



Jonathan Field Horsemanship

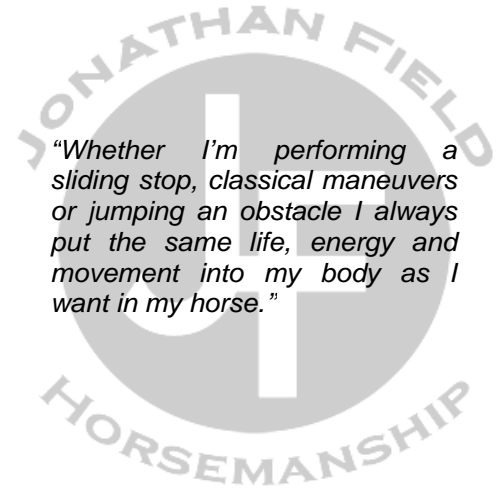
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Riding – It's an Active Thing



Whether riding the impulsive or hard-to-go horse, it is all about being an active rider.



The dictionary's definition of equitation is "the art and practice of horsemanship and horse riding." Sometimes we get caught up in a particular discipline, and it becomes our only definition of equitation. And yet, it is actually the sum of all disciplines that is the true definition.

In the previous article, I discussed how to develop an excellent seat by improving your balance through using your own natural balance and letting go of artificial aids. This month, I want to discuss the concept of riding and how the fundamentals of riding are the same...regardless of discipline.

There is much more to riding than simply keeping the horse between you and the ground (although this is very beneficial!). Riding is not a non-participatory action where one is simply a passenger sitting in the correct position; it is an active action that requires life, energy and movement in the rider.

Essentially, the life and energy riding requires is no different than the life and energy you use to walk, stop, or run on foot. It isn't the same level of exertion, but the principle is the same. By the life, energy and movement in your body, your horse should be able to understand whether you want him to walk, trot, canter, gallop, spin, or Piaf. It is your responsibility as half the partnership that you do your fair share. Great riders put the same life and

movement in their bodies that they want their horses to have.

But what if you have a horse that is impulsive and raring to go at the drop of a hat? Or conversely, a horse that is lazy and hard to get to go? How do you ride horses when they are either running away with you or lagging behind?

The answer lies in tapping into the horse's natural instinct to want to get in sync. As herd animals, they survive by moving as a unit. In fact, that is how horses find comfort. Watch a momma and her foal. The foal neither runs impulsively past nor drags behind. His movement mirrors his momma's. This is as much instinctual as it is learned. When we are in sync with our horses, our horses become willing and energetic partners in whatever we choose to do.

It is especially hard to get in sync with horses that are impulsive, because they persuade us to ride too little. In the hopes that we slow down our own energy and movement, our horses will do the same, we pop our legs off their sides, lean behind their movement and pull on the reins. Unfortunately, this doesn't work. If anything, because we are now so glaringly out of sync with their movement, they react the way impulsive horses usually react- by becoming even more impulsive! In fact, impulsive horses need to be actively ridden more than any other.

To be able to get in sync with you, they need to really feel you. The idea is to teach both you and your horse what it feels like to be in sync so that more and more the impulsive side of your horse is replaced with the desire to find harmony. This in turn makes you more comfortable and able to concentrate on actually riding your horse the way you want him to move. (Please note: there are many other ways to help your impulsive horse start feeling more confident and able to use the thinking part of his brain, such as ground work, but for now we are concentrating solely on understanding the fundamentals of riding.)

While the impulsive horse persuades us to stop riding, the hard to go horse coerces us to do all the work! We end up riding too much and always being ahead of our horses' movement, hoping they will catch up with us. We also react by continually squeezing and kicking. This can be an exercise in frustration! Regardless, we are as out of sync when we are ahead of our horses' movement as we are when we are idling behind.

Riding the Impulsive Horse

In a pasture or enclosed arena, start your horse off at a walk. Focus on riding your horse with your energy, pushing him forward, much like you do with a gas pedal when you push it down to ease your car into traffic. Once he is walking, ride the walk. (Doing the Mirror Exercise as described in September's article will help you learn how to actively ride the walk.) Ensure your legs are draped over your horse's sides and making contact (not gripping) and are not braced off your horse. He needs to learn that contact with your legs does not mean go faster or panic.

If your horse does start to go faster than you like, turn him in a tight circle or in a ninety-degree turn. Don't release contact with the reins until your horse not only makes the turn but, most importantly, matches the level of riding effort you are putting in. It is critical not to keep the reins taut beyond this point, however, because it is like burning the brakes in your car.

When you are ready to stop, *ride* to the stop. This is an important distinction. Stopping is every bit as much of an active movement as walking, it does not mean cease all energy and movement. Think of when you are walking. You don't all of a sudden go limp as a dishrag to stop - you actively stop. Resting, or being "at ease," is when you can let the energy out and physically relax. It is important that your horse feels the difference in your energy and body movement from walking to stopping and then resting.

When you and your horse are in sync at the

walk, transition to the trot, being conscious of pushing your horse into the movement (Again, the Mirror Exercise will help you with this.) If he goes too fast, ride him into a small circle and keep riding the trot. It is hard for a horse to gain momentum when he is circling, so tighten the circle until he matches your energy. Don't quit *actively riding!*

To transition back down to the walk, bring your energy down and ride the walk. If your horse doesn't mirror your energy, keep riding the walk and support with your reins by slowing your horse until he matches your movement. Release the reins the instant you feel in harmony. If he speeds up again, repeat the process.

