

The Riding Pyramid

Whether you ride down the trail, in the pleasure ring, or over jumps, dressage is a key to your success. A French word that essentially means “training,” dressage has also come to define a particular discipline of riding where we seek to illustrate how well trained on the flat our horse is. Partly because the sport of dressage riding is progressive, that is, horses can start showing when they can barely walk and trot, and they can move up through the levels until they are doing the most complicated training movements, equestrian enthusiasts worldwide accept the fact that dressage is a developmental process for the horse.

To reflect this developmental process, trainers and judges have developed the Pyramid of Training (see the United States Dressage Federation website at www.usdf.org and do a search for Pyramid of Training). This has become a standard in the sport and most dressage trainers aspire to incorporate its principles.

Interestingly, as a dressage and eventing teacher for the past 40 years, I have found very few instructors who, like me, teach *riding* itself as a developmental process, one building block after another -- another pyramid. In fact, without a training pyramid for the rider, the training pyramid of the horse cannot be realized. Riders need the proper developmental education and background to help their horses develop properly.

From the point-of-view of the teacher, we'd all love to be able to plunk a green rider on a horse, position her just so, watch her effectively and invisibly communicate with the horse, and just smile as we celebrate our brilliance. However, a much more common scenario is the following: the teacher puts a green rider on the horse and the rider struggles, and wrestles, and pulls and pushes and contorts her body into a variety of positions, and even after many years, we never do see her succeed.

To what do we owe this situation? In my opinion -- and what I will illustrate throughout this book -- we try to teach from the end to the beginning. We ask our riders to assume the position they will achieve, *eventually, as master riders with trained muscles*, when they first get on a horse. Then, we watch while our beginner's beautiful position disintegrates into a fetal ball of incompetence as soon as motion is introduced.

It's interesting that we attempt to teach this way, since in most other sports and intellectual disciplines, a developmental process is expected. In math, for example, we start with adding and subtracting, and then move on to algebra, trigonometry, calculus and physics. Everything builds on previous learning. We build a broad base and gradually the student progresses up the levels in his or her education. We'd never expect a beginner at math to be able to calculate the velocity of a wheel or the distance to a star!

In the end, we are victims of our “classical” dressage education which has indoctrinated us to believe that a good teacher *always* uses “correct” methodology, positioning, and vocabulary. In certification programs for instructors, for example, we are critiqued by the expert who evaluates our teaching on these aspects of our lessons. They use their personal educational process to develop their evaluative framework. However, classical dressage education of the type these evaluators most likely received, often neglected the rider's unique body with its specific and developmental challenges. I've rarely seen classical riding taught developmentally, but this book does just that.

Most of the “masters” of the past were men. Yet this sport is certainly dominated at the lower levels by women and girls. We women have specific postural nuances that don’t apply to men. We have challenges with our bodies that the masters never had to deal with in their students. Further, we women are often overweight and lacking in core strength. Girls suffer through changing bodies – one day they can ride and the next they turn 14 (or similar age) can’t even walk! The majority of our students are amateurs trying to enjoy and their time with their horse and just looking for dressage as a way to provide a structure for that time.

Like earth science or medicine, with riding we are only in the beginning stages of our understanding. Each day there is a new discovery as scientists build on the knowledge of their predecessors. The “masters” like Galileo, Copernicus, Newton and so on, each laid in a piece of the puzzle. Every one of those masters has had their theories tested over and over until it was certain that they provided solid building blocks for *further* learning.

On the other hand, in riding, there are some who believe we were supposed to stop learning when the “masters” died! We cite and recite their platitudes -- that may or may not be applicable to our given situation – and they were almost totally applicable to men only. Those who, like Mary Wanless (see her books in the list of suggested reading at the end of this book)

