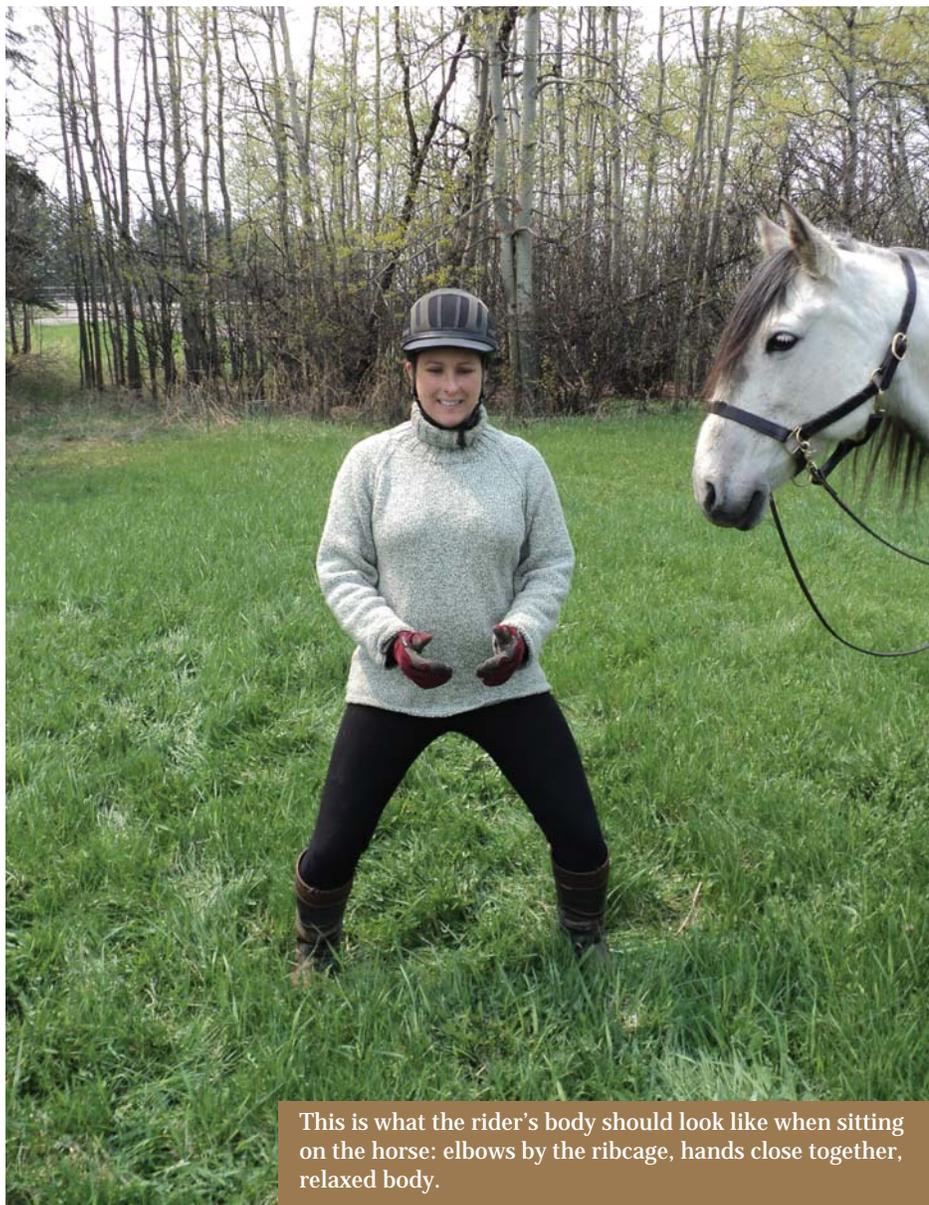


Transferring Equine Leadership Skills to the Saddle

by Barbra-Ann King



This is what the rider's body should look like when sitting on the horse: elbows by the ribcage, hands close together, relaxed body.

