

SELF-TEST

DOES MY HORSE WORK CORRECTLY?

Before beginning this chapter, please read from Section 3 (Understanding the Horse) the chapter called The Psyche of the Horse, and from Section 2 (The Basics) the chapters called Harmony and The Aids. In addition, you will find numerous references throughout this chapter to other chapters, which illustrate the close connection between all the subjects.

It is not every day that there is a knowledgeable ground person available to watch us ride and give us feedback. However, we get the most honest and accurate feedback each and every time we ride, from the one who knows best, and that is the horse.

We want to be correct. We want the training to go well so that we don't overwork the horse. We want the horse to accept the work in such a way that he develops in a positive manner, and most certainly, we don't want to waste time heading down the wrong track. ***It is so important to know that what we are doing is right.***

How do we know our work is correct? We can evaluate the results using certain exercises. Let us begin by making a decision...everything will go well, all the time. Removing negative thoughts and doubts from your mind provides the environment to create instead of correct, and gives the horse a fair chance to give appropriate responses that can be use in your evaluation.

We can test how our horses are working in about three minutes. This test should be a consistent part of our daily warm-up. It doesn't matter if, to begin with, it takes up the entire lesson. It is that important. Little by little, you will be able to complete the test more quickly. But it is important that you are systematic in your approach and do not skip anything, as that will hurt you later, and the test will no longer provide an accurate answer.

IS THE HORSE MENTALLY READY?

It is important that you have a good understanding of the information in the chapters from Section 3 (Understanding the Horse) called Excuses and The Psyche of the Horse before proceeding.

Before you mount your horse, he should feel obedient, attentive and relaxed. He should be able to walk quietly and calmly next to you. Just like you, he should be mentally prepared, relaxed

and focused. The horse should stand still while you mount. If he does not, you have just allowed the first mistake to take place, and from that point on, mistake after mistake will occur during the work with no way to determine the cause. One mistake leads to another. The idea behind this self-test is to work in a systematic manner by beginning at a specific point and moving through the work one step at a time, with a system in mind. That way, if you run into something along the way that does not work, you will be able to determine exactly where the weakness is and what the horse needs in order to better understand.

This means that if you have a horse with poor ground manners, the horse will not work willingly under the aids when he is ridden. If your horse is like this, then you should start your work with those issues. The chapter from Section 3 called The Psyche of the Horse will provide helpful information. It is so important to feel that your horse is mentally with you before you step up into the saddle. The horse needs to be on the aids while you are handling him on the ground.

The idea is to work systematically, not only with the horse, but with ourselves too. Any problems that arise should be taken care of immediately. But if we blame the horse for a fault that stems from the rider's lack of knowledge, we will never solve the problem. This is because, in this situation, we have closed our minds to looking at all the possible causes, making it hard to discover where the problem came from and why it occurred. You can see that there is a lot to think about, but it is by no means an insurmountable situation. However, the person that is not inclined to study theory and work with the basics is better off finding another sport.

HARMONY

Before you start the training session, you should have a clear idea of what is going to happen. It is very important that the horse responds to ***your*** signals all the time, and that means that you must know what the signals are and how to give them. The moment the rider begins responding to the horse's signals, mistakes begin to appear. Consequently, for your ride to turn out well, you must know precisely what you intend to do, even before you get in the saddle. If you begin your ride without a plan, you will be unable to give the horse the clear signals that he needs, thereby putting him into a situation where he has to guess what he should do. Most likely the horse will guess wrong, and you will have to start the lesson by making corrections, which is a ***waste of time!***

You have now mounted your horse and are thinking about riding forward. Even this may not happen by chance. When you ride forward, you should have a feeling that the horse goes forward in the manner that you want. This requires harmony between the two of you. See the chapter Section 2 (The Basics) called Harmony for more on this subject. Before riding forward, think about how you want each step to feel. And as you ride forward, think to yourself, "We will go

forward together and in harmony.” It is very important to relay this information to the horse **before** the first step is taken. Otherwise you set a trap for him to fail.

Before you ride forward, you should stretch up tall, sit in the middle of the saddle and straighten your back. This is a signal to the horse that he should stand upright and place his body right under yours. You should picture the horse’s top-line from poll to tail as if it is a long see-saw with you sitting in the very middle, at the focal point. As a result of the way you stretch up, the way you sit in the saddle, and the way your lower leg acts to drive the horse forward, you should feel that you have more horse in front of you than behind you. The horse’s top-line is in balance when it feels a little uphill.

