

Quiet Hands

By Danica Yates

My partner is an arborist, not a horse person. But he is interested in dressage and asked me one morning, “So when you are riding, doing like a half pass or something, are you telling the horse every minute what to do, squeezing or pulling or whatever?”

I told him that is an interesting question. (A) because many riders are not quite sure about this themselves and (B) because the answer is in part yes and in large part no. When horse and rider are well connected and communicating effectively, very little physical pressure is needed on the rider’s part to dance with the horse. Good training techniques and a lot of practice are needed to get to this point. Riders are in the constant process of applying the aids, softening and applying again. As dressage riders, the end goal is to physically *do* as little as possible but to *feel* every step.

Probably the main aid that dressage riders have a hard time doing less with, is the hands. You will often see riders see-sawing with the reins or in other less obvious ways pulling the horse together. Let’s think back to the age old adage, ‘ride leg to hand.’ What does this mean? It means that we create energy in the hind end using our legs and allow a place for the energy to go with our hands. We accomplish true thoroughness by developing soft, following hands that maintain a steady, supportive connection applying technical cues when needed.

Soft Hands

The main habits we want to steer away from are bracing or restricting back on the reins- even if it does momentarily round the horse's neck. More likely though, the horse will respond by bracing back. He might invert his back and 'come off the bit,' or more subtly lose forward impulsion and engagement. We want to avoid snatching one rein back, instead carry our hands evenly and lightly in front of us. Soft connection in our hands will encourage the horse to stretch forward 'seeking' the bit. Rather than blocking energy backwards with a bracing hand, we want to allow the energy we create in the hind end to circulate forward.

A good exercise to start creating soft, non-bracing hands is to learn to follow the movement of the horse. A rider who appears quiet in the saddle is still inside themselves, but their bodies are actually moving comprehensively with the horse. They are taking the horse's movement and letting it translate into their seat, pelvis and arms while maintaining a still core strength with their upper body. As your horse walks, pay attention to how each rein feels in your hands. Remember that the reins are connected to the bit lying on your horse's tongue and lips. Feel how his back naturally moves as he walks, and allow for this motion. Check to see if your arms are dynamic and encourage your elbow joints to open and close smoothly. Work on encouraging your arms and your hips to follow forward and back with the motion of the walk and canter and your seat to absorb the motion of the trot upward. Let these parts of your body move with the horse so that you can use your core strength to keep your hands still and soft.

Steady Connection

Once riders have developed soft, allowing hands, they must focus on the connection in their hands. We never want to 'hold our horses up,' hanging too much on the reins, but also, we do not want slack in the reins with a connection that is too loose. At one extreme, we want to avoid bracing on the horse's mouth; at the other, we want to avoid dropping the contact all together. When horses run free out in the field, most will not be moving in a frame. Our reins do play a role of support. Our hands harnesses the energy flowing up the spine and cycle it back around to create a 'through' dressage horse. The outside rein in particular must be steady with the contact. Maintaining consistent contact allows the horse's movement and frame to be consistent. With steady, supportive hands it does not matter if we are doing transitions, lengthening, turning, there should always be a light contact or connection to the horse's mouth.

A great exercise to see the effect of steady hands is to take your dressage whip



sideways, parallel to the ground. Place the whip across the top of your hands, holding it secure under your thumbs.

On a 20 meter circle, point the tip of that whip towards the very center of the circle. Image

that the whip is the radius of the circle. You do not want it to point too far back towards your horse's haunches, nor too far forward towards his nose. Also, you do not want the whip to tip up or down, but stay level, parallel to the ground in your hands. You should find that your hands become steady when using this technique. Your hands must work in unity and are not loose to push or pull on one side. If you follow the movement of the horse with soft hands, steadying your hands will improve the supportive contact.

Techniques for the Hands

Though our goal is to keep our hands as quiet and even as possible, there are certainly times when our hands must apply a cue to get a reaction from the horse. Two of these techniques are half halting and playing the reins. When we add our leg to increase impulsion, we do not want our horse running through our hand. If he does, we half halt decisively by closing our hand into a tight fist to stop the running then immediately soften by relaxing the

palm of our hand, add our leg and ask for impulsion again. Whenever we add our leg or tap to create energy from the hind end, we first stretch up and soften our hand to allow a place for that energy to go. You can see the pattern here with the half halt: we apply the aid, soften and apply again. We never hang on the reins or apply pressure without consciously listening to the horse and following up with softening and use of the legs.

‘Playing the reins’ entails softly squeezing, almost kneading the rein between your fingers and palm of your hand. It is so subtle that as a trainer, I see it enacted more from the horse’s reaction than from visually seeing any movement in the rider’s hand. What playing the rein does is talk to the horse’s mouth. Remind yourself of how your rein is connected to a metal bar in the soft tissue in your horse’s mouth. Playing the rein stimulates and engages that tissue like a message. Most often this technique is employed on the inside rein while the outside rein maintains a steady support. Playing the rein does not pull the horse’s mouth with static pressure or grab and throw away; rather it feels that tissue and talks to the horse as you add your leg. The key word here: leg. Playing the rein helps soften the back when the leg is added to create energy from the hind end.

Through developing good connection there comes moments when we can quit thinking rationally and simply move with the horse. Sometimes doing less is the hardest thing. But as riders we want to create freedom in the front end and a comfortable place for the horse to carry himself by keeping our hands quiet and supportive. We want to be engaged with our minds and feel every step but stay as quiet as we can with our aids to allow the dance to happen.

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