



“Do Whatever It Takes” Of Flying and Riding

As horseman, we all reach a certain point at which, regardless of our technical knowledge and skill, we cannot advance to a higher level without developing and refining our sense of “Feel”.

What is “Feel”, exactly? It has been described by Dressage great Dietrich von Hopffgarten as “the magical connection”, and by Ray Hunt as the “one other thing, that makes it all work.” If words seem inadequate in describing this phenomenon, it’s no wonder. “Feel” has mostly to do with the part of our brain that deals with intuition and creativity, and not much to do with the language-oriented part of the brain that deals with literal definitions. The best horsemen have an integrated way of thinking, that allows interaction and flow between these parts of the brain; simultaneously, employing excellent technique, while creatively responding to their sensory feedback. This allows them to react intuitively to their horses’ movement and responses, without first stopping to analyze each bit of information. This gives them great timing in the moment by moment process of applying and releasing aids, cues, and corrections.

To illustrate this idea, I’d like to share a story told to me by my good friend, Colleen Nevius. Colleen, like so many of our esteemed guests, is an amazing person. She was a Navy helicopter pilot, and had fixed wing (airplane) training in both reciprocating and jet engines (where she learned aerobatics.) Her career included jobs as a logistics helicopter pilot in both the H-46 Sea Knight and the CH-53E Super Stallion, and she was honored to be chosen as the Navy’s (1st woman) Test Pilot, training in Patux-

ent River MD where she worked as a test pilot for a couple of years. She also did some instructing, including aerial inflight refueling and ship-board landings- challenging work to say the least!

Colleen’s anecdote actually happened in Houston. In her words:

“A good friend of mine had purchased a Great Lakes- a beautiful aerobatic biplane, and after mastering ‘straight and level’ was venturing into the aerobatic flight maneuvers. He was the kind of person that wanted to know exactly what to do in whatever he undertook. For example, directions to my house would be to drive 1.25 miles south on the interstate, exit on route 128 and continue east for .35 miles, bear slightly right and look for the 3rd house on the right.”

“The problem is, flying an acrobatic maneuver is a matter of spacial awareness, as well as intuitive control. Each type of airplane (and sometimes, each airplane!) has its own control characteristics, that require different inputs to achieve desired outcome. Once you decide what you want to do, you have to couple that with what the airplane needs to get there. Hence, “Do whatever it takes” becomes the mantra (within reason, of course) in achieving the desired outcome. So to “do” a barrel roll with this beautiful little airplane, I couldn’t tell him to pull the stick back 4”, then initiate a roll by moving the stick 6” to the left and coordinating with left pedal etc, etc. And I couldn’t really go fly one with him and have him ‘shadow’ the controls (lightly hold on to feel what I was doing.) We did a barrel roll to get the sight picture of what needed to be done, and then I told him to “Make it happen”. Eventually, through trial and error, he mastered the maneuver once he ‘felt’ the aircraft and ‘saw’ the path of the maneuver.”

Throughout Colleen’s piloting experience, the rule of thumb was “Do whatever it takes.” She says it’s amazing how well that transfers to the back of a horse!!

I have to agree. Just as each individual aircraft responds uniquely to the same controls, each horse responds uniquely to the strength, timing, and placement of its rider’s aids and cues. Just as Colleen couldn’t tell her friend exactly how far to move the stick for a barrel roll, I cannot tell a student exactly how much to open a rein to begin a leg yield or half-pass, how much inside leg to put on, or exactly when to allow the horse’s movement to close the outside rein again. By the time I shout a directive at a rider, the dynamic has changed, and the signal often comes too late. The same holds true for virtually every horsemanship maneuver.

So how can you improve your “Feel” astride the horse? First, recognize that excellent riding, like flying, requires spacial awareness, and “seeing” the maneuver. As you ride through your training session, think ahead, and visualize each movement, before you begin to execute it. See it in you mind; the shape of your horse’s body, the direction of its movement, and the balanced position of your fluid body astride it. Then



use your seat, breath, and aids to create this picture. The picture will be dynamic and flowing as you move through space from one skill to the next. Have someone video all or part of your riding sessions, and watch them later, remembering as well as you can, how each part of the ride felt as you and your horse were moving through it. Those parts that looked and felt balanced and fluid are the ones that you want to picture in your mind, and recreate the next time that you ride.

Watching other skilled riders can also help you to visualize how you want to ride. Some of my best students are moms who watch their kids take lessons from a skilled teacher all year long, then finally get to try their hand at it on their vacation time with us at the ranch.

Stay fit, and engage in activities such as Tai Chi, Yoga, Pilates, and Dance, that are all excellent modes of enhancing the balance, body awareness and flexibility necessary for great riding.

Adopt a relaxed, yet alert awareness, that acknowledges the feedback from all of your senses. Centered Riding’s Soft Eyes fundamental is a way of seeing all around you, but still allowing your kinesthetic, or “feel” feedback to play a major role in how you respond to what happens moment by moment.

Above all, Remember to Enjoy the Ride, and don’t miss an opportunity to pick up a pearl of wisdom from a great source like Colleen!

Colleen and her husband, Space Shuttle Commander Bill Readdy, live outside of Washington, DC, with their two sons, (who I’d like to meet someday), and their wonderful daughter, Maureen, (who I have the pleasure of knowing quite well!) Thanks so much, Colleen, for your contribution to this article!

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