In order for the horse to understand the signals (aids) and to physically respond to them in an appropriate manner, you and your horse must be in harmony. If this is not the case, there is a problem even before the horse takes the first step. Without harmony, you cannot control the horse without holding him in place with strong aids.

When you and your horse are in harmony, you will feel the following:

- The horse stands upright, and places himself right under you.
- The top-line is like a long see-saw that is balanced.
- There is more horse in front of you than behind you.

These three things should give you the feeling that the horse’s center of gravity is placed right under yours, so that you and your horse have a common center of gravity. In other words, it should feel as if the horse is carrying you right over his body, not standing next to you. The moment you lose any one of these three things, mistakes will occur, and the horse will compensate for the resulting disharmony by tensing and making more mistakes..

As I have stated above, we always want the horse to respond to **our** signals and not vice versa. The easiest way to accomplish this is by doing repeated walk-halt transitions. Walk 5 to 6 strides and then halt, until it works well. When you ask the horse to go forward in walk, avoid an attitude that you “make the horse walk”. Instead, think to yourself, “I am going forward in walk now and I want the horse to do the same...I am stopping now and the horse should do the same.” This is accomplished by mainly using your seat. Do everything you want the horse to do before the horse, and by doing so, show him what you want him to do. You cannot be the leader and show the horse the way if you are following him. ***The one who follows will always be behind.***

The feeling you are looking for is that the horse copies you. He does the same thing as you, and it feels as if his legs are your legs and he is waiting for your next signal. When this works it is time to go on.

The following exercises will help the horse understand that it is his job to keep his body right under yours all the time, and to follow you as if he was afraid of letting you move away from his center of gravity. These exercises will help you determine whether the two centers of gravity (yours and your horse's) are united. You cannot see the horse's center of gravity or yours, but you can still tell where it is, because you can feel when the two centers of gravity are one.

EXERCISE 1

The first exercise is to make turns that are almost like turns on the haunches (how sharp the turns should be depends on the horse's level of training). Initiate the turn by lowering your inside heel and knee. Move your inside hip and outside shoulder forward. Open the inside rein if necessary. In essence, do the turn as if you were standing on the ground yourself. You should now feel that the horse turns with you, that he tries to stay right under you, moving his body in under yours. When you get a feeling in the turn that the horse's center of gravity and yours are together, you will know that you are in harmony with one another.

It is possible when attempting this exercise, that the horse suggests to you that it would be much easier to turn by swinging the hind legs out instead of moving the forehand around. This happens when the horse has too much weight on the forehand. The horse finds it easiest to move that part of his body that carries the least weight. If this happens, use your outside leg and a supporting outside rein to tell the horse that that is not allowed.

This exercise *is not* about making turns as small as possible. The idea is that the horse should stay right under you and not make the turns any larger than you intended. If he makes the turns larger than you asked for, you may not use your hands as a brake, because the horse will brace against the contact and fall on the forehand. When the horse makes the turns too large, it is because the horse's frame is too downhill. The top-line (or see-saw) must be made more uphill. When you set out to make this adjustment during the turns, first carefully stretch up, embrace the horse with your lower legs, and gently squeeze the reins. If the horse still tries to fall forward, raise your hands carefully. When your horse turns together with you, keeping his body placed under yours, quickly make a release so that he will know he responded correctly. The whole point of the exercise is to get the horse to bring his hind legs more in under his body.

In review, you should be able to make these turns by using very small aids, almost by simply shifting your weight, and without using your hands as a brake. The bit should be something that

the horse goes forward to, not something the rider pulls back on.

EXERCISE 2

The leg yield can also be used to determine whether there is a single center of gravity. Turn on center line and go straight for some strides. Decide on a point or letter where you want your leg yield to end. Imagine a line in the footing from your current position to the place where you want to arrive, and follow this line. Make a small half-halt and give the aids for the leg yield as lightly as possible. Place your body as if you yourself want to go sideways (without leaning). Think to yourself, “I’m moving sideways now, from this spot to that letter over there. If you (the horse) want to stay here, fine, but I am going over there!” If you commit yourself to your goal, you will give the aids wholeheartedly, and the horse will want to come with you. The result should be that the horse follows you, keeps his body under yours and comes along with you sideways.

