

Contact



April 2014

Part Two



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During the first phase of training the paces should be ‘natural’ and just what the horse offers us.”

Contact - At the end of the rein

The first contact with a young horse is likely to be via a hand on a rope that connects to its head. The horse's head is blessed with great sensitivity (both inside and out) and yet how much time is taken to prepare for this connection? It's probably a measure of the good nature of the horse that most accept this with good grace but if we wish to develop this, refine and finesse it then we should consider our first step very carefully. Foals are usually handled from an early age but the amount of care taken during this important stage of their lives plays a big part in their later confidence around humans. I have no intention of discussing foal handling and only draw attention to the fact that even when you start your ‘untouched’ horse it is worth remembering that they are almost certain to have had previous contact and a hand on a rope attached to their head; how this was perceived by your diamond in the rough you may never know unless

you have been there every step of the way. So assume that the first handling went well, no flooding, no confusion and no nasty incident to be forever etched onto the hard drive of the brain. This handling will have taught the basic rule of most horsemanship - pressure responded to by a release equals removal of the pressure. The pressure can be a feel on a rope, a tug on a rope or literally just a fixed rope at a tie ring. Pressure can also be a hand on a flank or a simple rising of energy towards the horse or even a raising of the voice. Pressure is simply something that exacts a response (stimulus) and is removed as soon as the response occurs. I train my own horses using as much positive reinforcement as possible, I add (+) something in terms of a reward following a desired behaviour. Even using this method it still makes sense to utilise touch as one of the primary guides in terms of communicating with the horse and personally I



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think that teaching very basic pressure/release is a good idea if you want your horse to be relaxed about tying up with a lead rope.

Ultimately the day arrives when more serious work begins, in-hand, liberty, lunging, long reining and ultimately riding. During the first phase of training the paces should be 'natural' and just what the horse offers to us. Our job at this stage is to create relaxation and confidence and from this the true rhythm of the paces can develop. Head carriage, hind leg action etc. is not an issue at the start; contact is not even a consideration as we want the horse to go forwards and stop from simple commands and in a relaxed manner.

At the same time as letting the horse go his 'natural' way and find balance in liberty and/or halter work I will be starting to share some useful ideas with him. This will mean teaching him to keep his neck soft/relaxed and his jaw and poll free from tension. Stationary exercises will include flexion of the poll/neck and releasing forwards, down and out (in terms of the nose seeking) and once learned will be taken into movement. This work in-hand will gradually encompass all that I need to build a supple back and soft neck along with relaxation of the jaw and poll when required.

In the French classical school the balance is addressed at the walk and halt, the in-hand flexions teaching the horse how to respond to the side pull/cavesson or bit and adding in basic lateral movements from the early stages. In this way we can begin to use gymnastic exercises to create balance and posture; small positive steps are the only route to a strong base in this early training. The whole of this level of training would require a book to describe it in full and even then requires the ability of the trainer to determine a horse-specific training plan. The essential thing is that the hand is able to be light and communicative at all times – nowhere in any training manual or book from any era or discipline, have I seen it noted that the hand should block, be closed or worse still be backwards acting.

My first two aims are rhythm and relaxation, I aim for a horse moving in his natural rhythm in a relaxed manner (free from tension not so chilled he's asleep). My third aim is to be able to release! I

need to release my aids, cues, pressure anything that I use I must learn to instantly release and this in turn develops the possibility for the horse to release.

The three R's...rhythm, relaxation and release...should be etched in our minds in this early work and returned to at the start of every session however advanced the horse may be in his training. Without the ability to release tension and work with the natural paces of the horse we cannot develop contact.

If you recall (from part 1 of contact) in my quest for thoughts from others I enlisted the help of friends at A Matter of Horse forum, from that discourse Katy suggested that-

< 'contact' encompasses for me the seat, the legs and the hands. Each having contact with and influencing a different part of the horse.>

“At every stage of the horses development his balance cannot rely upon our hand...”

This is so true because the contact develops and is felt through a relationship of all parts of the horse ridden/worked by all parts of the trainer. If the horse weights the inside shoulder we don't just feel it in the rein but in our legs, seat and seat bones. When the horse is



The in hand flexions teaching the horse how to respond to the rein aids in the cavesson'

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thoroughly warmed up and his energy pulses through all parts of his body without hindrance, when he perfectly understands leg and seat aids/cues and feels like a wave rolling with vibrancy and energy then we might consider that our contact could be good. This communication requires a hand that is light and accepting, able to follow elastically, receive nuances and at times closes and sustains (slowing a hind leg etc.) but all these actions MUST be taught to the horse so that he understands what is being asked. It is wholly unacceptable to expect a horse to guess at our intention when using a feel on a rein or touching with a leg.

At every stage of the horse's development his balance cannot rely upon our hand. If he needs our hand for constant support then he isn't in balance, the hand can explain to him what we want, where, how much, when to release but these can be no more than brief signals or cues. This is the same with the seat, leg and weight - how can they be constantly sustained if we want a conversation, it would be like someone who never let you get a word into the dialogue expecting you to nonetheless have an opinion. All that can ensue is a shouting match! At times I accept that the contact may feel firm because of a loss of balance but in an instant we need to be able to use our seat to re-balance and enable us to release the rein aid.

I believe that the gymnastic training at a basic level requires us to use a sympathetic hand via a system of pre-taught lessons so that the contact becomes just a set of signals; 'soften your neck, release your poll, raise your nose a fraction, turn your nose this way or that'. I don't believe that we need to keep a specific weight in the rein or a certain length of rein to achieve this contact; if we had time we could teach this without the rein with any number of cues/signals. Through gymnastic exercises we teach the horse to balance with us on their backs without a constant pressure on the rein. So why do we see the opposite at all levels of ability (human and horse) and where are people learning this front to back dressage? Find me one book that says wrestle with the front end, pull it and push into it and your horse will dance. To be honest I'm unable to explain this but we all know it happens and it happens from base level to top level all over the world. Perhaps it is the way it is written about, the idea is generally



accepted that when the horse 'comes' to the contact or to the bit, he welcomes an elastic feeling in the rein. I'm not actually sure of this myself and personally I want my horse to take the rein from me, not in a brutal 'pull' but in a way that asks for freedom to show me what he can do without me reminding him in a constant deadening way. I'm probably just not able to ride with the finesse that it takes to have a good elastic contact and so I have sought out a method that works for me and helps me to be as light as I can. A horse is dynamic and when we add our movement to his we are compounding every error in terms of contact with the rein. So there you have it, I'm just an old fool that thinks that contact is misinterpreted. I honestly don't mind if you disagree (and you may well do) but what I do want is for you to evaluate your contact, check it out, think about why and what you are doing to get your contact and remember just what is on the end of your reins!.

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