If you have been following the exercises in this article series, you probably have a very good sense of what I call "True Equine Leadership" by now. Your relationship with your horse has most likely reached new heights as well as a new level of excitement. Now, let's transfer this leadership to the saddle.

Let me start by telling you that you can ride any horses in the world, no matter what their training or background, using the Relationship Riding method because it is natural to the horse and easy for them to understand. It is also easy for humans to learn and use. This riding technique is all based on the horse seeing you as a true

equine leader, on the ground and in the saddle, not because of training.

Tools for Riding the Relationship Riding Way

To be true to the Relationship Riding method, meaning no pain, fear or discomfort on a physical, emotional and mental level, it is best to ride our horses with tack that will embrace this mindset; in other words, no bits, no spurs, no tie-downs or martingales of any kind, no treed saddles and no horse-shoes (hoof boots are fine). You may not have the level of confidence to go bitless right away. If that is the case, have someone lead or lunge you while you ride bitless to discover the freedom that the Relationship Riding method offers. To get started, work in an arena or round pen. Do not try riding out on the trails until you know your horse sees you as a leader he can trust and turn to in case of trouble.

You will also need to trust your horse. If that is still difficult and you feel you are not quite there yet, spend more time on the ground, reinforcing your leadership and relationship. The deeper your relationship with your horse, the more trust you will have towards each other.

Another tool you will need is the proper mind set. The "image" you have within yourself will have a huge influence on reality. No matter what you *think* you are doing, reality resides in what you *are* doing. Take a minute to stop and breathe deeply; do a self-check on how you are feeling inside and what energy you are carrying around. Be authentic and honest with yourself and with your horse. Be in the moment. If you have an agenda, make sure it is flexible and that your horse also agrees with it.

Horse and Rider - Freedom of Movement

To ride the Relationship Riding way, you must allow your body to follow the movement of the horse and not interfere with the horse's natural movement. You must also keep your boundaries up and not allow the horse to push them (more about



On the ground 2: When turning, the hips/belly initiate the turn, not the hands. Notice how the rider's hands stay in their initial position and follow the hips as they turn. In the photo, we are turning left. The right leg/knee naturally closes as the left knee/leg offers an opening for the horse. The hands do the same.

that later). As riders, our responsibilities are to be balanced, without tension in our body, and to understand how our body influences the horse's movement or lack thereof. When I teach riding, I like to see the horse moving as freely with a rider as without one.

Imagine that a person is sitting on your shoulders, someone light enough to not cause you any discomfort and with good body coordination (not a baby or very young child). Every small movement he makes while sitting on your shoulders, whether it is leaning forward, backwards or sideways, will influence your balance. In order for you to walk forward easily without losing your balance, your human-rider will have to sit quietly and move with you without tensing up or pushing you forward with his seat.

Imagine that this person starts getting worried, angry and/or impatient and that you have no clue what is causing this reaction. His body tightens up and he starts pushing you in different directions, maybe even raising his voice because you are not responding to the demands that are still unclear to you. I don't think I have to take this much farther for you to get the picture.

On the other hand, imagine your human-rider asking you to move forward by looking straight ahead (eyes up), staying soft and, if necessary, adding a cue you know, such as a kiss or vocal command. Then, as you walk along, if you feel your rider look to his right as his body gently turns in that direction, you would instantly know where he wants to go, even if you didn't have reins and a



Turning 1: The same thing applies when we are riding. The rider's elbows are by her ribcage; her knees are pointing forward.

bit to pull your head in that direction.

Riding, Guiding, Navigating

Riding a horse is no different. Since you have established yourself as your horse's leader on the ground, he will want to follow you when your body suggests turning left or right. Just like dancing, when your partner gently moves you to the right or left, you follow him, even if he didn't spell it out for you or warn you of what his intentions are. Because you feel safe with him, you willingly follow him without resistance. On the other hand, if he were to pull you into a turn, you would lose your balance, lose your footstep and possibly fall. If this went on and on, you would probably lose the dance partner and refuse all of his future invitations to dance.

