

IT IS ALL ABOUT COMMUNICATION

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I have always wondered why dressage is called an art, yet it is an Olympic sport. Let's face it, watching 50 GP dressage tests can become quite boring by number 20. However, watching 50 freestyle to music tests, is pure pleasure. It can certainly be categorised as an art. For me, the definition of art in dressage can be defined as 'he has mastered the art'.

The latter art is all about invisible communication. Horses are truly amazing animals. Every time a rider sits on a horse, the horse tries his utmost to interpret the rider's body language – his wishes. They try to figure out what the rider wants them to do. I wish my children were this motivated to please.

A horse is a biomechanical learning animal, not a machine which works with cogs, levers and wheels. It is not about bending the horse, turning his head from side to side, squeezing the reins, pushing him forward into contact etc. It is him constantly learning what pressure from each of the rider's body part movements mean - or does not mean. It is communication.

It is not our bodies 'allowing the horse to round his back'. It is our explanations which do this. Therefore, our focus should be on correct communication with the horse and not to treat him as though he were a mechanical object whose body simply 'fills in spaces we allow'. For example; there is no room for teaching phrases such as: 'Allow the horse to 'fill' your outside rein' or 'he does not want to take the outside contact' or 'he is holding the bit on the inside (or outside) rein' or 'the horse is like a bow'. These are examples of mechanical teaching. If we are riding by mechanics or by incorrect suppositions, then we are not going to solve the problem, and we will never learn the art. It would be unfair to the horse to leave him in the dark, to have him second guess us, as is often expected. Horses do not refuse to take a contact on a specific rein. They are simply bending in that direction. They have not learnt to bend or yield correctly to the opposite rein pressure. The correct terminology would be: 'ask your horse to bend to the inside'. Then his outside contact will automatically become positive (outside rein 'filled'). He will do what you ask, provided he understands what you ask. No amount of pulling on the outside

rein (or bending to the outside) will give you an inside bend. You have to ask for an inside bend and yield when your horse obliges. We have to look at the reason the horse is not giving an inside bend. If the contact is stronger on the inside rein than on the outside rein, the horse is biomechanically in an outside bend even though his posture may



This problem in particular is easily solved in one lesson. It should never be an ongoing problem. If the rider explains it

appear to have an inside bend. This is what Steinbrecht called, 'a false bend'. Only when yielding to soft inside rein pressure, does the horse have a correct inside bend.

The first shoulder-in lesson. This horse is reacting to the rider's pulling right arm by lifting his head and pulling back. The rider had not yet developed sufficient coordination skills for the shoulder-in. We have to learn to be 'one-man-bands', able to move each limb independently from another. The horse reacted as he understood from his rider's unclear instructions. The rider's 'pressure-reaction-release of pressure', communication is not clear. There should be no pull on the inside rein in shoulder-in.

correctly to the horse and the teacher explains it logically to the rider the solution is immediate.




Lesson three on the left. The rider has stopped pulling on the inside rein. It is now fairly loose. The horse is lifting his neck a little, showing that there is still a little tension in the rider's body. By the end of lesson three, on the right, the rider's body use has improved to such an extent that the horse now understands her communication with a soft yielding contact and clear left bend.

A few years ago, I was teaching my young horse the walk pirouette. I was unaware that I was stretching my body up as I asked her to start the movement. Soon she started the walk pirouette before I had asked her. It was only through her reaction that I realised that I was stretching my upper body up split seconds before going into the pirouette. She had been interpreting all my body movements as the body language by which I was communicating. Thus, the change in pressure on her back became

her pre-aid (signal) for the pirouette. Being a mare, she was not going to wait for more. The rider's weight changes only become meaningful once the horse has made the association between the weight change and the movement. That experience reaffirmed to me that random weight changes are not meaningful to the horse. For example, if you stretch up to do up your zipper, the horse does not react. If you bend down to do the girth, the horse does not move. It is by a learning process of association and

assimilation that weight changes become meaningful communications with the horse.

A second example also came to me by accident. About 15 years ago I was training a young pony. Working outdoors in the sun meant that I had to wear sunglasses while riding. Before a canter I used to push my glasses back up on my nose to ensure that they do not fall off.

The last example is about a farm horse which I had loaned from the farmer. I had to re-train him to my body language. Every time I squeezed him with both legs, he started to canter. When I explained this to the farmer, he said that that was indeed his aid for canter. When I enquired as to his aid for trot, he said that I had to push my knuckles into his wither. I tried, and it worked. I then had to teach the horse my body language, which he picked up in a session or two.

After a few sessions of teaching her the canter aid, I found she was preparing herself for the canter as I pushed my sunglasses up. Although this was not much of a change of pressure, it was a change of posture. In our communication, she interpreted the hand pushing up the glasses as a pre-aid to canter whereas she did not react to other posture changes because the latter were meaningless.

I have also learnt to recognise when my messages confuse my young horse - she stops dead or walks backwards. How does your horse tell you when he/she is confused?

What your horse gives you, is what he understands you want from him. You can check whether your instructions were clear by the way your horse reacts

