

TRAINING TIPS

Leg Contact

Most of us have had the experience of riding a horse whose only response to any contact from the rider's legs is to go. Such horses are fairly common. They overreact to any leg aid because they so rarely feel the rider's legs. This reaction makes the rider keep her legs off the horse, and a cycle is created that benefits neither.

If you want your horse to move fluidly and maintain contact with the reins, you must have calf contact with his sides to keep the energy moving forward and control him laterally. Calf contact secures your position, makes your aids instantaneous, and adds an extra measure of control in emergencies. If your horse shies, a long leg in contact with his side will not only "pull" you along with the motion but also enable a quick response to channel his energy into a shoulder-in or a spiral to remedy the situation and calm him.

Your thighs should be relaxed and long with your knees down—never gripping—and the inside of your calves lightly touching the horse at all times. A deep heel will keep the ball of your foot in the stirrup and stretch the calf, making your base secure. If you hold your calves out away from him, every leg aid will come as a surprise to him. Also, if you pull your leg out away from him and kick for an aid, he will feel a vacuum and then an attack.

Remember that you put your horse on the aids, not just on the bit, and any effort to influence the front of him must be preceded by driving aids. If you have rein contact, you simply must have leg contact, or the energy will be compromised, and you shape his energy, not his body. Physical force will only result in resistance on the horse's part. So

nudging, active legs will gain results, while a static, digging heel will make the horse lean into or "push against" the annoyance. If your horse has become dull to the legs, teach him to lighten by applying one fair "sting" with the wand (whip) just behind your leg each time he ignores the aid. He will quickly realize that the wand will tap him if he doesn't respond to the leg and become very light. You must be consistent and absolutely correct with your timing whenever you use artificial aids.

If your horse is overly sensitive to your aids, the answer is *not* to hold them out away from his body. He must learn to accept their contact, and the best way to help him do this is with many lessons in spiraling. Spirals at walk and trot—decreasing and then increasing with half pass in and leg yield out—will soon have him at ease with your leg pressure. Just be sure to keep your legs on him and shape the energy in your hands. Later, when the spirals are good at walk, then trot, you can canter them carefully. Because you remain circling in these exercises, the horse is less likely to speed up than when going straight ahead. When you do go wide onto the track, any overreaction to your leg aids can be contained immediately by circling the horse while you keep the legs lightly against his sides.

If you take one leg off your horse's side, you have thrown away that part of him. It not only opens a vacuum on that side, but if you still have contact with the other leg, you have in effect doubled its influence.

Especially over fences, calf contact is essential to your security. Between jumps, you need that lateral control from your leg aids.

This is the time pulling one leg away from him will cause you real trouble. He will just swing out into that vacuum and ruin the lines to your fences. Over the jumps themselves, you need the security of a deep heel to keep your leg from swinging back; your knees push down as you follow your horse's neck, and your calves hold his energy in flight. They *press* against his sides to secure you and stabilize him.

I went from riding saddle seat to hunter's, and nothing could have impressed the need for this "leg contact" business upon me more than that change! The saddle seat rider and the western rider have totally different goals and methods for their horsemanship. Their horses are built differently and move differently than a hunter, a dressage horse, or an eventer. If you are retraining a horse that went western or saddle seat or raced (horses off the track have not had much experience with leg contact), be aware and patient. You will have to spend *time* getting the horse used to the feel of your always present, kindly influencing aids.

Teach your horse to carry himself. If you find that you have to drive, drive, drive every stride until your legs feel like noodles, you are doing *too* much. Use the wand to sharpen his response to your legs. Aim for a hugging contact that needs merely to nudge or push the hair the wrong way to bring a response. When doing lateral work, remember to use *both* leg aids—for pirouettes, your inside leg maintains impulsion; in shoulder-in, your outside leg stretches the outside of your horse's body; etc. Never "throw away" half of your horse.

Be certain that you never *grip* with the legs to keep yourself in the saddle. Gripping only "pops" you up off the horse anyway, and it is certainly telling him to speed up. Keep your thighs relaxed, knees down and back (it bears repeating), and heels low. At posting trot, just roll up onto your knees, bringing your hips between your elbows, and settle back to touch the saddle before the horse's stride puts you up again, still with the calves on his sides.

When the time comes for the lightest, most refined leg aids, use your spurs to allow the briefest touch to convey your message.

By riding your horse forward to your hands with consistent, compassionate legs and a quiet, balanced seat, you will gain great influence over his entire body. It may seem as if he is reading your very thoughts. ¶

—Katharine Lark