



## Dr. Beverly Gordon

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### **Infinite Adaptability**

It's very common to see riders so focused on one aspect of their riding that they compromise another. This is especially true for less experienced riders who have not yet had the benefit of developing good muscle memory for the task at hand. For example, think about riders who are so focused on one aid they forget about the others. If they have already developed bad habits, such as hands too high or too low, this will be the first habit to re-occur when they concentrate on other issues. While there is no question that attention to detail regarding technique is important, at some point the rider's "feel" must take over, as it will ultimately become the foremost influence over the rider's ability to succeed.

### **Feel**

To understand the concept of a rider having "good feel", let's use the following description. ***"A rider is said to have good feel when he can correctly interpret conditions at any given moment and can communicate positive, constructive aids to the horse". Add to this consistent and immediate reaction times of the aids and you have "Infinite Adaptability"***.

Feel is a compilation of many factors, in fact, one of them being technique. It's true that one could argue good technique is the foundation of good performance. In most sports, the biomechanics of good technique allow the athlete to reach higher potentials. This why golfers practice the golf swing repeatedly. But, (and I say this with no reservations) even in the game of golf, at some point it all becomes about feel. Golfers, and pitchers, and tennis players, etc., all develop good muscle memory because at faster speeds, when there are a lot of variables involved, they cannot focus on every aspect of their technique. They need to have developed the feel

(and mental acuity) to *infinitely adapt* their aids - 1) to a numerous set of circumstances, 2) at any given moment. I call this “Infinite Adaptability”, and it is all about feel.

## **The Big Picture**

It has been said that a teacher cannot teach the student feel, but he can teach them how to *develop* feel. Feel is an individual thing and people interpret and experience feel differently. Even images and associations differ from person to person. In a recent clinic I gave, I was attempting to relate an image to describe the “feel” relating to a certain movement. One student said, “that really helped me...” and another student said, “that really confused me...” So, for the second student I changed the association and she then understood the “feel” we were attempting to achieve.

One very helpful method you can use to improve your ability to develop feel is visualization. Imagine any skill performed as perfectly as you can, and then focus on *how you would feel if you were doing the skill*. Whatever the goal, it is not just the visualizing the picture, but imagining the feel of the skill that is important.

## **Developing Infinite Adaptability**

To develop feel, and therefore attain the capacity for “Infinite Adaptability”, certain aspects of athletic training need to be available to the rider. Here are a few of the more important ones:

-Good solid technique with independence of the aids. Good technique is of paramount importance because every moment on horseback demands a particular combination of aids. Good rider-horse communication is only possible when these aids are combined in the proper relationship. The classic example is, “why do leg aids mean ‘GO’ and also mean ‘STOP’?” Of course, the answer lies in the other aids given as well.

-Properly conditioned responses (requires less conscious effort allowing the rider to focus on other variables). Conditioned responses are a prerequisite for good timing of the aids and speedy rider reactions.

-Capable physical ability. (Riders should be fit. Enough said here)

-Mental relaxation and imaging. Because of the cognitive aspects of learning, it is easier to process information and react accurately when you assess the current situation correctly. Tension and stress interfere with this assessment and therefore decrease the likelihood of accurate quick responses. Additionally, relaxed muscles can perform better and are an integral part of independence of the aids.

That being said, it all comes down to Visualize, Practice and Relax.

### **Final Note**

Inherent in the sport of riding is the notion we can always be better. Riding is about the journey, since every goal reached brings forth another new goal, the journey never ends. When it comes to horses, we can't live long enough to learn it all. All we can do is strive for better understanding, and therefore better communication with the horse.

**“Infinite Adaptability” is the key to successful horse-rider communication.** And it is all about feel. (Which in turn is all about visual imagery, muscle memory, conditioned responses, independent aids, good timing, relaxation, practice.....)

Need I say more?

Until next time,

Dr. Bev Gordon