

LINE'S OF

By Lee Ziegler



Lt. Col. J.W. Bradbury demonstrates riding without tack in a slow trail speed fox trot on his mare, Metronome. Because she was set in her gait and responsive to leg, seat and rein cues with headgear and a saddle before he tried this, he could communicate with her by holding only a lock of her mane. Don't expect this level of conversation with all gaited horses.

Whenever we ride, without saying a word, we talk to our horses, and they talk to us.

We talk with our legs and weight when we ask a horse to change his balance, his direction, or his speed. He responds and talks to us through the feel of his back and the placement of his legs. We talk with our hands on the reins, guiding a horse through the basics of direction and speed, but also using contact with a bit or noseband to tell him how to hold his head and neck, when and how much to bend, and when to relax or become more alert. He responds through the feel of his mouth or nose/head if we don't use a bit, through the reins to our hands. The tone of the conversa-

tions we have with our horses depends on how skillfully we use our bodies and hands, and how attuned we are to their responses.

Body language -- and its limitations

IT IS PERFECTLY POSSIBLE TO RIDE A horse with no headgear, or with "thrown away reins" that are totally slack. You can learn to steer, stop, and change speed through weight shifts on a horse's back and by applying basic leg cues. Although riding from the body alone, with no use of the hands, may look like the result of a special bond between the horse and the rider, it is really the result of a specific type of conversation with him.

Because horses don't like the

feeling of being off balance, if you move your weight on a horse's back, it will move to stay under your weight to maintain its own balance. Shift your weight to the left, and your horse will turn left to stay under your seat; shift your weight to the rear and he will shift his own weight toward his hind-quarters, a position of balance that will slow him down; shift your weight forward, and he will "chase his balance" forward by speeding up. Just as it is natural for most horses to learn to respond to weight shifts by moving to stay in balance under your seat, it is also not too hard for a horse to learn to respond to leg cues to move, turn, or back, once he has been taught to yield to pressure. Despite appearances, those are not very complex responses.

Riding without headgear has some limitations, however, especially for gaited horses that may not be completely set in their particular gaits. You can "talk" by shifting your weight to stop or slow your horse, but you can't tell your horse to lower or raise his head by moving your weight. Since the different easy gaits depend a great deal on the position of a horse's head, without the ability to adjust his head and neck, you will have trouble asking him to use his body in a particular gait. You can turn your horse with leg and weight cues, but you will never be able to ask him to bend in specific ways, through his body and neck, with only your legs. Without the ability to teach him to bend evenly, you will not be able to overcome the one-sidedness that can contribute to an unwanted pace in a gaited horse. If you want to help

your gaited horse use his body effectively in his easy gait, you need the broader “vocabulary” that is provided by headgear.

What you can say with the reins

BITS AND BRIDLES WERE ORIGINALLY invented to control and steer horses. They worked a lot better than the ancient method of tapping a horse (or donkey) on the side of the neck to turn him, and gave people a better way to maneuver in tight spaces, as well as making it a lot easier to stop after the cavalry charge was over.

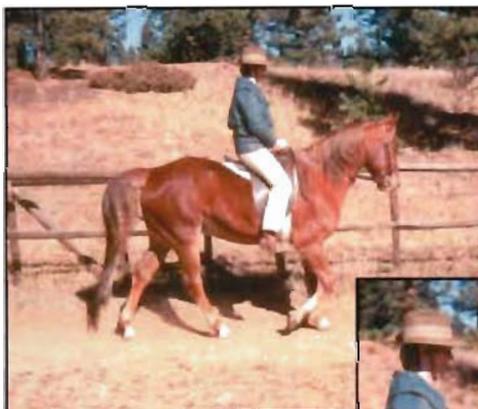
In keeping with this primitive use of a bridle, the instructions most people hear when they start to ride is to “pull both reins back to stop” and “pull the right rein to the side to turn right.” This direct and crude set of orders is often the only thing some riders *ever* learn

The old KISS method works well when choosing bits for clear communication -- keep it simple!

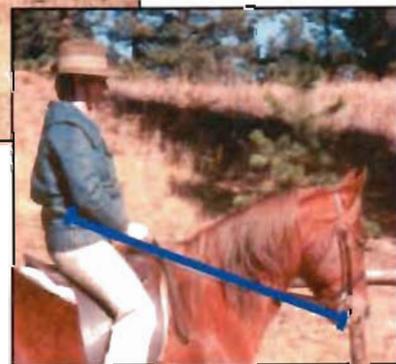
about what they can tell a horse through the reins. There is much more sophisticated conversation possible!

