

HARMONY

Our main goal in the training of the horse is to create total harmony between horse and rider. Consequently, this is a topic that deserves special attention. Harmony is difficult to describe as well as to achieve, because it is something that the rider must feel for himself...and a feeling is difficult to teach.

Perhaps the thought that comes to mind when considering harmony is whether horse and rider suit each other in terms of size and temperament. Though this can certainly be an advantage, it is not the focus of this chapter. Harmony between horse and rider primarily describes what is necessary in the training so that the horse and rider achieve a feeling of moving and thinking as one.

To create this harmony, we want to enable the full potential of the horse using small, fine aids. We want to position the rider's body and weight so that the horse does not feel handicapped, but rather feels the rider as a part of his own weight. Whereas harmony feels good to the horse, disharmony can stress the horse both physically and mentally.

How do we achieve this lofty goal?

- **The horse's and rider's centers of gravity must become one.** The horse has a center of gravity, as does the rider. In order for horse and rider to move as one, their two centers of gravity must be placed one above the other. Since the saddle is placed directly behind the withers, and the rider must sit in the saddle, the rider's ability to move his center of gravity is limited. So to achieve this goal, the horse must adjust his body in order to place his center of gravity under that of the rider. This is what takes place when the horse organizes his body in what we call the 'correct frame.' It is a signal to the horse to move his body, and thereby his center of gravity, in under the rider's when the rider sits vertically and steady in the saddle and stretches his body upward, making himself as tall as possible.
- **The rider should feel that he has more horse in front of him than behind him.** This feeling of having more horse in front of you than behind you is created when the horse steps further under his body with his hind legs, thus shortening that part of his body that is behind you and lengthening the portion of his body in front of you. As a result, his neck becomes longer as he reaches forward to the bit. A horse that is short in the neck and strung out behind the saddle is not 'in front of the rider's legs.'
- **The rider should feel that the horse has found his point of equilibrium.** To visualize a

horse that has found his point of equilibrium, imagine sitting in the middle of a seesaw at the balance point. The seesaw may not point too much upward or too much downward; it should feel completely level. The horse's topline between the tail and withers can be compared to this seesaw.

- **The rider should feel that the horse is standing or moving in balance directly under his weight.** By sitting correctly and stretching upward, the rider signals to the horse to stand up straight and to balance his body directly under the rider. If the rider collapses his body, the horse will lose his balance and wobble, which in turn will tempt the rider to incorrectly hold the horse together by using strong rein aids.
- **The rider must have a correct position.** The rider should sit in a way that does not disturb the horse, and that encourages balance and harmony between horse and rider. In order to achieve this, the rider must be completely relaxed and able to follow the movement of the horse. This topic is covered in depth in the chapter in this section (The Basics) called The Rider's Position.
- **Horse and rider must be completely calm and relaxed.** Any tension in the rider is carried over to the horse, but the opposite is also true, so if the rider is totally relaxed, the horse will be relaxed as well. Read more about this in the chapter in this section (The Basics) called The Frame.

Developing Harmony

Before mounting any horse, we should have a clear idea of what should happen next. It is very important that the horse reacts to our signals and that we are in command. If the rider begins to react to what the horse is doing, mistakes will occur, so in order to be successful, we must think ahead about how the training session should proceed, communicate this to the horse, and avoid leaving the horse to guess what is expected of him. Because, surely, he will make a wrong guess, resulting in a training session that begins by correcting mistakes, which is a waste of time.

So let's begin with you sitting on your horse, preparing to ride forward. Not even this may take place just by chance. Before asking your horse for the first step, have in mind that it is you who decides when and how the horse should move forward. This demands harmony between the two of you, that you have a clear idea of how you want the horse to respond and what the correct response should feel like. If you fail to tell the horse exactly what you want before you start, you will set up a trap for him.

Communicate to the horse that when the two of you go forward you should do it together and in harmony. Before taking the first step, stretch up, sit straight over the horse and straighten your back. This is the signal to the horse that he should stand up vertically and move his body right in under your center of gravity. Picture the horse's topline from neck to tail as if it is a long seesaw. You are sitting in the middle of this seesaw. By the manner in which you stretch yourself upward, place your weight in the saddle and use your legs to drive the horse forward, you should get a feeling that there is more horse in front of you than behind you, and the seesaw should come into balance. The topline of the horse is in balance when you feel a little like you are riding uphill.

In order to feel that you are in harmony with the horse, and consequently in control without holding him in place with strong aids, you should feel that:

- The horse is standing straight and vertically balanced, right under you.
- The horse's topline is like a long, well balanced seesaw.
- You have more horse in front of you than behind you.

These three things will create the feeling that the horse's center of gravity is right under you so that you and your horse can move together as one. Losing any of these three things will result in disharmony and lead to mistakes, causing the horse to have to compensate by, among other things, tensing his muscles.

