



WHOLE HORSEMANSHIP

By Dianne Lindig

Sweat the Details-Part 2 Body Language & Breath Astride the Horse

Last month, I discussed the importance of tapping into your horse's natural sensitivity to visual stimuli, rather than ignoring it. Specifically, we explored using body language, breath, and energy signals to develop a closely connected communication system with your horse.

This month, we'll identify how these same signals connect with your horse's highly developed sense of feel, creating the perfect interface for subtle, yet specific, communication between horse and rider. I also want to discuss other details that an effective horseman must not ignore with regard to your horse's sensitivity to touch, weight, and pressure.

Let's start with what I call your base, neutral position astride your horse. If your weight is not distributed evenly side to side, if your pelvis, shoulders, or head are already tilting forward or back, or if you are not generally in a relaxed, yet alert position, you are already sabotaging your horse's ability to respond to your other aids. That's because these details, (maybe not so obvious to you), are the *first* ones that your horse takes note of. *Everything else is secondary.* I could write a book on this alone, but Sally Swift has already done a great

job of that. Read or review Centered Riding 1 and 2 to make sure you are starting your riding sessions with a clean, unmuddled base, neutral position.

Next, engage your horse's attention by moving slightly, re-centering your weight, and gently lifting the reins. Notice, I did not say to "kick" your horse, or start by pulling the reins. That would be ignoring your horse's sensitivity to the details of feel.

Now, look forward, sit tall while relaxing your lower body, breath in and allow your lower legs to gently close around the horse's body. Grow even taller as you look forward and exhale. Unless your horse has become desensitized through years of over-stimulation, they will lift their back beneath you, and begin to float forward. If not, it is then OK to add a follow-up cue, such as a quick leg bump, or a verbal cue to the initial body language and breath. Be sure you "attach" the follow-up cue to the very end of the first set of signals, and only if your horse has not already responded. Your horse will connect the signals together in its mind, and the next time you ask, you probably won't need the follow-up signal any more.

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The same process works beautifully for slowing your horse down or for stopping. Imagine you have been moving forward with your horse, still sitting tall, while allowing your relaxed hips to move with your horse's back. You want to slow or transition down. Rather than first pulling the reins, inhale, then exhale as you soften your trunk, just below your rib cage, as though you are shrinking slightly. Lower your energy, and if you are riding Western, allow your lower legs to have less pressure against your horse's sides. (In most English disciplines, the horse is not asked to shift it's weight as far back in order to decelerate or stop, so legs can stay on.) Lift or squeeze your reins only after you have

started your body language signals. (Add, "Whoa", to the end of your signals, if you are stopping.) If your first efforts aren't great, try again, and use your reins and/ or verbal cues as follow-up signals attached to the end of your body language sentence. With practice, you will be amazed how little rein contact it requires to slow down, transition down, or stop, in balance.

In terms of directing your horse's movement, remember, once again, to give the correct body language signals before adding leg or rein aids. If you are asking for a bending turn, turn your shoulders, without leaning, in the direction of your turn; more for tighter turns, less for more opens turns. Let your hands follow your outside shoulder forward, (and slightly out under English), and your inside shoulder back. If you are reining with one hand, keep it even with the center of your chest, and don't pull the outside rein excessively. If you doing straight or lateral movements, keep your shoulders square and level before adding leg and rein aids. Get your shoulder position correct *first*, then use your reins properly with it, *not the other way around.* Your horse cares most about *these details in that order.*

As important as "sweating the details" of body language and breathing are, I don't mean to de-emphasize your horse's sensitivity to your leg and rein aids. That's why I'm going to write "Sweat the Details, Part 3: Leg and Rein Aids" next month. Take time to digest and practice Parts 1 and 2 with your horse, and you'll be all set for adding Part 3 to your riding skills, just as we get our

first bits of great Spring riding weather in March.

Until then, don't forget what a gift riding really is. Be safe, Enjoy the Ride, and remember that I'm always here, should you need some extra help along the way.

Have a Happy End of Winter! Dianne

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