

August 2007 Beyond the Basics

Pressure and Balance – Part II

“Only a rider who has a good position may obtain valid results from his horse. This position will be bettered when the rider’s seat is as one with the horse, his upper torso enlarged, yet flexible, his legs well down, without being over tightened, while gently adhering to the horse. The nearer the rider approaches an ideal position, the more he will succeed in difficult exercises without apparent movements or gestures, leaving the observer with an impression of total harmony between horse and rider.” (From *Reflections on Equestrian Art* by Nuno Oliveira)

Oh to ride as Mr. Oliveira describes, in perfect harmony with my horse, in lightness, and connected far beyond the physical realm! To achieve this picture of oneness is not unique to any one discipline, but what does seem to be universal in achieving this connection is the understanding and appropriate use of the riders aids, along with his position and clear consistent purpose with focus. In his book, *The Handbook of Riding Essentials*, Francois Lemaire de Ruffieu describes these tools to remind and encourage the horse as: **The Natural Aids** (i.e. Seat, Legs, Hands, Voice, Eyes, & Mind) and the **Artificial Aids** (i.e. Whip, Spur, & Longe Whip). As we progress in Part II of examining the use of our aids related to pressure and balanced we will be well served to remember the tremendous responsibility we have in being able to separate our body parts, to adjust our body position, in order to allow the aids to work in concert with one another.

Last month in Part I of this series, we examined some specific definitions of terms such as: Aids, Balance, Pressure, Rhythm, and Timing. We then focused on how these riding requirements assisted effortless communication specifically as it relates to balance. I hope you were able to go on line to read the entire article! (www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles) As a quick review, we discussed how balance was primarily a function of the rider’s upper body, influenced greatly by his seat bones, hips, shoulders, head, and eyes. Hands, as part of that upper body balance mechanism, can aid the balance of **the horse**, as in making a suggestion in the rein for lateral or longitudinal poise. But the hands should never be used by the rider to achieve the balance or stability of the human! Hopefully you had a chance to experiment with balance (fore/aft, side to side, on the diagonal, up and down) and identify how your position influenced the

movement of your horse. Once you have experienced the wonderful floating feeling that comes from being in balance **with** your horse, you will seek it again and again with every ride and every job you may need to accomplish as a horse/rider team.

Now let us look in depth at **pressure** as it relates to the use of our natural and artificial Pressure in my minds eye, is not as “pushing”. There is no way my leg, let alone my body, can up the horse. Rather I see pressure as a “caress”, a compression of air, a suggestion that reinforces a request I have first visualized and consequently prepared my posture to allow the request. (Remember the “Horseman’s Protocol”) Pressure in the use of my leg is primarily below the knee by squeezing and releasing the calve muscles, and a lifting of toes which causes the heels to go down and legs to lengthen. As a last resort when the horse is not responding to my pressure suggestion, I will escalate the request by a final use of the heel and touch of the spur or whip, as in a request to go forward or sideways more enthusiastically.



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It is important to note that different saddles, and different body types of both horse and riders, will all effect where the leg naturally drapes over the ribcage of the horse. Being vertically challenged as I am, with a women’s thighs, it is a little more difficult for my legs to rest properly while I am riding a large barreled horse! But not impossible...look at Debbie McDonald as she rides Brentina and you will see what I mean! For most of us, the saddle should place our legs in a position at or behind the girth. A well-fitting western saddle should have a seat similar to a dressage saddle, and your legs should drape without tension. If you are pushing on the stirrups, causing your heel to come out of vertical alignment with your hip, then you are missing a great opportunity to feel **of, for, and with** your horse! By creating this tension, you will decrease the range of motion throughout your entire body and your seat will disconnect from the back of the horse, making your natural balance aids very difficult to employ. In addition, a stiff lower leg, pushing on the stirrups, will not allow you to use the leg as an aid for either balance or pressure.