, have been willing to think outside of the box and present us with wonderful new learning, have had to fight for every scrap of recognition they got from the powers that be in this sport. It seems the dread is that we will be labeled as “not classically correct.” Riding has time honored traditions, but blind acceptance of these traditions has resulted in ubiquitous bad riding, broken horses and no hope of change. Because a progressive process for teaching isn’t the norm, teachers most often try to impress the student and the onlooker with immediate success. It’s very risky, for example, to teach a clinic with progressive techniques. If the teaching is unusual or unexpected to the participants and observers, they quickly write us off as “fringe” or “not classical.” It’s far safer to impress our uneducated student by having them do a bad job of an advanced movement, that it is to have them go around and around on a circle working on the appropriate position for their level of training and their body style. However, the price we pay for doing these advanced movements incorrectly is unsustainability. Since these movements are done without the necessary prerequisites, they can only be inherently flawed, and nothing can be built on their foundation. You can’t do physics if you can’t add and subtract!

This book is a boundary-breaker. It’s designed for the teacher and the student alike. It’s designed to develop a collaborative spirit between the two so they can learn from each other and be willing to take risks – not with their safety of course -- but with their minds. It’s an invitation to think outside of the traditional boxes we have put ourselves in as we’ve tried to copy traditional masters; not that what they taught is wrong, but it’s just not the whole story!

We know it’s not, because following classical protocol we have produced horse upon horse that is broken in the neck, lame in the hind legs and/or sore in the back. We keep getting comments on our dressage tests, “lacks engagement,” “not through,” “tense in back/neck,” “downhill,” and so on. We may have purchased a “trained” horse, only to find that we still get the same comments. We may have a nagging sensation that we just can’t get it solved with our current training approach.

Whether your guru is a modern-day dressage great or a hero from the past, you have surely been getting *some* good information. You just haven’t been getting an understanding of *all* you need. You’ve done

movement after movement, gone sideways, forward, backward and up and down, but it's not beauty. You know it's not right, you just haven't been able to fix it.

This book will help teachers and students alike put all the information they have gotten over years of teaching, training, taking lessons and so on, into its place on the pyramid. They can choose to integrate their learning into a newfound, solid underpinning of basics, or they may choose to reject it altogether. This book will help you evaluate what you read and hear from clinicians and teachers so you will know who is worthy of respect and who isn't. It will help you know what is fallacy and what is fact. It will help you develop yourself as a rider with a solid foundation and a real possibility of moving up and embracing the true beauty of classical dressage.

I have been riding, teaching and training for almost 40 years. I have taken hundreds of "classical" lessons from some of the most recognized teachers. I believe I ride much more classically than I was ever taught. I am committed to riding forward and through and I rarely see that anywhere, though it is espoused everywhere. But my methods have never been willing to fit "in the box." Subsequently, over the years I've learned, from my horses and my students, how to teach so they can learn. I've learned how to whisper so they can listen and how to listen so they can whisper. And I learn so much every single day!

I think the masters would roll over in their graves if they knew we expected them to have found all the answers. If they knew how little this sport had evolved in its pedagogy, they would be appalled. So let us begin a new journey of learning together. Thanks for joining me!

Teaching on the lunge:

Many teachers believe that lunge lessons are too much work. Since they also require a decent horse and some advanced skills and equipment for controlling that horse, many shy away from these valuable teaching opportunities. Often those who do teach lunge lessons don't know what they are looking for, so the lessons aren't very productive anyway.

For the fastest progress, I recommend all the postural lessons for the riding pyramid be introduced on a lunge line. Then they can be reinforced with group or individual lessons as long as you have cooperative school horses that will allow the riders to safely have the reins loose occasionally. If the rider is asked to drop the reins, they should tie a knot in them so they don't fall dangerously close to the front feet and at halts the rider must take up the reins so the horse doesn't scratch his head and put his foot through them. If this should ever happen, the rider should immediately jump off the horse and then unbuckle the reins or lift the foot and remove it from the rein loop.

Note to Teachers:

All the basic lessons used in this book can be taught to any level of rider. Make sure you put your advanced riders through all these lessons as well, because you will be likely to find, much to your surprise, that you've been missing something fundamental. When you and your rider discover it, the rider will soar to new heights.