Depending on how and where you hold the reins, how much tension you have in them, and when you release that tension, you can suggest to your horse that you would like him to (among other things): lift his head, lower his head, relax his jaw, flex at the poll, relax his neck and reach down and forward, tighten the ligaments in his spine and lift his head while raising his back, bend his neck in various places, bend his head to the side at the poll, bend his body to

one side while moving the opposite direction, bend his body in the direction he is moving even if that is not his most limber side, and hold his body straight while shifting his balance to the rear. All of these things are important for gaited horses to understand because the degree of relaxation, tension and flexibility in their bodies is strongly connected to which gaits they will perform. Add the use of the reins to weight and leg signals and you can develop complete, effective communication with your horse.



Here the straight line between the rider's elbow and the horse's mouth maintains polite conversation between her relaxed fingers and the horse's relaxed jaw.



It is also a good idea to avoid bits that can “scramble” your signals. A bit with many moving parts may wiggle or twist and put pressure in several places at once, confusing your horse about what exactly you are telling him. The old KISS method works well when choosing bits for clear communication -- keep it simple!

Use the mildest bit your horse seems able to “hear” when you use light pressure on the reins. Mild bits produce less pressure on the horse’s mouth, and in fewer places, than more severe ones. The mildest bits are snaffles that operate on a 1:1 ratio of pressure -- they put exactly as much pressure in the horse’s mouth as you put on the reins. However, there is no point in using a bit that is considered mild if your horse is “deaf” to it.

Some horses are unable to respond to some of the milder bits due to of previous training, and it makes no sense to try to “shout” at them by using strong pressure on those bits. You can often retrain

Preparing for a polite conversation

TO ENRICH YOUR HORSE’S VOCABULARY by talking to him through the reins, first you need to eliminate all possible causes of “static” that can interfere with your communication.

Bits: Avoid bits that “over amplify” your signals. For example, a curb bit with 10-inch shanks, a double-twisted wire or knife-edge mouthpiece, and a very tight, sharp, twisted curb chain will turn the quietest whisper from your hands into a blast from a bullhorn in your horse’s mouth.

Lines of Communication

these horses to understand a milder bit by riding bitless, or in a combination bit like a Pelham, until their "hearing" improves, but until they understand the basics, don't put yourself in jeopardy by riding in a bit your horse ignores.

Reins: While bits can make your signals loud or soft, the reins that transmit them can make them clear or confusing to the horse, send messages you do not intend, and make it difficult for you to feel the responses his mouth gives back.

If you are having trouble carrying on conversations with your horse, your reins may be at fault. Reins that are thick and heavy pull down on the bit, and can put pressure on his mouth that you may not intend, as well as dampening the feel of his mouth in your fingers. Reins that are made of rope may stretch in your hands, taking a longer time to relay a signal to your horse's mouth than simple leather ones, and again muffle his responses to you. Reins with slobber straps or chains, in addition to being heavy on the horse's mouth, can also swing from side to side as a gaited horse nods his head, interfering with the natural rhythm of



This rider has cocked her wrists, pulling hard on the reins, despite a straight line from her elbow to the horse's mouth. The horse is resisting this rude language by stiffening his neck and gaping his jaw.



his head and neck in his gait. Reins with snap ends will bounce on the metal of a bit and create vibrations in a horse's mouth that can irritate him. With sensitive horses, snap end reins can lead to head tossing and other signs of discomfort. In contrast to these less than ideal types of reins, relatively **thin, supple, leather reins that buckle to the bit send clear, direct signals from your fingers to the horse's mouth** and from his mouth back to you.

Seat and stability: You can't have meaningful conversations with your reins if you are hanging on them for dear life to keep from falling off

Asking questions vs enforcing orders

Using a light conversational tone, it is easy to ask questions and encourage responses from a horse.

To ask for a higher head position, simply vibrate your fingers on the reins and raise your hands an inch or two.

To ask for a lowering of the head, vibrate your fingers on the reins and lower your hands a few inches.

To ask for a bend in the neck at the poll, tighten your fingers on one hand momentarily, while opening them on the other.

To ask your horse to flex at the poll with light, alternating vibrations with the fingers on each hand, relaxing them when he gives at the poll and also relaxes his jaw.

Although you can also enforce orders through the reins by using heavy pressure to constrict a horse's head and neck into a particular position, by using them to communicate in a softer tone, you will usually get a lighter response.