As I mentioned earlier, pressure is mostly a function of the lower body of the human. Horse and riders who seem to operate in perfect agreement are able to fix, refine, and adjust with rhythm leg position, whip, spur and hands to enhance the horse's movement forward, backwards, sideways, crossing the hind quarters, and into the High School maneuvers. We want to position our seat bones, hips, shoulders, and focus (balance aids), in concert with the leg and hands (pressure aids) so that we create a wonderful symphony that is rhythmic, and is in time to influence the feet. Some tips that help me to visualize and feel for pressure are: The River and The Bank – I envision my legs being the banks of the river and the horse as the water flowing between. The banks of the river simply contain the water, not totally control it. They bulge to allow the bends in the river, with the inside of the bend pressing or caressing the water towards the outside bank, which accepts the energy. If you push too hard with one bank (i.e. leg) it will cause the water to overflow the opposite river bank (i.e. the horse loses balance and casts his energy, dropping a shoulder, or winging-out the hip). My upper body is like a kayaker. If I use my upper body to try to pressure the boat sideways, I will lose balance and the kayak may squirt out!



Exercises to Help Stretch, Flex, and Strengthen – I have mentioned the importance of suppleness in both horse and rider, but to efficiently use the leg it is particularly important that you condition your core area for strength, your hip flexors down the front of the thigh for stretching, and the ankles for flexibility. Exercises on board that I really appreciate are: 1) Draw your knee up without touching the saddle, then push the heel down to stretch the whole leg down; 2) Next draw both knees up, and then push down; 3) Draw your heel up towards the buttocks – one, the other, then both heels up; 4) Ankle twirls going clockwise, then counter-clockwise, and finally one twirling forward and one backwards at the same time.

Light Toes rather than Heels Down – Try this experiment while sitting upright on your horse: First, close your eyes and try *pushing* your heels down. Next relax, sit up straight, and think about lightly lifting your toes up. Do this several times and try to identify how each affects your other body parts. I find that when I push my heels down, other parts of my anatomy get tight. But when I lighten my toes, I get the same effect of the heels going down, and I seem to relax into the back of the horse.



Loose Ankles and Feel Stirrups as Ground – I once had someone say to me, “At any time during the ride, could you remove the horse to find yourself standing balanced on the ground?” I try to visualize the stirrups as if they were the ground. I don’t walk around pushing my heels into the ground, nor do I walk on my toes continually. Gravity does a fine job of keeping me grounded! If I can see in my mind’s eye that same feeling of gravity, I will stay balanced in the stirrups with a long leg prepared to slightly use pressure to influence the movement.

Sailors Hands – I haven’t spoken too much about ‘Pressure’ as it relates to your hands, but it is important to remember that in most cases, it is the leg working together with the hands, in balance, that makes for a very harmonious picture. So what do I picture in regard to pressure or resist-hold-caress and release-relax-give with the hands? Try this...picture yourself as a sailor and your horse as the sailboat. As the wind comes up behind the stern of the boat, the sailor needs to put some pressure or resistance or **FEEL** on the lines that go to the sails. It is not a pull, but rather a caress or hold. With slight changes accomplished by giving more on one line than the other, the sailor can

make a suggestion through his hands, to the sail, that influences where the energy of the wind ultimately carries the boat. There is a balance to be struck between being a 'natural' sailor that operates entirely on a loose line and allows the boat to go mindlessly where ever the wind takes it, and the sailor who wants to dominate the wind and thereby uses (or attempts to use) physical force to manhandle the lines. As an 'Aspiring Sailor' I am trying to find that place where I have enough **pressure** on the lines to feel **of, for**, and then **with** the boat to direct the energy of the wind!