Body Awareness:

You may have heard about the ear, shoulder, hip, heel alignment that a rider is supposed to have. It's interesting that we expect to do this on a horse, because most of us can't do it on the ground! Does that mean we are hopeless and should never even try? Heck no! It means we have to adapt our positions to fit the specific limitations of our body. A wonderful place to begin is just observing ourselves and teachers should observe their students, in a standing position, from the side, the back, and the front. I also like to watch them while they are walking. Riders have to "float" and be able to walk lightly. If they can't walk that way, they can't ride that way. Horses mirror us.

Some of the most common postural flaws are:

- Head forward
- Jutting chin
- Shoulders up
- Side to side unevenness – spinal abnormalities (crookedness) – one hip up, one down.
- Toes turned out
- Arching back
- Lack of core tone resulting in too mobile a midsection

The horse is a mirror for the rider. If we jut our head forward and/or look down lower than the level of their ears, they fall on the forehead. If we arch our back, they hollow theirs. If we press too hard in our stirrups (when they are long, as in dressage length stirrups), we will most often also arch our back. If we press too hard in short stirrups, for jumping, we often take our thighs off the horse creating an insecure seat. If we pull our shoulders up into our neck, horses lose their shoulder freedom because we have invited the hindlegs to go behind our core. If we let our lower leg come too far forward or become dead, the hind legs become lazy. These are a few themes that will be developed much more as we continue on.

I especially recommend study of the Alexander Technique (references) because it's a wonderful expression of a path to a harmonious, elegant, straight body. Pilates is, of course, respected as a method of improving core strength, but be sure to get a good instructor who teaches Pilates as an art and can help you gain a true understanding of the elegance inspired by Joseph Pilates. Dance can be useful; however, many times dancers have terrible arching backs which create a huge challenge for them as riders. The same is true with gymnasts. Thrusting the chest forward and the tummy forward in the interest of gaining elegance and height is not correct. Swimming, especially the freestyle (crawl) is wonderful for endurance and general fitness, but also because while kicking, the toes turn in. If you're a serious rider, be careful of embracing supplemental disciplines where the toes are expected to turn out from the body. In riding, many of the problems with the leg can be traced to the feet. When they are turned out they cause a multitude of problems.

The thighs, calves and feet are keys to our position, since they establish our base of support. Thus, they are the first elements on our riding pyramid.

The Base of the Riding Pyramid: Developing the leg position ---

First position: Getting the legs too far back

What you need:

Lunge horse, lunge line, sidereins, lunge whip, dressage saddle adjusted so the stirrups are one finger or two above the rider's heel. Someone to lunge you.

Begin with the rider on the lunge, reins secure, and the horse walking with the sidereins on the saddle, but not attached to the bit. Let the horse stretch and relax while the rider is messing around with her position. I am a believer in this axiom: If the rider isn't working correctly, the horse can't. So, since you're just working on positioning, there is no point in restricting the horse's neck by putting on the sidereins. Horse and rider can stretch at the same time and work at the same time. However, I often let my school horses rest on a long rein while I work the rider with exercises such as posting at the walk which is a lot of work for the rider!

Scissors – for stretching the inner thigh

Move one leg back as far as possible with the knee straight and the toe pointed. Bending the knee often results in a horse getting a heel in the flank, so avoid that! The other leg can go a bit forward, but this leg is not your important one right now. Focus your attention on getting the leg that is back to go fully back. I often ask my students if I can pull a bit on their leg and get it more back and more rotated with the heel to the outside. After the rider gets the idea, she should switch legs. She is thus, "snipping" the horse as if her legs are a scissors. Be careful with older riders that you don't hurt them when you pull on their leg in this way. Some of us are quite stiff in the hips.

Thigh torture – for stretching the quadriceps on the front of the thigh. It also stretches the ankle.

Grasp the front of your ankle with your fingers and pull it forward, toward the horse's ears, while pushing down and back with the knee. This helps you understand how very far the thigh can rotate inward. This is wonderful for gaining a sense of sitting on the "front" of the thigh. I often tell my students: "Ride on your kneecaps." Which, of course, they will never, and can never, do. But by thinking of this exercise they understand how the rotation should feel. One of the biggest problems with dressage today is people sitting on their fannies instead of their seatbones and pubic bone. They can learn the latter by positioning their thighs correctly.

