



Sweat the Details-Part 3 Rein Aids

My two previous articles in *Horseback Magazine* dealt with being aware of, and using your horse's sensitivity to visual stimuli, and to sense of feel. The articles described using your breath, body language and position, both on the ground and astride your horse; in order to develop a closely connected, detailed communication system.

This month: "Sweating the Details" with regard to rein aids.

First, it's not just the details of what you do, but also what you don't do with the reins that matters.

Example: How many times have you seen someone sling and pull the reins over their horse's neck before mounting, with no regard to what signals they are sending the horse's mouth, (via the bit), or nose, (via a bosal), in the process. Those people probably expect their horses to ignore these unintentional signals to these very sensitive and delicate areas of their horse's bodies. Yet, they expect those same horses to respond readily and alertly to their intentional rein aids and cues when astride the horse.

The contradiction is obvious. Not only are these riders desensitizing their horses in a counter-productive way. They are also expecting their horses to "guess" which of the rider's rein signals are intentional, and which are impertinent gibberish. Instead, stabilize your reins below the bit or bosal with one hand as you place the reins over the neck with the other, each time you prepare to mount.

Next: Mounting your horse. If your horse is young, and you are concerned that they may jump or "take off" with you upon being mounted, it's OK to hold your horse's head toward you when mounting. Eventually, however,

you should teach your horse to stand straight and quietly when being mounted. Hold the reins with one hand, with light contact, but don't yank or twist them as you mount. Pulling the reins back hard tells your horse to back up, right in the midst of your mounting. Don't do it unless your horse reacts to something. (Remember, if you expect your horse to ignore your rein pressure when you are mounting, why should he respond to it when you apply it as an aid to back up from astride horse?)

The simple act of picking up your reins to start a ride is another moment when a lot of rider-trainers forget to sweat the details. Many people grab the reins abruptly, or immediately pull back or grab the horn in the same hand, sending a sudden tug down the rein, meanwhile wondering why their horse's head suddenly pops up, stiffening their jaw and pole. Always lift your reins gently, adjust them to the right length carefully, and notice exactly how your movements are affecting your horse. A well-trained Western horse will respond to just the changing weight of the rein as it is lifted. Don't destroy this amazing sensitivity with your lack of awareness to detail.

Quiet hands, when riding either English or Western, are also essential to making the most of your horse's sensitivity to feel through the reins.

In Western riding, if your hand is moving up and down in the air as your horse takes a stride in the lope, you are essentially telling your horse, "stop-go, stop-go," and correcting them every time they've responded to what you just told them to do.

In English, your horse is allowed and encouraged to use the bit as a reference point for their own balance. If your hands move up and down, even as little as an inch with each stride of the trot, that reference becomes inconsistent and unreliable, causing your horse to stiffen and ignore at least part of your rein signals. Relax your elbows, and allow them to "take up" the movement of your upper body, in rhythm with the horse's stride.

In either discipline, use your reins, from a steady position in the air or against the horse's neck or withers, in order to vertically collect, or to laterally bend or balance the horse. Couple these rein signals with the body language and breath signals described in the last "Sweat the Details" articles to accomplish smooth, intentional changes of gait, speed, stride length, or direction.

The exact position of the reins, (how high or low, how open or closed each one is), is vital in aiding, rather than inhibiting, your horse's best performance. Always think of molding your horse's body into the best position for them to accomplish balance and collection. In biting up and longeing, as well as astride the horse, the reins should never, cause the horse to twist at the pole; in my book, not even when disengaging the haunches. (Exception: Stopping a horse in an emergency situation.) To accomplish this, the mouthpiece of the bit should be kept as level as possible in most training situations. (See the



"Wrong!" and "Right!" photos).

In a bending turn or circle, the outside rein must always be slightly longer, (when biting up and longeing), or the rider's hand slightly forward of the inside hand, (from astride). This allows the horse to lengthen the outer side of its body in order to bend with balance in the direction of the turn or circle. During a ground work session, stop as many times as it takes, to adjust the reins to just the right length to accomplish this.



I am just as particular about how our horses are bridled and unbridled, as I am about how they are worked and ridden. All of our bridling is done in such a way that the horse opens its mouth before the bit is lifted up gently between the upper and lower teeth. The lower hand only guides the bit in; no forcing the bit up into the teeth and gums. The horse's ears are gently flipped forward through the earpiece or head-

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stone with some of our friends from Cody, Wyoming and played our version of "The Amazing Race" with the kids. We had teams competing against each other and completing tasks while learning about the park. It was really fun!

We like to visit different National Parks each year. We went to Mesa Verde in Colorado to see the cliff dwellings of the ancient American Indians a couple of years ago. We learned that these people are believed to not have actually lived in what appears to be city's under the cliffs, but were used most likely for religious ceremonies.

Following the Oregon Trail and having friends whose great grandparents came across has been another wonderful American History lesson. We are tired after driving each day when travelling. Can you imagine travelling like the pioneers did, then stopping each night and having to build a fire and cook dinner as well?

While rodeoing in the Northwest, we've explored the beautiful San Juan Islands north of Seattle and decided to go whale watching. It was exciting to see the Orcas in their natural environment. Of course now that the "Twilight" book series has come out and the story is set near Seattle, Kenna can identify the places she has been in that part of the country.

While in California, we visited the great

Redwoods and experienced their majesty. We also stopped at Donner Pass and learned about the tragedy of the ill fated Donner Party that terrible winter and what a bad decision can do. What people had to do in order to survive was unthinkable, but it happened.

While I was teaching clinics in the Northeast, we visited New York City and made the rounds to all the famous places that everyone sees on TV or hears about.

Many times, we have accidentally happened on places or read a small plaque about some small thing from the past. This feeds curiosity, so we have to look up information on the internet to find more information.

So while my competition and clinic activities have kept me busy on the road with my daughter, it's been a wonderful way for us to explore our beautiful country and learn so much about it firsthand. We have so many subcultures within the borders of the grand landscape, even within our horse world. Travel is a wonderful and fun way to learn firsthand. I wouldn't trade these experiences as a Mom and teacher for anything. I'm not saying it's been easy being miles away with horses dogs and kids, but it is rewarding.

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stall, not grabbed and pulled through. When unbridling, we always lower the headstall slowly, pausing until the horse releases the bit itself, so as not to clank the bit against the horse's teeth as it leaves the mouth.

Your horse is by nature an expert in awareness of body language, visual stimuli, and feel. If you consistently tap into his or her expertise, it will pay big dividends in your horsemanship career.

Till next month, take care, and remember to enjoy the ride!

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