In practicing your horsemanship this month, pay particular attention to the use of your pressure aids through the leg and hands. Remembering that 'pressure' as we have defined it, is a compression of air, a caress, and is not seen as a 'pushing' device. As you apply pressure to request the basic movements (see Applying Pressure with Movement as the "Rest of the Story" online at: [www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles/Beyond the Basics](http://www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles/Beyond%20the%20Basics) article for August 2007) pay particular attention to how little you need to ask of your horse to get a wonderful response. Do less to get more! Note how your seat, legs, and hands are

beginning to work in concert with one another to achieve effortless communication between horse and rider. You now have all the instruments of the symphony orchestra...It is time to combine to create a concert of beautiful music, with you conducting! In Part III we will utilize balance and pressure in combinations with basic movements to achieve 'the dance'.

Useful Reading & Video Materials:

Riding Essentials by Francous Lemaire de Ruffieu
Video/DVD: Classical Dressage – The Philosophy of Ease

(Series of 3) Series 1 = The School of Aids by Philippe Karl
Advanced Dressage by Anthony Crossley
Reflections on Equestrian Art by Nuno Oliveira
Eclectic Horseman Magazine – Series of articles by Wendy Murdock, plus access to many great books and videos, including Ride Like a Natural Series of DVDs from Wendy Murdock; www.eclectic-horseman.com

Applying Pressure Concepts to Basic Movements

Pressure with Forward Movements: To begin, we need to remind ourselves that **forward**, with **rhythm**, accomplished with a **willing attitude** is the basis of everything we will accomplish with our horse. **Without forward you simply do not have much working for you!**

Achieving forward with straightness or balance is of course first established by you preparing your mind's eye and body, followed by a pressure suggest from the calve of your leg. It is not a kick, but rather an encompassing of the horse with your legs, and squeeze of the calve acting equally. I want the horse to move enthusiastically forward, and often times my leg will only need to be used as a 'reminder' to the horse to follow my previous suggestions made through the use of the Horseman's Protocol.

The use of the hands in forward movements are primarily to fix, refine, and enhance the carriage of the horse. I like to include a '**feeling**' in the reins as part of preparing. As my posture comes to attention, I will put a feel or connection in the reins, feeling for the horse's tongue, asking him to lift his poll, develop self-carriage and also come to attention for the forward movement we are about to accomplish. I want my horse asking me 'how' will we go forward (what gait?; what speed?), and 'when' will we go forward (timing, waiting, & rating once we move forward). So is there 'pressure' in the reins for forward? I say there is a caress, a suggestion, and a feel.

Horseman's Protocol

- ✓ Become Present & Breathe
- ✓ Think
- ✓ Visualize & Focus, which prepares your Posture
- ✓ Allow
- ✓ Reward



Note: The outside or left leg of the rider is relaxed and draping over the ribcage of Enca, and my outside left rein has a slight ‘feel’ or caress, while the bend is maintained to the right with forward movement.

Pressure with Stopping & Rein Back: Oh...if you want to open a HUGE conversation, ask five trainers from different disciplines to answer this question and you will get five different answers! So I will have to rely upon what works for me. First, I think everyone could agree that we would want to cease any pressure from the legs that might be confused with asking the horse to go forward. This doesn’t mean to pull them off his ribcage, which would set up a brace in your hip and thigh. Rather, let us picture a relaxation of the leg. Stopping for me is a function of the picture first, seat second (as in balance aids), and resistance or pressure in the hands on the reins last. The legs should stay relaxed, not push on the stirrups. However, to counter-balance your torso, especially on a horse who stops with their hindquarters placed well underneath them, then your feet may need to move slightly ahead of the girth giving the impression that you were pushing on your stirrups. The resistance in your hands is not to stop the horse, but rather to keep from going forward after the stop.

In the rein back, the use of the leg and hand is again very little. My hands will resist if the horse attempts to move forward when my picture and posture is asking him to back up. My legs hang or drape at the girth in a natural position. If the horse can not find his back-up gear, I will use, in the beginning schooling, a bumping of the side of my calve against his ribcage or a tap of the whip on the shoulder. These are cues that I will throw away as soon as the horse understands my request through the use of the seat and focus aids. (Reminder: Use the eye in the middle of your back to help you feel where you are going in the back up!)