It is important to move the front end in the direction you want to travel; the front end follows the line you defined in your mind. The horse does not need to be parallel with the track as long as he does not move in a different direction than the rider. Should he go in a different direction, it does not mean he is disobedient. It is a signal that you and the horse have two centers of gravity instead of one, and the solution is the same as in the previous exercise – adjust the see-saw (the horse’s top-line) to be more uphill.

If the horse follows you without resistance, without tensing and without going against your hands, his center of gravity is right under yours and there is harmony between horse and rider.

EXERCISE 3

There is one more exercise along the same lines as above. Walk forward. Make sure you drive your horse forward in the tempo you want and that the horse follows that tempo. Next, pick a point where you want to start walking in shorter strides, slowly, more like in slow motion. Stretch up, squeeze the reins gently and drive the horse forward in the new tempo. The horse should copy you. After a few short strides breathe out, relax and primarily, by the use of your seat, ask the horse to take longer strides again. Again, the horse should copy you.

You are now ready to combine these exercises. This part of the self-test is complete when the exercises can be done with ease and the horse mimics everything you do. He should come to a point where he lowers his head and neck and begins to chew the bit softly. This is a sign that he understands and accepts your signals, and feels comfortable and confident between your aids.

THE AIDS

When you feel that the horse follows you everywhere and, in general, copies everything you do, it is time to test the aids. When you test the aids it is important that you take one at a time. Attempting to work your horse before you are sure that he understands the aids and is able to answer each one correctly is asking for problems, and is once again *a waste of time*.

If you have not already read the chapter in Section 2 (The Basics) called The Aids, or you have remaining questions, now is the right time to read it. In that chapter you will find information about how the horse should answer each aid. If you have a good understanding of that material and you feel that your horse understands how to respond to the aids, then it's the right time to test each one to make sure that your horse understands your language.

This little test is complete once you have assured yourself that your horse is mentally relaxed and focused, and you and your horse are in harmony. Make an agreement with yourself not to proceed with other work unless this understanding and harmony is established. If you move ahead without this solid foundation, you will end up spending all of your time correcting. As a result, you will use valuable time dealing with problems, when you could use this time to develop and educate your horse instead.

Testing the aids:

- First, make sure your horse is mentally ready to go to work.
- Create harmony between you and your horse.
- Test that your horse understands and answers the driving aids.
- Test that your horse understands and answers the outside aids.
- Test that your horse understands and answers the inside leg to outside rein aids.
- Finally, test that your horse responds correctly to driving and resisting aids (the half-halt).

This part of the test takes about three minutes when everything works correctly.

ON THE AIDS

The easiest way to explain this expression is by using the following examples:

Have you ever had a lesson where the instructor asked you to ride an extended trot or something

similar and you thought, “OK, but first I have to make a circle or two to prepare and organize the horse before I can try it.”? In this case, the horse was not on the aids.

On the other hand, you may have experienced a moment when you thought, “If I make a canter depart right now, it will work just right. My horse feels perfectly ready to make a canter depart!” In this case the horse was on the aids. When the horse is on the aids the rider has the feeling he can do anything at that moment that he chooses without any further preparation (within the limits of the horse’s level of education, of course).

ON THE BIT

It is important that you have a good understanding of the information in the chapter from Section 2 (The Basics) called On the Bit before proceeding.

When you feel you have arrived at that point in time when your horse seeks to go forward to the bit, you will want to be able to test and see if he is truly on the bit. When a horse goes forward to the bit correctly, you should be able to do two things:

1. You must be able to shorten the strides by using the aids that ask the horse to bring his hind legs forward under his body, without the following faults:
 - The horse goes against your hands as an initial response to your aids (answers with his mouth instead of with his hind legs).
 - The horse tenses in the poll.
 - The horse compresses (shortens) his neck.
 - The horse tenses his back.
 - The horse becomes crooked and moves on two tracks.
 - The horse develops a pacey walk.

The horse should maintain a steady tempo while going forward and must respond at the same moment you give the aids. To put it another way, the driving and resisting aids (half-halt) must go through.