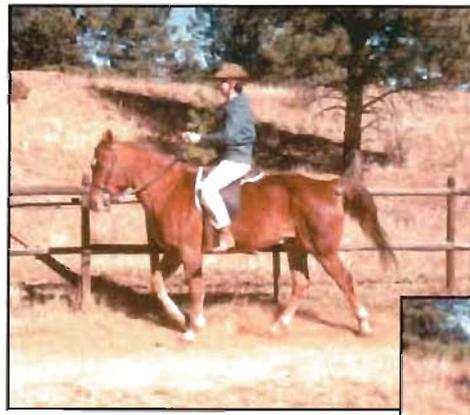
your horse. Practice and hours spent riding well-trained "school-master" horses of various types will help you develop balance and muscle tone to stay on a horse without grabbing at the reins in panic if he whirls or shies. A good stable saddle that holds you securely will also help. If you don't know how secure your seat is, try riding without reins while someone longes your horse at a walk to see how well you stay with him. Practice, practice, practice until you are stable in the saddle and you can ride without worrying about losing your balance on horseback.

Talking with your fingers - contact: You can have contact with a horse's mouth with a foot of slack in your reins, using only the weight of the leather to communicate with him. You can also have "contact" that consists of 15 pounds of steady pressure from both hands, pulling on your horse's

mouth and, incidentally, building your biceps. The first type of contact is the barest whisper of a conversation, and may be totally below the hearing level of most horses. The last is a loud, continuous shout that may leave your horse deaf to anything softer. Somewhere in between is the happy medium level of polite conversation most of us would like to have with our horses when we are asking for more than basic turns or speed changes.

Basic rules for polite conversation: To talk quietly with your horse, try to have relaxed, but not sloppy fingers, wrists and elbows. There are some old and very valid equitation rules that make this easier. One basic equitation rule requires a straight line between your elbow, your wrist and the horse's mouth and it helps to prevent cramping, pulling, and locking of the joints of the lower arm that contribute to stiffness and shouting through the reins. Another part of this rule is to carry your upper arms close to your body, hanging straight from the shoulders, with your elbows just slightly away from your sides, so that your hands are about eight inches apart. If you maintain your upper arms in this position you will not be pulling back on the reins with your arms, and are more likely to allow your fingers to do the talking.

Another old (English) equitation rule requires you to hold the reins in two hands, through the bottom of the hand with the loose ends (bight) coming out between thumb and index finger, while holding the thumb at the top of the hand. This allows the fingers to remain soft and mobile on the reins, without blocking the flow of conversation from the horse's mouth. If you hold your reins this way, you will not have your wrists cocked up or down, and will not be



Here the rider's high hands break the smooth connection between her elbow and the horse's mouth. For her to create a friendly dialogue with her horse while holding her hands at this height, he would need to carry his head much higher than he is in this picture.



as likely to pull on your horse's mouth. You will also have free use of your fingers and wrists to adjust the height of the reins, and the amount or direction of pressure you may need to use to convey messages to your horse's mouth.

Establishing the conversational tone, the length of the reins:

You can have picture-perfect hand and arm position, but if your reins are so long that you can't feel your horse's mouth, or so short that all you can feel is a heavy pull, you will not be having a pleasant conversation with him. To talk effectively through the reins, at first adjust their length so that when your hands and arms are in position, you can feel your horse's mouth as about the weight of a small plum or large strawberry in your fingers. This is the "tone" you will use most of the time, with moments that feel more like a grape, and some that feel more like a grapefruit!

The length of rein that you need to get this feel will depend on your horse, and you will probably need to adjust the length of your reins frequently by opening or closing your fingers over them to maintain that feel. Keep your fingers relaxed so that you can adjust them easily to maintain this conversation, don't let them freeze into a fist, or get so soft they drop the reins.

Listening to your horse

IF YOU KEEP YOUR REQUESTS POLITE and soft, you can hear your horse as he talks to you through the reins. When your fingers are relaxed with light contact, you can feel him lick or mouth the bit, as he thinks about what he is doing. You can feel him carry it quietly when he is content and confident in his work. You can feel him chew it lightly if he is confused. You can feel him stiffen his jaw and resist if he does not understand or is not able to do what you ask. You can feel him drop his conversation with you and duck away from the bit if you ask him for something he is unable to do. You can also feel him grind his teeth and harden his entire neck if he is unhappy, uncomfortable, but resigned to doing what you ask.

When your horse tells you these things, listen and respond, keeping the conversation going by helping him understand what you want and reassuring him if he expresses concern. Don't freeze on the reins or throw them away, use them with as much precision as possible as lines of communication between you and your horse.