The easiest way to develop a feeling of harmony is to use walk-halt and other types of transitions. Walk 5 to 6 strides and then halt, repeating the exercise until you begin to feel that the horse responds immediately to small fine aids. When moving forward from halt to walk, think about moving your own body forward in walk and your horse will do the same. Avoid the attitude that you need to 'make your horse move forward.' Do everything before the horse, and in that way show him what you want him to do. You cannot be the leader and show him the way if you are following.

Once you have achieved a feeling that the horse copies you—that he does the same thing as you do and that it feels almost as if your legs are his legs—you are ready for some additional exercises. These exercises will teach the horse that it is his job to keep his body right in under yours and follow you even when you move off a straight track. Basically, you should get a sense that the horse is concerned with keeping you centered in his point of balance.

You cannot see the horse's center of gravity or yours, but you can feel where they are. These

exercises will help you feel if you and your horse are working together with one center of gravity or if there are two separate centers of gravity.

The first exercise consists of making turns, almost like turns on the haunches (how sharp they should be will depend on the level of the horse). Ask for the turn by stepping down into your inside heel and lowering the inside knee. Move your inside hip forward. Also move your outside shoulder forward. Open with the inside rein if necessary. This is very similar to how you turn when you are on your own two feet. You should now feel that the horse turns with you and that he tries to stay right under you. When the horse stays right under you during the turns you can say that his and your centers of gravity coincide, and that you are in harmony.

It is very possible that during this kind of turn the horse will suggest to you that it would be much easier to move the haunches out instead of moving the forehand around. If this happens, use the outside leg and an opening outside rein, to tell the horse that this is not allowed. When the horse prefers to move the haunches out instead of moving the forehand around, we know it is because he is on his forehand. The horse, of course, feels it is easier to move that part of his body that carries the least amount of weight.

It is not a matter of making the turn as small as possible. The point is that the horse stays centered under you and does not make the turn any larger than you intend. If he makes the turn bigger than you have in mind, you may not use the reins as a brake, as this will cause the horse to lean on the bit and fall on the forehand. If the horse makes the turn too large it indicates that his topline is not in balance, but rather is downhill with too much weight on the forehand making it difficult to turn his forehand. The angle of the topline needs to be adjusted so that the seesaw points more uphill.

To adjust the angle of the horse's topline, and move the center of gravity back, do the following: stretch upward, embrace the horse with your calves, squeeze the reins gently, and perhaps, if he wants to dive onto his forehand, carefully lift your hands up a little. This causes the horse to move his hind legs in under himself a little more. When the horse turns easily together with you and keeps his body placed right under yours, you should be quick to soften the aids so that he will understand that he responded correctly. You should be able to make this kind of turn by using very small aids, almost by using only the weight aids, and without the need to use your hands as a brake. The bit should be something we ride the horse forward to, not something we pull back on.

Another way to test whether the centers of gravity are united is by riding a leg yield. For example, turn onto centerline and ride straight ahead for some steps. Decide that you are going to ride a leg yield to a specific spot or letter. Picture a line in the footing from the point where you will start to the point where you want to arrive. Make a small half-halt to prepare and give the

aids for a leg yield very softly. Position yourself as if you want to move your own body into a leg yield. In your mind, think: “I am going sideways from here to that letter, and the horse can stay here if he wants, but I am moving over there.” It is important that you really believe the horse is going to go with you and that you give the signals wholeheartedly. The horse should follow you, keeping his body under yours, following you sideways without stepping ahead of that line you have pictured.

When leg yielding, it is important to steer with the front end, moving the horse’s shoulders in the direction you are traveling. It is the shoulders that decide the direction of movement. The horse does not need to be parallel with the long side, as long as he moves in the direction of the rider’s weight. If the horse travels in a direction other than that of the rider, he is not disobedient, but it is a sign that the two centers of gravity are not in unison. This problem should be corrected in the same manner as for the previous exercise. If the horse follows you without resistance and tension, and without leaning into your hands, then his center of gravity is placed right in under yours and we can say that there is harmony between horse and rider.

You can continue the same type of work, using another exercise. Walk straight ahead, driving your horse forward in a tempo that you have chosen. Make sure that the horse is walking in the exact tempo in which you are driving with your seat. Now decide that you want to walk with shorter strides, almost as if in slow motion. Stretch up, squeeze the reins lightly and adjust the tempo of your driving seat to the new tempo in which you want your horse to walk. The horse should imitate you. After a few short strides breathe out, relax, and ask the horse—primarily with your seat—to lengthen the strides. Again, the horse should imitate you.

Finally, when everything feels very easy and the horse copies everything you do, test to see if you can combine all these movements. If you and your horse are in harmony, he will follow you easily all over the arena. He will lower his head and neck and begins to chew the bit quietly as a sign that he understands and accepts your aids.

When a horse and rider are in harmony it is like two people dancing. It looks very skillful. One dancer does not get in the way of the other or tread on the other's toes. It is as though they are gliding across the floor, thinking and moving as one.