Ankle rotation

This is simply moving the toes up, out, down and around so the ankle is loose and ready to pick up the stirrup. A variation of this is to have students practice dropping and picking up the stirrups.

Stand up sit down

Many riders are too loose, or arching in their lower back, and others are too loose in their upper back. Both of these problems cause them to move their head and shoulders while the horse is in motion. These body parts should sort of "float" on top of the rider's following body. In other words, while the hips of the rider may be moving, the upper part of the rider should be as level and steady as possible with no rocking from front to back. To help riders feel this they can stand up in their stirrups, not high, just a little bit, and notice that now they can keep head and shoulders still. This will take core strength and the legs must be back under the center of gravity of the rider so she doesn't fall down on her fanny. Most of the time the toes of the rider must be level with the heels, or **DOWN**, not **UP** for this exercise to work. The instant the rider puts the toes up and heels down, she will fall on her fanny. Staying slightly in front of the vertical,

next sit down and try to maintain the same feeling you had while standing up. This is a very useful exercise to help you position yourself correctly for posting trot, too.

Slow Motion Posting

This exercise expands on the above and helps prepare for posting to the trot in balance. In this exercise the rider goes to the “up” of the posting trot, a position a little higher than the slight standing position we just practiced. Next, stand up over your leg, without arching your back or thrusting the pelvis forward. Then count to five as you lower yourself into the saddle, still staying over your leg and not sitting all the way down. Sit down as if you only have the **pommel** part of the saddle, not the **cantle**. Have a feeling that you are sitting on the edge of a chair, ready to stand up again whenever you go down to the saddle. Barely sit. Use a hunk of mane to help you balance. Stay forward of a vertical line with your upper body. Counting to five as you lower yourself to the down, or sitting position, helps you find all the body parts involved in maintaining correct balance. Your legs must stay back and your core muscles must work and your shoulders must stay down.

Climb the rope

Add to the above lesson an imaginary rope that is hanging from the sky just in front of you. You can reach it with moderately extended arms. Pull (in slow motion) down on that rope, imagining that you are in gym class and have to lift yourself as you climb it. This should help you find your mid-core muscles which are the ones near your bellybutton. It’s really fun when you are lunging a rider and you teach this exercise and the horse stops, because he is responding to the increase in core muscles the rider has while pulling on the imaginary rope. Then you know the rider is doing it right! I sometimes have to teach them this exercise by letting them actually pull on a rope. Some people can’t imagine this one.

Exercises to be done with short stirrups to work on getting the heels down:

Toe touchers

This is an especially important lesson for jumping, and can only be done correctly in short stirrups in a jumping saddle. Arms out to sides, take right hand down to touch left toe, and then come up to normal position. Then take left hand to touch right toe. Work to get your fanny back and your feet forward. You’ll find your optimal stirrup length here, because if stirrups are too long you’ll fall forward, and if too short you’ll be too awkward and find the exercise too difficult. In jumping, most riders/teachers, neglect to get adequate angles in the rider’s body. During the USEA trainings I’ve been at, the most common correction was, “shorten your stirrups.” The stirrups should hit you at or above your ankle bone. The length does depend on your horse’s size/conformation and yours! It takes a capable teacher to help you with your jumping, so look for one who has you do this exercise!

Stand in stirrups with feet forward and fanny back.

See if you can get your fanny over the back of the saddle while showing the soles of your boots to your instructor. This helps you understand how to get angles in your hips, a very useful thing for your riding position and flexibility.

Leg stability

With a short stirrup, stand up slightly in a two point position and have someone try to move your leg back and forth. If you have the proper length of stirrup and the proper leg position and heel way down, your leg will “lock” on and you will be really hard to move. This is the kind of leg you need for jumping and riding spooky or naughty horses at those difficult moments.