Pressures to Assist Crossing of the Hind Quarters: (Note: Review the definition of “Crossing the Hind Quarters” from the July 2007 issue of Beyond the Basics) The pressure aids greatly assist us in accomplishing a displacement of the hindquarters. In the movement of crossing the right hind leg forward and under the belly of the horse towards his left shoulder, your right leg will move slightly back, and you will caress with the calve muscle or Achilles tendon just before the right hind foot leaves the ground...then relax the muscle. Your outside or left leg is relaxed at the girth and accepts the energy transfer from right hind to left fore. Your hands act in a similar manner to the leg. The right hand feels for the right eye of the horse, asking for a slight right bend. The left rein accepts the energy, and in later schooling, even suggests or accompanies the pressure suggestion from your right leg. The outside rein is supportive and the inside or right hand in this case, simply keeps a slight bend. Over bending the horse will inhibit forward motion with this exercise, and make it difficult for the horse to accomplish the movement in balance or with rhythm. Remember that the pressure in your leg needs to come at the right **time**. Similar to the use of the balance aids in this exercise, if you are sitting on the leg you would like to move, it may be difficult for the horse to move his foot and hip! The leg must request and in some ways direct the movement of the hind foot just **before** it leaves the ground. Timing becomes a very important component of our pressure aids.

Pressure to Enhance Sideways Movements: Here again, I am going to procrastinate on fully answering this question until Part III of this series, as the full picture is truly accomplished by combining the use of balance and pressure. The legs and hands will work in concert to achieve brilliant sideways movement, in both the leg yield posture, and in half-pass. (i.e. Leg Yield = Moving sideways and forward away from the bend, as in horse is laterally bent slightly to the left, but is moving forward and sideways to the right; Half-Pass = Moving sideways and forward into the bend, as in the horse is laterally bent to the left, and is moving sideways and forward to the left.)

As example: If I am asking my horse to leg yield on the diagonal with a left bend, but moving right...My balance will be slightly to the **right**, with the right leg feeling a little longer than the left but relaxed, and the left leg would be applying pressure lightly to encourage the left hind leg to step under and forward on the diagonal, and to keep the left lateral bend. My hands would accompany this with the left rein feeling for the left eye, and the right rein accepting, supporting the movement of energy from left hind to right fore. There is a feel or pressure in this right rein, but not need to grossly open the entire arm or forearm to give the horse direction! This may destroy the balance in your shoulders and hips, and actually encourage you to try **pushing** the horse sideways with your left seat bone. Opening the outside or right leg in this example, will have a similar effect, and cause tension in your hip area, besides being unsightly. Stay balanced and relaxed, caressing with your inside leg, accepting the energy in the outside rein, and you will be amazed at the floating feeling you will achieve while moving sideways.



In the first photo I am being rather gross with my left or outside rein aid, and consequently you can see the result in the slight dropping of my right shoulder. The legs are also a bit braced with the right leg looking as if it is 'pushing'. In the second photo, the rein aid is more refined, and the outside or right leg in this case is relaxed and accepting the energy about to come from the left hind to the right rein.

For minute, let's look at half-pass postures and the use of the pressure aids. Again it is critical that we realize the legs and hands work together with balance aids to effortlessly find this great communication. As example: If I am asking my horse to half-pass on the diagonal with a left bend and moving forward and sideways to the left, my left or inside leg will help in keeping the bend, keep forward movement, and be actively inviting the movement from the right hind to the left shoulder. My left leg will hang at the girth, and lightly caress the ribcage. The right leg will also be active, but slightly back to encourage the hindquarters to step right to left. It is not **pushing**, but the right or outside leg does encourage the movement. Your hands act similarly, with the left inside rein accepting the energy, keeping the slight lateral bend, and to a small degree giving direction to the horse. The right rein has to grow a little longer to allow a place for the neck of the horse, and it regulates the feeling in the left rein so as not to over-bend the horse. It sounds complicated! The best teaching model is your own two-leg horse. Hop on board, and practice both the leg-yield and half-pass postures.