

TRAINING MYTHUNDERSTANDINGS

Using Leg: A Confusion Of Terms

by Nancy Wesolek-Sterrett, Dressage Department Head, Meredith Manor International Equestrian Centre

An online chat about an article that discussed how to get the horse 'in front of the leg' caught my attention recently. The students argued whether the writer was right or wrong. When I read the article, I realized that their disagreement arose, in part, because of the bewildering use of terminology in the horse industry. People use different terms to mean the same thing. Or they use the same term but with different shades of meaning. As an example, let's take a look at how the meanings of 'forward' and 'in front of the leg' might get tangled.

The first thing a baby green horse learns about leg pressure is that if he moves forward when he feels pressure from both legs simultaneously, the rider releases the pressure and it goes away. That pressure may be described as a squeeze or a bump or a tap, but they all mean 'the lightest possible pressure the horse will understand.' The release of that pressure is the horse's reward. We are only

looking for a directional response, not for a particular speed or a particular shape the horse takes with his body. Trainers call this basic understanding of leg 'forward' or 'moving off the leg' or 'forward off the leg' or 'respect for the leg' or similar terms.

As the horse progresses from this very basic, baby green response to higher levels of training, the rider adds layers of sophisticated nuance until the horse understands the individual meaning of a wide range of leg pressures. But at every level of training, the basic response we expect when the rider applies pressure with both legs simultaneously is that the horse moves 'forward' immediately.

'Going forward from the leg' is a precursor to having a horse 'in front of your leg. I feel this term confused the students in the chat room because it did not precisely describe the response from the horse that the writer intended. When talking about a horse being in front of the leg, I prefer to describe the rider's feeling that the horse 'moves forward into the hands' or 'moves forward into a connection' with the rider's hands. The rider closes the leg, and the horse responds by pushing off from behind, lifting the back, rounding the neck and connecting to the rider's hand, thereby completing the circle of aids

Moving 'forward into connection' is a much more sophisticated forward response, not to just leg but to a combination of legs, seat and hands than the green horse's simple 'respect for the leg.' When I close my legs on a more advanced horse, I want him to do more than just go forward quickly. I want him to step well under himself and push off the ground energetically with his hindquarters, taking a particular shape with his body that transmits that energy into my hands holding the reins.

In the beginning stages, the combination of legs, seat and hands feels like a mixed message to the horse. I am saying GO with my legs and HOLD YOUR FORWARD ENERGY A BIT with my seat. My goal is that when he feels this apparent contradiction, he will step farther under himself than he would have from leg pressure alone, contract his abdominal muscles to lift his back and withers,

BLACK MOUNTAIN RANCH



CARNIVALS GOLDEN DECISION

Kim & Jeff Elliott • (623) 465-0442

P.O. Box 82623 • Phoenix, AZ 85071





GREENWAY SADDLERY

9380 E. Bahia Dr., #A-103 • Scottsdale, AZ 85260
(480) 502-9776

Open 10 am to 6 pm Mon-Sat • Closed Sunday
SHOP ONLINE 24/7 • www.greenwaysaddlery.com



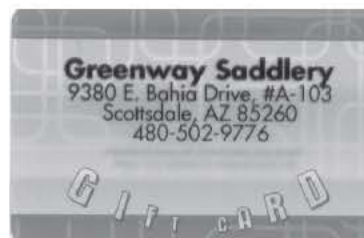
HOLIDAY SHOPPING MADE EASY



With our **HUGE** selection of English tack and apparel and experienced staff of Santa's Helpers, you are sure to find the perfect gift for the equestrian on your holiday gift list.



A gift card is always the perfect choice...



and allow an energetic connection with his driving hindquarters to flow up into my hands holding the reins.

Some riders try to ride their horses faster into 'connection.' Adding more leg pressure without modifying it with seat and rein aids only asks the horse go forward faster. Forward is simply a direction, not a connection with the hands. Horses cannot go faster forward into collection nor can riders gather a horse's forward energy into collection by pulling on the reins. Connection starts with that powerful thrust from the hindquarters that moves through the horse's body in a way that allows the rider's hands to gather and direct the energy.