The more you do this exercise at the slower gaits like the walk and trot the more your horse will look to be in sync with you which will, in turn, make it easier for you to actively ride whatever gait you want without worrying if your horse is going to take off on you.



Riding behind the movement- Hoping her horse will slow down, student Bobbi Rothenburger rides behind the movement with her legs braced off the sides, causing her horse to become even more impulsive. Pulling on the taut reins further aggravates the situation and creates greater disconnection.

Impulsive horses actually learn to be this way at the walk and trot because many people don't try to change the behavior until they are faced with a runaway at the canter or gallop. It is important to ask yourself, "Is my horse running away from me at the standstill or at the walk?" If he starts walking or trotting *before* your energy and movement ask him to, then the answer is YES. And while it is easy to ride a runaway horse at the walk it doesn't make him any less of a runaway.

Straight lines actually encourage the impulsive horse to pick up speed. Circles and S patterns, on the other hand, are a great way to get an impulsive horse to start thinking more and reacting less, for it is much harder for him to run away when he is busy concentrating on turning. Remember though, a hundred tight circles won't help if you aren't *actively riding*. Impulsive horses get used to moving with tension and waiting until they are standing still to relax. When your horse finally gets in sync with your movement, don't reward him by stopping. Allow him to relax in the movement. Signs of relaxation are: lowering of head, stretching out the top line, blowing and smoothing out of gait

Riding the Hard-to-Go Horse

In an arena or enclosed pasture, ask your horse into the walk just like you would an impulsive horse. Bring your life up and push your energy forward, just like the gas pedal. After you have brought your energy up and squeezed with your legs, support with a light tap on the hindquarters to insist that your horse gets going. He may balk a bit, but stay persistent until he moves up into your forward energy. When he does, quit tapping, release the squeeze and ride at the level of lightness to which you aspire.

It is crucial to keep *actively riding* once your horse moves forward. Our tendency is to be so relieved he starts walking that we quit ALL energy. Or, we anticipate that he is going to quit so we overcompensate and keep squeezing and tapping. Enjoy the harmony as long as it lasts. If your horse slows down and gets behind your movement simply repeat the process. Soon, it will be less work for your horse to keep in sync with you at a walk than to continuously stop, start, stop, start.

Now, ride to the stop. For the hard-to-go horses this will be a movement they can get in sync with

quite easily! Transition into the walk, and then the trot and so forth.

Just as with impulsive horses, hard-to-go horses will start looking to get in sync with you, making it easier for you to ride your horse at all gaits without worrying if he is going to quit on you.



Riding ahead of the movement – By continually squeezing with her legs and riding ahead of her horse's movement, Rothenburger does all of the work trying to get her horse to move forward. A light tap on the hindquarters to support the squeezing, followed by an instant release of all pressure the moment her horse moved forward, would soon have her horse moving out with ease.

Straight lines are great for the hard-to-go horse. If your horse is safe, get out of the arena and take your training sessions out in the open areas or on the trails where there is a place to go. Give him a reason to want to move.

When your hard-to-go horse is moving with ease and you feel in harmony, stop and rest him as a reward. The next time, keep riding a bit longer before you reward him. Build on this incrementally. Essentially, you are building a desire in your hard-to-go horse to go forward willingly to be in sync with you.

Great riders have the flexibility to go into any movement that is required for what they are asking their horse to do. They may choose a specific discipline they want to apply their riding skills to, but it isn't the discipline that teaches them how to ride. A cowboy riding a bucking horse stretched out completely at the top of the buck, a dressage rider

elevated and collected and moving in place for the Piaf, and a reiner hunkered down in the sliding stop all have one thing in common: they are mirroring the energy and the body movement of their horse. They are true partners, neither working more or less than their horse.

Do's and Don'ts

For the impulsive horse:

-DO lots of circles to establish a base of relaxation in slow speeds. You can then build from this base or go back to it as needed.

-DO give him enough time to relax in movement.

-DON'T idle behind your horse's movement. This will only make your horse more impulsive.

-DON'T ride with taut reins, trying to hold your horse back. This is like burning the brakes on your car.

For the hard to go horse:

-DO lots of straight lines. Continuous circles shorten a hard to go horse.

-DO reward by stopping.

-DO allow your horse to break gait. Let him make the mistake so that he can learn from it.

-DON'T continuously squeeze, tap, or kick your horse once he is moving. Your horse will just get frustrated because there is no release of pressure telling him he is doing the right thing. This can cause him to balk and buck



Riding in sync - Actively riding the walk, her body posture is relaxed and in sync with her horse's movement. Her legs hang loosely at her horse's side, making contact but not gripping, and her reins are loose with a nice drape to them.

Tips for a positive session for both you and your horse.

Be very conscious of *actively riding* your horse. You are one half of a partnership. You shouldn't be doing less or more work than your horse.

Make a program of this until you can *actively ride* your horse at a walk and trot without having to consciously think about it.

Patience and persistence are the keys to success.

Don't take things personally. Your horse is only being a horse.