Stand up sit down variation – do this in a jumping saddle

Stirrups must be short for this to be a useful exercise. Start by pushing feet forward and fanny back -- well toward the cantle of the saddle. Now lay down on the horse's neck, keeping back flat, not arching or extremely rounded. Now lift the fanny, just a small bit – maybe a half inch off the cantle while keeping the body down on/near the neck and the legs in position. What I find in this exercise is that people begin to find their thighs. Often, in posting, as in two-point for jumping, the thighs get too loose. It's critical (in both) that the thighs stay connected right up to the crotch. This exercise will help riders feel this. Pretend to be posting while in this position. Never come higher than a half inch.

Practice holding your jumping position without stirrups

With regular practice you should be able to hold your jumping position without stirrups in all gaits. If you are overweight it will be much harder. Keep practicing every day to strengthen your legs and get in shape, but don't endanger yourself with more speed if you aren't ready.

Drop the outside stirrup

While trotting and cantering on a circle, drop the outside stirrup. This will really help you get your weight over to the inside of the saddle where it belongs. You'll fall off if you don't get over to the inside of the saddle. In all the years I've been teaching, I've never had anyone fall off the inside, so get way over there. You'll see, if you stand on the ground, how easy it is to post on one leg. How come it's so hard on a horse? Notice how you shift your weight over your standing leg when you are unmounted. Do the same thing when mounted.

Exercises for building confidence, freeing the arms, and developing lateral straightness

Up-Out-Pivot-Pivot.

This helps riders become more confident without their hands, helps position the upper body, and helps with lateral straightness. First, reach “up,” as if trying to get the cobwebs down from the ceiling. Stretch the ribs off the hips. This taller torso is important to develop. Then, go to the “out” position, and then the “pivot” to the inside. In the outside pivot, riders should be made aware of their body weight moving toward the inside. In the other pivot, they should be made aware of how they have more weight in their outside stirrup. This is helpful since riders can do the pivot facing outward whenever they are sitting too far to the outside of the horse. It may take a teacher to tell you, however. We are all in denial of our lack of straightness! The outside pivot takes the outside shoulder back as well as the outside hip. Eventually, riders will need to be able to separate their shoulders from their hips. However, in the beginning, and for quite a few years, riders may need to bring the outside shoulder back in order to get the outside hip back and thus, the weight to the inside, with the inside seatbone forward.

Shoulder Rotation/shoulder drop

Bring the shoulders forward, up, back and down. I used to say, “Keeping them back, set them down,” but found all my riders were arching their lower backs. So, now I say, “Always try to keep your shoulders from hiking up into your ears, and in half halts push them even more down.” Another way to do this exercise is to hold the shoulders up by the ears with tension for the count of five, and then drop them down. This most often correctly positions the shoulders.

Exercises to develop the core muscles

Leg lifts to help riders find the deep abdominal (psoas) muscles.

To expand on the previous exercise, hold the rider’s knee down with your hand and ask her to lift it. As she works to do that, she’s going to discover her lower core muscles. These are the deep muscles in the abdomen. I always go through this portion of the exercise before letting riders do much bicycling. It’s a waste of time to learn it without using any of the correct muscles. This area of muscles is also activated while trying to push the outside hip down. Many of us, as we try to get to the inside of the saddle, angle our waistline down toward the ground on the inside. The waistline should always be level. These muscles help with that.

Leaning back, finding other abdominal muscles.

Lay all the way back on the horse. Be sure to do this at halt and only use a horse you have complete confidence in. A ground person should hold the horse so no accidents occur when first trying this exercise. Then, only do this exercise at the halt and walk. There is no benefit from doing this exercise with more speed, since the back of the saddle will really hurt a rider’s back if there is too much motion. After laying back, the rider lifts herself from the horse’s croup to a sitting position. Go slowly so you can tell where you feel the burn. If no stomach muscles are engaged in this exercise, you may need to do a lot of Pilates at home, or at least knees-bent sit-ups. This will help when you next get on the horse, since you’ll have a lot more awareness of the stomach muscles when they are already sore!

Climb the Rope, described above.