Also adding to students' chat room confusion, different riding systems describe different methods for applying leg - bump, tap, squeeze, flutter, pulse, use heavy leg, use light leg, lay leg against the horse's side, keep the legs away from the horses' sides, drive every stride, drive and leave the horse alone, and the list goes on. "How DO I use my leg?" lamented one chat participant.

There is, unfortunately, no simple formula that I or any other instructor can offer that fits every situation. How the

rider applies leg or other 'forward' aids depends on multiple factors. Here I will discuss two of those factors:

- **THE HORSE'S TRAINING LEVEL** - In our training classes, students learn to first **SHOW** a horse what they want him to do. At the next stage, they can **ASK** for what they want. When the horse consistently gives what they ask, they can then **TELL** him what they want and expect a response. If the horse does not respond, only then is it fair to **ENFORCE** their request. The rider enforces forward movement with only as much pressure as needed to get a response. That might be increasing levels of leg pressure, a kick, or a touch of the whip added to leg pressure. Spurs, by the way, are not on the list of aids for forward movement. They are used to encourage hindquarter engagement (that first step in collection).

The rider starts with the least amount of leg pressure and increases the pressure until the horse moves forward. The rider pays attention to the horse's response to the aid and changes the aid based on the horse's feedback. The next ride, the rider does not start with a tap of whip pressure because that was what it took to get a forward re-

JADA P RANCH & SONS

Rose Garden and 22nd Street
Just West of Cave Creek Road
Phoenix, Arizona

*Ride out our back gate to a beautiful
500 acre mountain preserve!*



For Your Horse's Pleasure...
Two Lighted Arenas With New Footing
Round Pen • 3-Speed Hot Walker
Turn Out Stalls • Outside Stalls

**Best Trails
Right at the 101
& Cave Creek!**

*No matter what part
of town you live in,
we are conveniently
located off the 101!*

602-686-0271

FRISCO FARMS PERFORMANCE HORSES
TRAINER: GREGGORY BUSINGER
Specializing in all your training and showing needs!
415-706-4852 • www.FriscoFarmsPhxAz@weebly.com

sponse the last time. Then that would become the pressure that the horse understands as 'forward.' The goal is to help the horse respond respectfully to the least amount of leg pressure.

• **THE HORSE'S TEMPERAMENT**
- Leg pressure must have meaning to the horse. It must be part of the vocabulary used by both horse and rider to communicate. The hot horse that needs no leg to move off as soon as the

reins are released must learn to allow the rider to apply leg pressure. When a horse runs from leg pressure, he may be going forward, but the rider cannot get that energetic connection from back to front. As training progresses, however, hugging lightly with the legs creates a corridor that helps this type of horse relax and trust the legs. At the other end of the spectrum is the placid horse that ignores a leg con-

stantly bumping or gripping his sides. This horse is more likely to pay attention to a fluttering leg or a bumping leg against his sides. The horse would ignore a constant leg pressure and start going slower and slower.

When terminology confuses riders they should ask their trainer or riding instructor to explain how they are using a particular word or phrase. Good instructors know how to explain the same thing different ways to suit the learning styles of individual students. If riders come across the use of a term in an article or book that seems to contradict their own understanding of the term, they should search for the author's definition or try to tweeze the meaning out of context. Different riding disciplines and different schools of training within individual disciplines often use the same or similar terms with different meanings. Don't let it throw you. Just keep learning. □

© 2013 Meredith Manor International Equestrian Centre. Nancy Wesolek-Sterrett has earned numerous United States Dressage Federation horse awards including Bronze and Silver Medals on horses she has trained. She competes her horses at Training through FEI levels. As a Certified Riding Instructor she brings over 20 years of experience to her position as Head of the Dressage Department at Meredith Manor International Equestrian Centre (147 Saddle Lane, Waverly, WV 26184; 800-679-2603; www.meredithmanor.edu), an ACCET accredited equestrian educational institution.

