

The Keys that Unlock the Door Master Your SEAT

by Pam Fowler Grace

Pam Fowler Grace explains the important elements that are the foundation of good riding.

In 40 years of training, teaching and judging, I have observed hundreds of riders and have found there to be a common misunderstanding when it comes to the basics. These simple but important elements are the foundation of good riding and training, and the failure to master these can cause problems and become a source of frustration for both horse and rider.

There are two kinds of suppleness in a horse's movement: lateral, which is side-to-side, and longitudinal, which is head-to-tail. I believe the key to success in dressage is in creating suppleness through the topline. When a horse has longitudinal suppleness, he lifts and rounds his back, thus enabling him to bring his hind legs under himself. Then, and only then, will the hind legs properly carry, lift and propel him. The rider will enjoy a horse that is moving "through" from back to front. The horse will then lift, which allows rounding of the back to shift weight to the hind legs. The way you sit on the horse has everything to do with whether or not you achieve this perfect union between horse and rider. Here are the key points to consider; just remember, it's all about your SEAT.

Subtle Hands

For the horse to be supple and come through, the rider's connection should provide the horse with a dependable, consistent frame of reference. The rider's elbows should be bent and the arms flexible to slide along the sides of the torso. The hands should be fairly low, close together and steady with a soft connection on the reins, in conjunction with the seat. The rider's hands should not be rigid weapons of destruction. They should be subtle communicators of relaxation and security.

Engaged Back

Engaging the muscles of your lower back is key to a proper seat. This is the basic foundation of the rider's effectiveness. When the lower back is engaged, it can be used in conjunction with any other aid and will act to magnify it. This cannot be achieved with the pelvis rocked forward or when the rider's back is hollow or arched, or when the tailbone is tucked under (i.e., sitting on your pockets). The term "seat" does not refer to the tightening of the muscles in your buttocks, but rather the engagement of the muscles in your lower back. The muscles in the lower back must push forward with the pelvic floor flat on the



Extended Trot



Jennifer Wilkening



Leg Yeild On a Circle

lower leg is constantly on the horse and the rider attempts to give a cue with it, the cue is muddled, and frequently the horse does not receive a clear signal. Many times, the frustrated rider, unaware of the problem, will decide the horse is being lazy or disobedient. For a sharp, clear cue that will, in turn, initiate an immediate response, the lower leg should very deliberately touch the horse's side and then come off. This is done by starting in the riding position with toe forward, then swivel your ankle to turn your toe out slightly, cue the horse and then return to the toe-forward riding position. The more clearly defined these cues are, the more subtle they can be and the happier and more responsive the horse will be.

A Basic Building Block Often Overlooked

Once you have memorized the checklist and mastered your SEAT, you can move to the essential basic building block of riding your horse from the inside leg to the outside rein. This is the final basic technique that is so frequently ignored. To do this correctly, first apply your new checklist, SEAT. In order to master this, the outside rein must have a soft but steady connection with the lower back engaged, body aligned on the vertical and toes pointed straight ahead. The rider then uses the inside leg in rhythm with the horse's gait to send him "into the outside rein." When this is properly executed, the horse will come "through," balance on his hind legs, and will have a delightfully light feel.

Here is a great exercise to practice this fundamental basic: First - make sure your outside rein is steady and connected with hands placed in the area down in front of the saddle. Put your horse on a 20m circle. Then, with your lower back engaged, ask the horse's front end to come toward the center of your circle by slightly opening the inside rein and then subtly return it to the riding position. As you open the inside rein, ask the horse's haunches to move out of the circle by cueing with your inside leg. This exercise is basically a leg yield on the circle. When the horse is honestly "through" and into the outside rein, you will be able to release the connection on your inside rein for a moment, and the horse will stay "through and on the bit." If the horse falls apart, crashes on the forehand, or comes above the bit, you are not there yet – try increasing the angle, front-end more toward the center of the circle and haunches more out.

saddle, not tipped forward or back and with buttock muscles and hips relaxed.

Aligned Body

The basic alignment of shoulders, seat bones, and heels is absolutely necessary. If the rider is even just a few degrees in front of the desired vertical line with the upper body, that causes disengagement of the rider's lower back and negates his ability to influence the horse. Likewise, if the rider's legs slide out in front of the vertical, this too will disengage the lower back and cause the rider's seat bones to bang against the horse's back. This will trigger the horse to stiffen his back and defend himself against the rider's seat. Once the horse stiffens in defense, the hind legs begin to take short choppy strides, the horse comes above the bit, and thus, the struggle begins. From there, the quality of movement and enjoyment of the ride deteriorate.

Toe Position

The position of the rider's toe should be pointing forward, not turned out to the side. When a rider has toes pointed out to the side, it causes the calf to "live" on the horse's side, imposing a constant pressure. One can turn the toe out a bit to cue the horse, but then should return to the correct forward position. When a rider's leg stays constantly on the horse's side, the horse eventually begins to ignore the rider's leg. Horses process things in a very black and white manner. They need to receive black and white cues. When the



Leg Yeild On a Circle Showing Rein Release



This is a wonderful way to develop this important fundamental basic and also an easy way to test yourself if you are not sure if you have yet mastered the technique.

Incorporating the simple SEAT checklist and practicing the inside leg to outside rein exercise will help you eliminate a lot of the strife and training problems. A few changes here and there can create a happier, more willing horse and restore joy to your relationship with your equine partner. I wish you many enjoyable and productive rides!

Pam Fowler Grace is a USDF Bronze, Silver and Gold medalist. She has won numerous GAIG, ABIC and All-Breeds year-end championships and has competed successfully in Grand Prix both in the U.S. and Europe. She is also a USDF level "L" judge. Pam currently performs exhibitions and conducts clinics in both traditional and western dressage.

Western Dressage

There is a new riding discipline spreading like wildfire across the country called "western dressage." The progression was inevitable with the way many of the western disciplines are evolving and the standards of quality in the competition rings becoming higher and higher. Both reiners and

barrel racers alike are showing up at dressage clinics to learn the techniques and apply them to their sport. Breed show competitors from all walks are realizing the benefits of incorporating the principles of dressage into their daily training sessions. Even trail riders are enjoying the heightened sense of balance, suppleness and harmony that a foundation of dressage will create. Bottom line: dressage will improve and advance the training and performance of every horse.

Riding the front of this wave you will find Pam Fowler Grace, a long-time international Grand Prix dressage rider with 85 championship titles, five of which are at the Grand Prix level. What you may not know about Pam is that she trained and competed with western discipline horses for 15 years before beginning her legendary dressage career. All tallied, she garnered over 150 state, national and world championship titles on five different breed circuits. Her experience and knowledge of all things horse is hard to match. Recently invited to the advisory board of the Western Dressage Association of America (WDAA), Pam will serve as their advising dressage expert.

Pam is very excited about bringing her expertise to the world of western dressage. She has designed the first western dressage saddle, which integrates the qualities of correct position and balance for the rider, and comfort and freedom of movement for the horse. This innovative new saddle is being produced by Circle Y Saddles, Inc., of Yoakum, Texas, and is available through their national and international network of distributors.

"Star In Stripes," Pam's current multi-champion mount, who has earned superstar status in the international dressage arena, is now her dance partner in western exhibitions; and, the pair is having a blast promoting this exciting and revolutionary new equine sport.



Extended Trot