Think of dancing with your horse when you are riding; you may want to try riding to some quiet music. Allow your body to flow as your horse's body moves. Your seat bones should be well connected to your horse's back, with equal weight on each one. Your legs hang from your hip joints, with no tension, and your feet rest in the stirrups. Do not push your heels down as this will cause tension up your leg. Your feet are ground parallel. Your ankles will act as little "buffers" absorbing the movement between you and your horse's body. Your belly does the same. Your pelvis should be in a neutral position to allow it to move back and forth with the horse's natural, easy-flowing movement.

Your upper body is the navigational centre. Sit upright without leaning backward, forward, or to either side, each of which impedes the horse's balance the same way your human-rider on your shoulders would. We must keep in mind that a horse's balance is easily disturbed. We haven't even talked about reins or hands yet and already we can throw our horses completely off balance!

Horses need their heads when they are moving in order to keep the whole body in perfect balance. When a horse walks, his head bobs over the front leg that touches the ground. When we tie up



Turning 2: The rider turns her hips; the hands follow as her elbows stay close to her ribcage. There is no pulling. Notice how the left rein is loose, offering the horse a place to go.



Turning 3: The horse willingly follows the rider's body, without being pulled off balance. In this photo the rider is making a sharper turn by turning her hips more. The rider's upper body moves like sitting in a swivel chair.

his head or restrict head movement with reins, tie-downs or running martingales, we are preventing the horse from moving freely. Our hands will allow us to connect the energy that flows freely from the horse's back through our pelvis to his head with every step.

Also, the reins along the horse's neck will guide him by indicating where our boundaries are when we are on his back. When the reins are connected to the noseband, the feelings and sensations that run down the reins are felt by the horse. When you stop your

horse's forward movement by blocking your pelvis (pull in your belly button and put some weight in your seat) at the same time as your elbows lock, without pulling, your horse will feel your boundaries on his noseband and respect them by not pushing through them. If he chooses to push against your hands and go forward, he is pushing your bubble. When this happens it is a clear indicator that your horse is testing your boundaries to see if you are a true equine leader. At this point, if you were to get mad or frustrated and pull harder, it would only confirm to him what he already knows, i.e. you are not a leader. Instead, stay firm in your

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No contact: When there is no contact on the reins, the horse doesn't know where the rider's bubble is and will test her more. In this photo, the horse is not paying attention to the rider, i.e. the head is up; the attention is elsewhere as the mare takes over leadership.



Riding with contact: Here the rider has contact and her hands are moving back and forth with the horse's movement. Although it seems like the reins are tight, the rider is holding them with only two fingers to show how light the hold is. Contact does not mean pulling or tightness. Contact is simply feeling the weight of the horse's head in your hands. Notice how the horse's body is well balanced and engaged. The horse's neck is rounded from the base up, not by bending at the poll. In this photo, the horse is attentive to the rider and they are riding together, as a team.

position, squeeze the reins without pulling and add a verbal cue (whoa) until he stops, then praise him. Walk on for a few steps and stop again. Do this until your horse stops immediately when you block your pelvis. This is a good indication that you must go back to doing some ground work to establish your leadership a little better. Leadership is not established in the saddle and it is not something that we demand from our horses. Leadership is earned and it will be tested over and over again; it is just what horses do in order to survive.

When you wish to turn left for example, look in the direction you want to go, turn your pelvis in the same direction (do not lean to one side) and, with your elbows by your rib cage, turn your upper body like a swivel chair. If you do this on the ground, you will notice that as you turn your pelvis to the left, your right leg closes and the left one opens up, creating an opening for your horse to follow. As your upper body follows, your hands will do the same thing and also create a path for your horse to follow.

Hold your reins just short enough to feel a contact with your horse's head when it is in a natural position. Your hands should be

Try this exercise on the ground:

Bend your knees as if you are sitting on a horse and move your pelvis as if you were riding. Hold a pair of invisible reins and allow your elbows/ arms to move back and forth naturally. Your hands will come back towards your belly as your hips move forward.

in front of you, no wider than as if you were holding a small book, and not resting on the pommel or horn. As soon as the horse steps forward, his head will move forward also, and your hands need to follow this movement. As your horse walks, his head will move back and forth naturally. Bring your hand/ elbows back to their original position to follow that movement (towards your belly) with every step he takes. The beauty of this is you don't even have to worry about timing it properly. When your hips move forward, your hands will naturally come back towards them, as long as you are not tense in your shoulders/ arms.