Hold a Penny

You won’t probably ever be able to actually do this, but the mental image is helpful. See yourself holding a penny in between two of your rolls of fat on your tummy. Now, if you tend to arch your back in the low thoracic area, hold the penny at the stomach/heart level. Think of expanding your back at the same time. Breathe deeply into your back. If you have trouble with the lumbar spine collapsing forward (arching) hold the penny lower, between the bikini line and the belly button. Imagine your breath going into your low back. Sometimes you may need to imagine doing this with a few pennies in different places to make yourself straight and strong in your core.

Front line shortening

Most often we allow the front of our bodies to become long, while we contract in the back. In riding we want to make both sides the same, so, initially, we work to shorten the front line excessively to get the concept very clear in our minds. Sit in the saddle trying to put the back of your belt on the saddle. Get your fanny really tucked under. Then lean forward, maintaining the contact with your fanny up as close to

the belt level, as possible. This is like an extreme crunch. Keep your chin down and in and try to flatten your abdomen against your back as you do this.

Lengthen the neck

Keeping your torso erect, push the shoulders down while staying tall through the neck. This results in a stretch of the neck muscles and a lovely riding posture. Think about keeping the stomach firm and the chest and back (about bra level) pushed down. Feel the stretch in the neck.

For gaining access to the seatbones and loosening the thigh

Bicycle riding

Riding is a combination of balance and grip. To help students gain the ability to loosen the thigh and not clamp with the knee and calves, this exercise is wonderful. The rider must sit without rocking side to side and slowly lift one leg and then the other. This should **NOT** be done with the rhythm of the horse's walk. Horses should not be encouraged to rock the rider from side to side and riders should never go with this motion because it is very incorrect. Excessive side-to-side motion is always a result of the horse going with his croup high – a result of not bending the hind legs.

Riders should not move quickly or lift the leg high. This exercise is a control exercise and helps riders learn to flex the tummy while not gripping with the leg. The fannies of the rider and horse should stay level. The lifting should be done with the core abdominal/stomach muscles, not the back muscles. And it's not a bicycle race!

Choosing and Working with A Trainer

Every barn and its trainer has a "feel." You need to find one that fits with you. For example, some trainers are mostly interested in showing. Others never want to show -- and everything in between. Some barns like to keep horses in stalls all day and night, others like to turn them out, and still others like to leave them out all the time. Some barns have lots of individual care, others have almost none. Some practice modern feeding methods, others rely on tradition. I've found that people who stay at my barn, are a fit for it. If they don't like the way we do things, they leave. This actually is a good thing because those who aren't a good fit for the barn are unhappy people and create bad morale among others.

Instructors and trainers have a big responsibility. They have to help the horses and the students learn this very arcane art. This requires being able to communicate with the horses and the people. With the horses they use their instincts, reflexes, intuition and "feel." With people they have to use their words. Often trainers that are good with their feel aren't so great with words, and vice versa. The two different sides of the trainer's brain have to operate very well in order for the trainer to be a great trainer.

To choose a trainer, find a barn that suits you and watch the trainer ride and teach. Take some lessons on school horses. You may want to lease a horse if you don't have one. Don't rush into owning. A great deal of perspective is available to riders who get on many horses. See what the trainer's show record is. Sometimes the trainer is too good for you, meaning, they are too busy and you'll always be assigned a junior trainer to work with. This is not the same as working with the master. However, it often works very well, especially when students are beginners. Beginners can learn a great deal from an average trainer.

In choosing a trainer, find one who matches with you on discipline. If you believe, as I do, that horses should eat what is put in their feed tub, and not be handed treats by an owner or trainer, don't choose a barn where everyone is giving treats! If you believe, as I do, that discipline is an essential part of training both horse and rider, don't choose a barn where the horses walk all over their handlers and you get a sense that people are constantly "begging" their horses to do things. I also prefer a teacher who insists on correct work before he/she says, "good." Often beginner teachers don't know what good is, and they use that word much too often. In my book, "good" is a score of "8." I teach like I judge.

Students that have done the best with me are those who watch me ride their horse frequently. Ideally, they practice a lot, on anything with four legs, and then they have more than one lesson a week on their own horse. The best scenario is that the trainer has a few days a week to ride the horse and the student practices the week's lesson on other horses or takes his or her lesson after the trainer has warmed up his/her horse.

