is essential that the aids be applied and carried out. But oftentimes riders become more aware of their power to *force* a horse into submission not by strength for he is stronger, but with aggressive over aiding and psychological tricks; forgetting that horses *know* how to be horses.

If the aids are applied properly, they will fulfill their function of *influencing* the horse’s body. They will shape his energy, impel him to respond correctly and then, when they cease to act, will reward him for his effort.

Consider how *you* first learned a lateral movement – leg yielding, for example. You had to coordinate your own body, concentrating on and memorizing the position of each leg, each hand, shoulders, hips and seat bones. You struggled a little, when you did it correctly; your horse stepped across to the track. He may never have done a leg yield under saddle in his life, but when **you** put him into the right frame, channeled his energy and sent it on correctly, he leg yielded. Maybe he was stiff. If it was his first time, his muscles were not used to it, but he was willing. And he understood. Not because he

reasoned it out and thought, “This is a leg yield,” but because **you** learned how to leg yield him.

Your horse does not think “canter” when you aid for it – he doesn’t have time to reason it out before he makes the transition. He simply and totally responds to the influence of your aids at that moment. The aids we all use in classical horsemanship are very old and still used because they work. When your horse was first mounted and schooled, he learned to trust the aids and respond *naturally*. The foundation that started him in dressage made him a creature able to move as he is naturally inclined to move with the *control* coming out of mutual understanding.

The “horse moving like a river between the banks of your aids” is a good visualization, and it is even better if you think of his *energy*, too. Your aids establish the boundaries of a “space” in which he will move and shape his body and his energies. If there is clarity, consistency and compassion, he will submit willingly to those boundaries. If you keep the vision in your mind of where you need him to be the *next* stride, the *next* moment, you will channel him forward like a benevolent, flowing river. If you aid suddenly and violently without preparation or thought, he will churn like the writhing rapids of a twisted stream that splashes its very substance out beyond the banks that struggle to contain it.

Get in touch with your own goals and expectations. To direct the life of another, you must know where you are going. Your horse will teach you and tell you when he is ready to progress. And when he does, you must know what the next step will be. By concentrating on the present moment, aligning your thoughts with your horse’s feelings, and making decisions, you can imagine the possibilities of the future. When you can see those possibilities, you can choose direction. After you choose direction, you can set goals. Those goals will shape your daily expectations. When you ride because of the love you will feel for your horse and for the art, your horse will meet your expectations *and* you will meet his.

Once you begin this path in dressage, you will learn more from clinicians and teachers because you will not need the “inhale-exhale” kind of instruction so often seen. You will be a *rider*, and *horseman*. Your coach will act as a translator between you and your mount, offering advice to polish the understanding you have established instead of giving a stream of verbal commands to follow.