

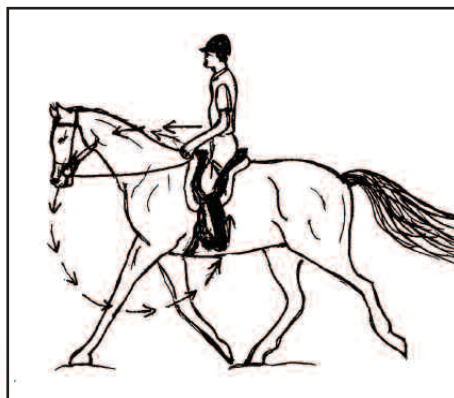
Circle of Energy: Feel and Timing in Collection

In previous articles, I've written about the importance of developing good feel, and precise timing of aids and cues. Proper collection of your horse is a process that requires both of these skills in spades.

Proper collection is not just a head position. It is a "way of going" that involves the horse's whole body, from the its nose, to its tail. When properly collected, a horse will engage its core muscles, lift its back beneath its rider, relax at the jaw and poll, and move forward with lightness, cadence, and even rhythm and momentum. The horse's hind legs will reach far up under its body, as the haunches propel the horse and rider

forward together as one. Any effective English or Western rider, whether in Dressage or Reining, Equitation or Horsemanship, must be able to collect their horse, in order to successfully prepare for and execute certain skills within their competitive tests and patterns.

When working to improve feel and timing, it often helps to visualize what it is you and your horse are striving to accomplish, before and during your riding session. In this case, try visualizing a "Circle of Energy", as suggested by the diagram below. It is actually not a perfect circle, because it starts in the rider's center, slightly above the rest of the circle. Nevertheless, you can visualize it as a "circling" or "recycling" of the horse and rider's energy as follows:



1) Energy and movement are initiated by the tall body position, breath, and leg pressure of the rider's centered body.

2) As the horse moves forward, the energy initially pushes forward and flat, like a horse at play, or racing, might move. The rider's legs, breath, and seat maintain this forward energy, but...

3) the rider's hands begin to apply slight down and back pressure to the mouth or nose of the horse, turning the flat, forward energy into circular, forward energy, that re-circulates back

up under the rider's seat, to be sent out and forward once more by the rider's seat and leg aids.

For this process to work, the balance and timing of the rider's seat, leg, and rein aids or cues are critical. Much of the time, there will be both some leg, and some rein aid applied simultaneously, in just the right balance. Finding that balance depends upon the rider's ability to feel how the horse responds to his or her aids, and to adjust and apply them, moment by moment, according to the sensory feedback he or she receives. If the horse's movement becomes too flat and forward, the rider must immediately apply a bit more rein pressure. If the horse loses momentum, or threatens to drop gait or lose cadence, the rider must momentarily apply more leg. If the rider feels the horse's back start to drop, he or she must immediately apply more leg, but still maintain just enough contact with the horse's mouth or nose to maintain the collection. There will be a lightness, and an elasticity to the movement that the rider must also feel and recognize.

The diagram shows an English rider using light, but direct contact with the horse's mouth, supporting the horse's movement as the bit becomes a steady, consistent reference point for the horse's balance.

Over time, in Western disciplines, horses are trained to self-carry to such a degree that only brief, intermittent pressure is applied to the horse's mouth or nose in order to bring the horse's energy back up under the rider's seat. When a leverage, or shanked bit is used, the horse may respond to a signal as subtle as the change in the rein's weight as it is lifted slightly by the rider's hand.

Regardless of the differences between the exact aids and cues used in English and Western riding styles, it is, in both styles, a balancing of the seat and leg aids with the rein aids, applied with accurate timing, (through feel), that accomplishes correct collected movement.

Another important aspect of feel in collection, is the rider's awareness of just where to hold his or her hands, in order to allow the horse to hold it's head at the optimum height for "getting on" or carrying the bit comfortably. Each horse has its own individual "sweet spot" or zone, for this. The perfect position for one horse may be a bit too high or low for another. The effective rider-trainer must adapt his or her hand position, until he or she feels the horse find their optimum head and neck position, relaxing and softening their jaw, when slight rein pressure is applied. (This is one of the "Details" that you do want to "Sweat." A difference of 1/2 inch can determine whether your hand position helps or hinders your horse in this process.) Once found, the rider must then maintain this hand position, through relaxed elbows, whether sitting, rising, or in half-seat.

Equally important is feeling the exact direction and manner in which one must squeeze the reins in order to relax the horse's jaw and poll. Typically, using the whole arm to pull up or

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straight back results in an undesirable stiffening or bracing of the horse's jaw and poll. Using a squeezing of just the fingers, and possibly a little wrist, in a down and back direction, works best.

Visualize the Circle of Energy before and during your riding session. Close your eyes from time to time as you ride, and simply feel and respond to your horse. Have someone video your session, and review the video periodically as your session progresses.

Relax, and acknowledge your improvement. Above all, Remember to Enjoy the Ride!

Dianne can be reached at Hill Country Equestrian Lodge where she teaches Whole Horsemanship year-round. www.hillcountryequestlodge.com, or (830) 796-7950.

Horse Health Products Introduces Four New Products And A New Look For The Product Line

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