It is very tricky being a trainer (or an owner, for that matter). Sometimes the horses do have to bear the brunt of our stupidity as we learn. Unfortunately, the "how-to-train-a-horse" gene was not implanted in us at birth! And, it's important for young trainers to take some initiative or they'll never learn anything.

When a trainer or owner has an "ugly" session with a horse, like one in which there was little agreement and lots of arguing and the arguing included some harsh corrections, or when the trainer lost his or her temper, most of them feel sick, and they think, talk to other trainers, read and study and next time try something else. But, trainers HAVE to be able to make seat-of-the-pants decisions sometimes. We think at the time that we are doing the right thing, but sometimes we get more information and learn more, and years later we say, "gee that was dumb."

I find when people have pointed out things to me that I did that they thought were wrong, I started out feeling defensive and then thought about it and maybe changed my mind or my practices - or not. Usually I made some change. But I always have thought a lot about any criticism I have gotten. When you disagree with an approach a trainer or a farrier is taking, talking directly and privately with them about practices you think are harmful (without getting too much on your high horse and making her feel more accused than necessary, but rather offering to be helpful as part of her problem-solving team, to help her think through her approach) is what I would encourage. But don't expect to be welcomed! This shoot-from-the-hip thing that keeps us alive -- because we have to be able to make fast decisions and trust that they are right -- is critical to our survival. If we don't believe, and we are always second-guessing ourselves, and waiting for a committee to help us, we die because when we needed to take a quick action we said, "Let me think about this for awhile." As you all know, horses are quite large and can be very hazardous to our health!

Anyone who works with horses will often have to mull it over and think it through when we have a tough time with a horse. Most of us will make better and better decisions the next time and the time after that. And, as time goes on and we get more skills and figure out how to be clearer with our horses about what we want, etc., any harshness we may have, decreases. Our edges get smoothed off. We use more and more finesse and less and less force as our training lives go on. But that should not mean we get less of what we want. On the contrary, it just means we become more efficient and effective because we are clearer, and the horse finds peace and security in our clarity.

Pilates

Joseph Pilates developed a system for strengthening the core muscles of the body that has been widely embraced by riders for good reason. When I teach a new student who is familiar with Pilates, it's so much easier! Pilates has taught this student to be aware and to feel the nuances of her body. She now recognizes that she's "popping her ribs," or that she's "in 6-o'clock or 12:00." When you use these terms she's got another frame of reference.

Betsy Steiner has a book on pilates for riders. There are many others working in the field. Explore. Take a few private lessons to REALLY learn it and understand the finer points. I took group lessons for quite a while before I had some privates and really began to do the movements correctly.

Body work on people

Crooked riders make crooked horses. You can't ride well if you are crooked. Stand with underwear on and look in a full length mirror. You'll be surprised at how your ribs stick out differently on each side -- how your underwear always are higher on one side -- how there is a concave space under one of your arms, and so on. See what it takes to make you straight while standing. You're going to need to use those same muscles while riding.

If you go to a Rolfer or deep muscle therapist or some physical therapists, you'll be treated to a painful session of structural integration where your fascia is manipulated and pressured into relieving its tension and thus allowing you to be straighter. If you have a good bodyworker, eventually you should be able to look in the mirror and see a straight person. Go regularly, and go often if you can possible afford it. It will help your riding tremendously.

The other day someone called me "old school." That comment was largely prompted because I use an ancient Passier saddle with no thigh blocks, and I expressed my dissatisfaction with the "modern" saddles that, in my opinion, severely limit the freedom of the leg.

I began my dressage career riding in an old Crosby jumping saddle, trying to do first and second level work on a 15'2" hand Morgan/TB/Quarter cross named Venture. I struggled and struggled to get my leg back under me when riding in that saddle -- it never occurred to me that I needed a new saddle -- it wasn't in the budget anyway. One day when watching Elizabeth Madlener it struck me that she always had her leg so beautifully back under her, though her toes were pointed down to reach very long stirrups. I tried lengthening my stirrups so I could hardly reach them, and low and behold, my leg went back!

