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The Elusive "Feel"

FEEL YOUR HORSE ON THE GROUND AND IN THE SADDLE

There is a vast difference between possessing some knowledge of horses and having the *feel* of a horse. I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of being able to understand and respect the difference between the two.

The balance and rhythm of the horse's entire body should not only be recognized and understood, but *felt* by the rider. The importance of feel is that it is the purest and most complete communication between horse and rider. But while students of riding struggle to develop and improve their feel, instructors of riding struggle to teach and describe it. Legendary horseman Tom Dorrance spoke often of balance, timing and feel and the difficulty in teaching it. In his book, "True Unity" Tom states, "There can be some direction, or support and encouragement, but the 'feel' itself can come from no one but themselves (students)."

Over the years, I have struggled with finding effective ways to communicate to eager determined riders the feeling of having a certain connection with their horse, just as I myself work to improve and understand my own feel. What I have found is that you can't teach feel; people have to learn to master it on their own. While instructors *can* help students find ways to better develop and realize feel, students *need to* work toward acquiring the knowledge necessary to understand it.

So what exactly is this elusive feel, and how exactly does one learn it?

USING GROUNDWORK TO IMPROVE YOUR FEEL

First, let me say that there are two types of feel. One refers to the tactile sense or the physical connection with your horse (can you feel what your horse is doing?) and the other refers to compassion (mental or emotional connection with your horse). While the two are connected in that they are both based upon enhanced understanding of the horse, this discussion will focus primarily on the first type of feel: tactile.

Learning the feel of the horse in your groundwork can be a great advantage in achieving good-quality mounted work, no matter your riding discipline or purpose.

When your horse maneuvers well through *feel* on the halter rope, and you have learned to direct and support the horse in time with the front and hind feet as they leave the ground, then you have a foundation in place with your horse from which to develop a *feel* of the horse from the saddle.

The best way to try to learn feel is to always remember you are influencing the movement of the feet. Even highly developed riding skill and communication which produces body position and self-carriage needed for advanced work began with the understanding of where, and how to direct the horse's feet. It always surprises me when I work with upper level riders who have difficulty "getting to the feet", but it never surprises me how their horses improve when they can direct each of their horse's feet more effectively. In a perfect world, our communication with the horse would be pure and complete, with the ultimate goal of being able to direct any foot, in any direction, at any time.

It is the quality of this communication (your feel) which dictates the quality of your training. How can you communicate to your horse which movements you desire if you have no control over directing the horse's feet?

MOVING YOUR HORSES FEET

One of the best ways to feel the movement of your horse's feet is to back your horse from the ground. You can feel the horse's response to your aid, as well as learn appropriate timing of your release. Ask specifically for each step, and remember to continually focus on the *quality* of your horse's movement.

1. Stand facing your horse on left side. (repeat on the other side)
2. Hold the bottom of your horse's halter with your left hand, thumb down. (rope halters are best as they have better *feel*, but if using leather or canvas hold the lead close to the halter. Do NOT use any leads with chains)
3. Gently rock the halter side to side and ask your horse to back. Watch each diagonal pair of legs and time your backward pressure to effect each step. Remember to soften (release) your backward pressure after each step. Continue to ask your horse to back for several steps. How soft (willing) can you get your horse to back?
4. Try to influence each diagonal pair of legs. Can you start the back-up with *either* diagonal pair of legs?
5. Try to place your horse's feet where you want them. Can you back your horse around a circle? Between two ground rails?
6. Remember the following rules: Always release pressure when your horse makes the slightest try. Keep the feet flowing freely. Connect each step to each ask in the halter. Keep a regular rhythm in the back up.

Remember that force can never elicit anything from a horse comparable in sensitivity, accuracy and spirit to what is volunteered by the horse through understanding and feel.

Search until you have discovered the best way for each horse to receive and understand the intent of your message. This is paramount to developing *feel*, and will improve your communication with horses forever. Not a bad thing!

Until next time,

Dr. Bev Gordon