



Riding & Natural Horsemanship Part 3

By Tim Hayes

Part 1 of this series looked at some of the formative periods in both the art and history of riding. In Part 2 we discussed the influence of Natural Horsemanship on riding during these historical periods. This article, Part 3 was supposed to be the last of the series covering the actual methods and tools of Natural Horsemanship as they are used in riding. However as I began to write I realized there was too much information to fit into just one article.

Furthermore when I thought about writing an article about riding horses I felt overwhelmed and quite humbled. There are hundreds of thousands of books, magazines, journals and articles written in many different languages by some of the world's greatest horsemen all instructing the reader on the proper way to ride a horse. What could I possibly say that had not already been written or said by someone far more knowledgeable than me?

I thought about all the horses I had ridden, all my teachers and all the books about riding I had read. Some were wonderful and easy to understand some less so. I realized that how one communicates knowledge is sometimes more important than the knowledge itself. The most helpful knowledge is meaningless if it is not presented in a way as to be clearly understood.

As both a student and a teacher of Natural Horsemanship I want share with you how and why this method was so helpful and instrumental in my riding education and experience. This therefore is my attempt at communicating the principles, methods and tools of Natural Horsemanship and how they are incorporated into riding horses.

I believe there are 3 primary elements for both human and horse necessary to riding together successfully in any discipline be it English or Western. They are: Physical Harmony, Mutually Understandable Communication and A Cooperative Positive Relationship. Many of the methods and tools of Natural Horsemanship used to achieve these goals are profoundly different than those that are used in what I refer to as *Traditional Horsemanship*. This months article will focus on Physical Harmony while Communication and Positive Relationships will follow in the next two issues.

PHYSICAL HARMONY

Everything a rider (English or Western) wants his horse to do; his horse already knows how to do. It's natural for him. The goal of riding is to have the horse willingly perform the rider's desires on request while sitting on horses back.

If you watch horses in their natural environment (open spaces) you will eventually witness them performing every human equestrian desire: Jumping, Passage, Slide Stops, Lead Changes and Pi-affe just to name a few. Some of these beautiful maneuvers are what gives a horse (a prey animal) escape advantages over predators, while others are expressions of his natural, happy, playful and gregarious personality.

The goal in establishing physical harmony is to have horse and rider become and move as one. Great riding is like great ballroom dancing with both partners moving together as if they are one being. In riding as in dancing both partners must know how to perform all of the different steps.

In riding, since the horse already knows these steps, it is up to the human to learn exactly how the horse moves. He must then have a method of communication that the horse understands so he can request these movements from the horse when he desires (if I shift my weight forward it means move in that direction).

The age old natural method of achieving physical harmony was never more perfectly expressed than with 3 words by the late Tom Dorrance: "Feel, Timing and Balance." To explain what Tom means I use a "Seesaw Analogy".

When I was a kid at the playground I would try and balance myself in the middle of the seesaw. I'd start by walking up it toward its center. I'd try not to let the other end touch the ground. The moment I could feel the seesaw go too far in the other direction I would stop and take a step back. In order for me to progress to the center I had to feel when to go forward and when to go backward. This required the split second timing of my steps in both directions. If my timing was accurate I would maintain my balance, the seesaw would stay in the air and I would end up standing at its



Tim bareback working on "Feel, Timing and Balance." Mackey Range, Idaho, 1994.

center in perfect physical harmony (if I shifted my weight forward the seesaw moved forward). It's the same whether I'm standing on a seesaw or sitting on horses' backs.

Being out of balance makes performing anything physical extremely difficult. If one is not perfectly balanced on his horse, his weight will be distributed unevenly. This will cause the horse to adjust his body to compensate for the discomfort of the out of balance extra weight of the rider. This in turn will cause the horse to be off balance and unable to perform at his best. To visualize this a "Backpack Analogy" can be helpful.

My backpack feels lightest and most comfortable when it sits in the center of my back. If it's off balance one of the straps digs into my shoulder, it feels heavier and makes it uncomfortable for me to carry. If it's not corrected it makes me want to take it off. With

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talked about part of the work she is doing for her dissertation, investigated the differences in the inflammatory response between a Repeated Sprint Exercise Test, a Graded Exercise Test (similar to a stress test) and an Interval Exercise Test. The Repeated Spring Exercise Test was found to be the most strenuous when markers of inflammation were evaluated in synovial fluid and in the blood.

Dr. Amy Burk of the University of Maryland described her investigation of, "Supplement Use in Top Level Event Horses." Riders were asked to participate in a survey at the 2006 and 2007 Jersey Fresh Three-Day Event in Allentown, NJ. The majority of riders had their horses on some type of joint supplement, and got most of their nutritional information from trainers, while some riders followed research driven information. This fact implies that trainers need to be targeted by Extension programs for up-to-date, factual information on equine nutrition. Overall, riders were very concerned about proper maintenance of their equine partners.

The day ended with Virginia Tech's Dr. Kathleen Crandell, who summarized the themes of the day. Her talk, entitled, "What does it all mean? Adding Supplements to Your Horse's Feed Ration." One of her main points was that because there is currently no regulation of supplements, the industry has formed a self-policing unit known as the National Animal Supplement Council (NASC), whose rigorous standards help ensure a quality product goes to market. Products with the NASC seal have been analyzed and tested, so that what the manufacturer claims is in the package is actually there. Many people want to help horses heal with food, and to improve overall health. But caution is warranted when purchasing and feeding a supplement. The bottom line is that a balanced diet is critical, and educated consumers are demanding quality control.