2. After shortening the strides, you should be able to give the reins and feel that the horse seeks to maintain the connection, reaches forward to the bit and as a consequence maintains the connection with your hands.

When this test works correctly, you can compare the top-line of your horse (between the withers and tail) to an accordion that can be lengthened and shortened at will. This test is actually very similar to a half-halt, which is not so strange, since it is by making half-halts that the rider encourages the horse to go forward to the bit. If you have not read the chapter from Section 2 called The Good and the Bad, please read it now.

RELEASING THE REINS

You should be able to make a release at any time, in all three gaits, so the reins hang in a small loop for a few strides, without the horse taking this as a signal to lengthen the strides. A release is not a driving aid.

ON A CIRCLE

When you ride on a circle with the horse bent to the same degree as the arc of the circle, the horse should be moving into the outside rein and you should be able to release the inside rein without any changes taking place. If the horse speeds up when you release the inside rein, it's an indication that he is going forward to the inside rein instead of the outside rein. If he straightens his neck immediately, it is because you were creating the bend by pulling on the inside rein. If the horse raises his neck, we can assume you were holding his head down by pulling on the inside rein, which of course is wrong. However, if you ride with a released inside rein for more than a few strides the horse will slowly begin to straighten out—***this is not wrong.***

On the other hand, if the horse is moving correctly into the outside rein and you move your outside hand forward towards the horse's mouth, he should follow your hand, reach forward, and seek to maintain the contact with the bit. In this situation, a young horse is allowed to lengthen his stride a bit, while a more educated horse should be able to maintain a steady speed.

All horses are different. One horse is best ridden in one tempo, another horse in another tempo. One horse should be bent more in a half-pass in order to execute it really well, while another needs to be straighter. One horse goes best when the rider makes many half-halts, while another horse is distracted by so many half-halts. One horse goes best when ridden in a lower frame, while another works best when he is in a higher frame.

You cannot open a book, read page one and teach the horse what is written there, go to page two and teach him that, and so on to page 250 and end up with a Grand Prix horse when you are done. More often than not, when we decide how to train, we have to say, "It depends on..." ***We have to learn to listen to the horse and use common sense.***

Remember there is always a simple, logical and natural explanation when the horse does not respond in the way we expect. Even if you can't immediately understand the horse's reaction, this is truly the case. As human beings, we have a hard time accepting that there are things we don't understand, and things we can't put a label on. In this case, we often have a tendency to blame the horse for his stupidity or disobedience. But after spending many years together with horses I have come to realize that this is very seldom true. If we allow ourselves to believe that the horse is stupid and disobedient when we do not understand him, we will never be able to find any solutions. We make ourselves blind to the possibilities. It is much easier to find constructive solutions if, instead, we ask ourselves, "What does my horse need help with in order for him to give the correct answer?"

■ If you have not already read the chapter from Section 3 called Excuses as Seen Through the Eyes of the Horse, now is the right time to do it.

Another thing to keep in mind is that many more horses than we realize are resistant because they hurt somewhere. The number of horses that do not want to cooperate with us are so few, they are not even worth counting.

It is often hard to figure out where a horse is sore. Is he lame? And if that is the case, why is he lame? Is the symptom that we see caused by something else? Much of the time we have to guess at what is wrong. Many horses are treated for their symptoms instead of the real problem, precisely because it can be so difficult to find out what is really going on. The horses do not speak English, but they are trying to tell us something. It falls upon our shoulders to learn to better understand their language.

How can we help?

- Become better at listening to the signals from the horse, and ride him as correctly as possible.
- Use this test every time we ride to make sure the horse is working in balance, so that they do not become overstressed.
- Make sure the shoeing is as correct as possible.
- Prevent unnecessary soreness by ensure that the footing is level and the consistency is not too deep or too hard.
- Check that the saddle fits the horse correctly. Far too many horses have saddles that do not fit well.
- When it doesn't go well, learn to accept that the problems could be our own.

Make it a habit to do this little test every day. You need to do a certain amount of warm-up with your horse anyway, so why not work systematically and constructively. Keep in mind that the examples I have provided for this self-test are just that: Examples. The best test for one horse and rider may not be the best for the next. What's most important is that your horse understands what you want him to do with his body, so that you can avoid making unnecessary corrections, and instead use the time to create something.