As a teacher, I've seen time-and-time-again that beginning riders can not get their legs back and their heels down at the same time, so I've taken to teaching legs back first. There are several reasons a teacher is compelled to do this:

- Many riders are big and heavy in today's world. Letting them crash down on a school horse's back is not okay.
- No beginning rider has any muscles to "hold" themselves in a balanced position. It's the job of a teacher to help them find a way to balance themselves on their stirrups until they develop some muscle (often it takes a year for even a bit of muscle to develop with a once-a-week rider).

Riding is developmental. A rider doesn't learn everything the first day, week, month, year. They must be taught in a logical progression. First I help them develop their balance, then we work on rein and leg aids and the use of the stomach/diaphragm/back to influence the horse. The phrase "heels down" only enters my vocabulary when I teach jumping and occasionally when the rider has other balance problems that necessitates this change.

Since I believe developing a deep heel is critical (when the time is right), all riders jump a little so they get the idea of the required balance for jumping. Jumping for dressage riders helps me teach so many things. However, putting the heels down causes flexion in the wrong places and ruins the use of the stomach/back for most riders when it's done with the long dressage stirrups. It causes some of the ugliest pulling on the reins and resulting in some of the worst dressage riding imaginable. Heels down with flexing the backs of their thighs, and/or excessive inner thighs and buttocks tension destroys the harmonious relationship one seeks to develop with the back of the horse, since it translates to harshness on the horse's back and a chronic driving seat that sends hyper or fragile-backed horses nuts. That's why, in my developmental progression, it takes about many years before the rider is able to put heels down while riding dressage!

If we weren't teaching impatient, economy-minded Americans we might keep them on the lunge for a year, but realistically, they are going to be riding in a group very soon.

I've always had people I admire, and I've taken clinics or regular lessons from some of the best, but often I've been outside of the mainstream in my riding. I think that's because I defer to my horses more than another trainer for the answer to riding questions I have. I listen to the thoroughbred who says "get off my back," and Arab who says, "Give me confidence," and the warmblood who says, "Don't bully me, treat me fairly and explain clearly." I also have to listen to the lazy horses who say, "I'd rather be eating hay, what can you do to motivate me?"

My answer is, "Use my own brain and intuition to understand what my horse is whispering." I may be old school, but my horses' backs are happy, and they are through and they are beautiful. Is this old-fashioned?

Where is Success?

What if I told you that in "not trying" was success?

What if I told you that in "giving up" was winning?

What if I told you that is "letting go" was contact?

What if I told you that in "surrendering" was conquest?

Would you believe?

How do you let go, give up, and not try on your horse?

Have you tried:

Riding each step for the pleasure of the perfection of each step?

Releasing the reins and finding the contact with the horse as he seeks it?

Caring about your friends and other competitors and wishing them art-making success?
Relaxing, as if riding were the easiest form of meditation and joining with the unknown?
Having all the time you need in each moment, whether you have time or you don't?
Believing the horse is generous and trying his best to understand and accommodate?
Riding one step at a time, rather than the whole movement?
Learning what your horse has to say?
Believing you have all the ability you want?
Not caring what the judge thinks?
Believing in your self?
Believing in your horse?
Listening to other horses?
Riding other horses?

Why not? Discover the ultimate trip!

Forward transitions: not just an art form, a way of life.

Suggested Reading

Wanless, Mary. [The New Ride with Your Mind Clinic: Rider Biomechanics-Basics to Brilliance](#), 2008

[Ride with Your Mind Essentials: Innovative Learning Strategies for Basic Riding Skills](#), 2003

[Ride With Your Mind: An Illustrated Masterclass in Right Brain Riding](#), 1995,

[For the Good of the Rider](#), 1999

[For the Good of the Horse](#), 1998

[The Natural Rider: A Right-Brain Approach to Riding](#), 1996

[Ride with Your Mind Clinic: Rider Biomechanics - Basics to Brilliance](#), 2008

[Ride with Your Mind](#) 1995