Another successful day of academics, industry and students coming together to share knowledge was completed. Graduate and undergraduate students had the chance to present their research to attendees as well, adding to the ever-growing body of scientific equine knowledge. Each year the Mid-Atlantic Nutrition Conference grows, and it always provides an excellent forum for networking and sharing knowledge. I'm looking forward to next year!

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Bananas! I know that horse!" Little kids are crazy about him. Who can resist the power of the palomino? Ironically enough, a judge of an early Training Level class approached and confided, "I love your horse, but CHANGE HIS NAME!" Fortunately, she did not. His name reflects his personality oh-so-accurately. Axel Steiner, F.E.I. "O" judge noted on a First Level Test, "This horse, this horse is a clown horse." Truly.

The two earned Alice's Bronze Medal two years ago. Bronze goes well with gold.

But, while working toward 4th level, sadly, an inexplicable, almost unnoticeable lameness occurred. After months of confusion, an extremely mild case of laminitis was diagnosed in one foot.

But, never fear! The Banana is Back! He has returned to work with aplomb. They've been hitting the gym together, building up Rooster's topline. Recently, en route to a return to 4th Level Rooster carried some of Alice's clients in training/first level clinics. Additionally, they are working on a 3rd Level freestyle. Rooster has indicated that he prefers Elvis Presley music, all the better to "shake his stuff!"

His sense of humor has remained intact. In fact, this is what Alice loves most about her friend. "He's such a good boy!" Upon reflection, Alice confided that although she has a barn full of boarders, many of whom are on training board, she missed Rooster deeply while he was recuperating. However, it was these horses, whom she feels privileged to ride every day, who kept her sane during Rooster's long rehabilitation.

So, we have a lot to look forward to this summer. Not only a 3rd Level Freestyle that should have us rockin' and rollin', but a fourth level debut. Not bad for a golden rooster!

A Note: Remember, laminitis can be caused by any toxin at any time. It can go to the feet, or not. Any horse can be struck. If you notice an inexplicable lameness in your horse, don't waste time, have him radiographed – for his sake.

– Dale Gifford

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horse and rider this may show up in some form of resistance from the horse (sometimes it may become a buck or a rear).

The tools I have found to be the most helpful in learning feel, timing, how to stay balanced and obtain a proper seat have been: riding in a small-enclosed area (i.e. corral, round pen), initially using a halter and lead line instead of a bit and bridle and finally, when possible, riding bareback.

Riding in a small-enclosed space allows for more control and safety. Since the horse cannot take off and run across an arena into a field or down a trail I feel safer. The safer I feel the more confidence I have. The more confident I feel the more relaxed I am physically. The more relaxed I am the more my horse relaxes. The more relaxed my horse is the easier it is to control his speed and work on my balance.

Then I can practice feeling the movement of his body, timing my body movement to stay in sync with his body and move together as one. I can learn to do all of this without gripping with my legs or using my reins and saddle as the way to stay on his back.

When I ride with a halter and a lead line ("one rein") I discover I can stop my horse without needing to pull back on a bit. I can actually communicate with my horse using shifts in my weight (like a seesaw) and light nose pressure from the halter when I lift up on the lead line.

Bits are meant for extremely light and refined communication from the rider to the most sensitive part of a horse: the inside of his mouth. Bits are not for stopping. Many riders of "Traditional Horsemanship" pull back on the bit to stop their horse only to one-day experience the terrifying realization that if his horse decides to take off and run out of fear or disrespect no bit of any type or size will stop him.

I continue in my small-enclosed space and progress at my own comfortable rate. When I can go, stop, turn and backup at the walk, I do it all at the trot and then at the canter. If I am physically, mentally and emotionally able I go back to the beginning and do it all again bareback. There is nothing more helpful to developing balance and harmony than riding bareback. Once I am confident and have developed harmony at the walk, trot and canter in my small-enclosed space I move to the arena or the next larger space I wish to ride and repeat the same process there.

IMPORTANT. I have found for myself and recommend to others that these methods should initially be practiced with the help and supervision of an instructor who is experienced and knowledgeable with both these tools and exercises. Furthermore before one uses these methods one must first establish a solid foundation of mutual trust with his horse. Mutual trust along with love and respect are the three ingredients necessary for a cooperative positive relationship between horse and rider. Establishing these relationships will be addressed in the final article of this series.

These then are the methods and tools, which have been the most helpful in developing physical harmony when riding my horse. They've been effective because they've kept me safe, increased my confidence and allowed me to experience the principal of "feel, timing and balance". All of this helped me ride my horse with what some call an Independent Seat. Tom Dorrance called it "True Unity", Sally Swift called it "Centered Riding" Ray Hunt called it "Think Harmony".

In the next issue we will discuss mutual understandable communication, the second element necessary for successful riding and how it is achieved with Natural Horsemanship.

To find out about Clinics, Classes and Private Sessions with Tim call: 631-329-5840 or visit www.hayesisforhorses.com