This is exactly what happens when we ride. The horse moves our pelvis back and forth and his head bobs in perfect synchronicity with our hands moving back and forth. As you sit squarely on your seat bones and allow this natural movement to happen, you will notice your horse's ears turn towards you, paying attention and attuned to every movement you make. Stop moving the pelvis and hands (without pulling!) and your horse stops. The reason why this works has nothing to do with training and everything to do with soft, respectful connection between horse and rider.

Riding in this natural and connected way, respecting balance and boundaries, is easy and fun as long as we allow it to happen. It takes a little practise, so give yourself some time. If you hold any tension in your body, your horse will get mixed messages and not understand what you want. Or thinking the technique doesn't

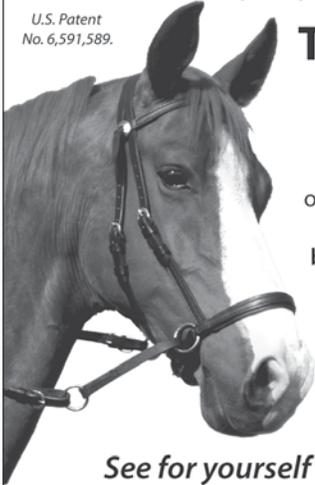
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work, you may want to go back to your “old” ways and start dominating, pulling the head around or pulling on the reins. Please resist the urge to do this. Instead, stop, take a deep breath, reconnect with your loving equine partner, and try again with a softer body. This works; I guarantee it. If you are having difficulties, relax your body and try again. Be patient; your horse deserves it.

The nature of human beings dictates that we rule with force, thus using our hands. The nature of the horse rules with harmony, trust, respect and love. If we wish to accomplish anything with horses, we must let go, literally, and start communicating more effectively in a language that is clear and natural to the horse. Enjoy the journey! 🐾

About the author:

Barbra-Ann King is an internationally known horse behaviourist, founder of the Relationship Riding© method, and a published author living in Alberta, Canada. She travels year-round sharing her passion with like-minded horse owners. She also offers video consultations for trouble shooting through her website, www.relationshipriding.com



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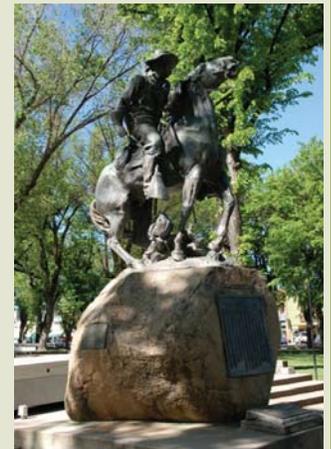


A Horse's Voice from The Past

by Walter Cole, DVM

Dr. Robert Cook, in his memorable introduction to the “Bit vs. Bitless experiment” at the 2008 Certified Horsemanship Association’s International Conference, said “the horses are going to be doing the talking.” And they did talk - with their bodies - improving their performance scores an average of 73% in their first ever four minutes of being ridden bitless (Cook and Mills 2010).¹

Below are photographs of a horse talking to us from over a hundred years ago, through a bronze statue dedicated to Teddy Roosevelt’s “Rough Riders.” This memorial, which stands in front of the court house in Prescott, Arizona, has been acclaimed by art critics as one of the finest equestrian monuments in the world and was cast in 1907 by Solon Hannibal Borglum, America’s first cowboy sculptor.



This horse, un-named, but not to be forgotten, calls out to us and gives silent but ringing testimony about the pain and



anguish caused by the bit. 🐾

Reference:

Cook, W.R. and Mills, D.S (2010): “Preliminary Study of Jointed Snaffle vs. Crossunder bitless bridles in four horses.” Equine Veterinary Journal. Vol. 41, 827-830

1. A video of the introduction and experiment is available online at www.bitlessbridle.com/dbID/420.html