

**Riding Your Two-Legged Horse for Posture, Balance, Movement, Rhythm, & More!**

Master Horsemen talk about “getting in time with the feet” or “free-up the life in the body through the feet to the mind”. Since I began re-discovering a more willing partnership with my horses some fifteen years ago, I have been blessed with the opportunity to listen, watch, and study several true horsemen. Tom Dorrance, Dennis Reis and Bettina Drummond have helped me to see and feel glimpses of freedom with movement while riding. Ultimately developing a trusting relationship with my equine partners. In time phrases such as, “ride all four feet...all the time” have begun to mean something to me in my horse handling skills. However, it was not until I got in time, rhythm, balance, and focus with my own feet that I truly understood how to make it easy for me to get out of the way of the horse.

It was somewhat by accident that I stumbled upon the idea of physically connecting the human’s hands to their feet. In our T&T Horsemanship classes we work with people to understand necessary positioning, focus, and direction of our energy to accomplish basic ground maneuvers with the horse. Difficulties often arise in transferring that communication (or “feel” as Bill Dorrance might call it) when people find themselves on-board. Humans seem to try too hard, with BIG motions, which not only confuse the horse, but also put both horse and rider severely out of balance.

The first sets of awareness exercises are accomplished with strings attached to each foot under the arch of the foot. (Progress strings come in handy, but good ‘ol bailing twine works just fine.) Tie the ends of your strings together, so that as you prepare for a transition you can simulate using your mecate reins, feeling for the horse. Start by thinking about your posture, and experiment with moving your feet forward and back with your eyes up, down, and then closed. Feel how your body automatically aligns itself with your eyes closed by stacking head on shoulders, shoulders on ribcage, ribcage on hips, and hips on legs. Open your eyes and prepare to depart forward on a circle to the left, letting your hands get in time or slightly leading your feet. If you discover a snap in the strings you are probably trying to lead the feet too much, and without rhythm. Experiment with how your body feels when you guide the strings – thumbs-up. How does your energy and focus vary when you lead with the knuckles are up, as if you were playing the piano, as in the picture below? I think you will find that your body stays much more relaxed, with balanced shoulder weight, if you guide your feet first by focusing with your eyes, then aligning your body, and finally giving direction with your hand in thumbs-up position. It is amazing how parts of your body will shutdown or block movement with the slightest change in your hand position.



There often seems to be a lack of connection between what we are requesting on the ground through feel, timing, and balance, and how we ask in the saddle. To add to the confusion, many humans don’t have a good concept of their OWN balance and center, let alone add in rhythm, timing, balance, and intention! It becomes a multi-tasking nightmare! Here are some exercises to help prepare your body to get in time with your horse:



Now prepare to stop your forward motion. Experiment with pulling on the strings to see how little effect that creates, and where the braces appear in your body. Next try stopping the forward motion by looking ahead and slightly up. Flex both knees, and lower your center towards the ground. Try pulling your tummy muscles towards a “C” shape in your backbone. Next, straighten up a bit by tilting your pelvis so the “C” has disappeared from your backbone. From that comfortable position, think about backing-up by squeezing the strings slightly back, become internally light, change your focus from slightly up to level, and back your feet with a bounce or flex in your knees. Pretty easy! Now try pulling your feet back! I think you will discover it just does not work to physically pull.

transitions between gates are but a few of the maneuvers at which to become proficient. I have yet to have my two-legged horse lead me astray for being a direct comparison to the focus, balance, rhythms, and timing I will need with my four-leg partner! For the “Rest of the Story”, check at [www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles](http://www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles) or attend one of Alice’s clinics.



After accomplishing the back up with feel, timing, and flow, make a change in your seat, focus, and intentions, and prepare to depart of on a circle to the right. This time note how you prepare your body to tell the feet you are going slightly to the right. I will bet your eyes changed to a right orientation, that your weight shifted to your left leg, and that your hand aided the foot by slightly leading with the knuckles up, and right little finger suggesting the direction.

Now that you have mastered your feet and body for going forward on a circle and backing, it’s time to try some fancy stuff! Turn-on-the-haunches, spins, half-pass, canter pirouette, flying lead changes, and

### **The Rest of the Story**

As we review the many possibilities we have in experimenting with riding our two-leg horse...riding our own feet...keep in mind the two filters we have been discussing. (i.e. Attitude -watching the eyes and ears & Movement – Forward, Backward, Sideways, and Crossing the hindquarters) In the next series of pictures we will look at body balance, focus, and hand position for “crossing the hindquarters” or “disengagement”.

Try starting by traveling on a square, rather than a circle. As you approach the corner look ahead to the next corner, think about riding your inside hind foot, across and forward of your outside foot. Note how

your hand position to effect the hindquarters is with the knuckles down, with the energy coming slightly across your belly button and chest. Allow your outside shoulder to seek the direction of travel. Pay attention to how your focus effects the balance from your inside foot to your outside hind foot. Remember that horses do not cross their hindquarters very efficiently behind their butt! Your old gym class exercises of crossing in front and then behind just don't apply to horses!



### **Backup to a Turn-on-the-Haunches**

Begin with a back up on a circle to a turn-on-the-haunches. Prepare your body for a back-up, and start with equal squeeze on each rein to help your feet to back on a straight line. ***Imagine your feet are the horse's FRONT feet.*** Now start thinking of a big circle to the right. Tip your head slightly to the left, squeeze your left rein back a little more towards your left hip, and position your left foot back and slightly underneath your body. As you repeat the positioning you will find that you are swinging a circle to the right, with very little effort. Stop that motion, shifting your weight more firmly back onto your left leg and allow your right leg to come through to the left. Don't push too hard, or over-step with your right hand and leg. You have just accomplished a simple, 1/8<sup>th</sup> turn-on-the-haunches.