

SENSITIVE SCHOOLING - part 1

How your horse would like to be ridden

by Sylvia Loch

To school a horse with minimum effort, maximum effect, we must first understand some of the theory of riding. An idea of simple biomechanics - for example how the hindlegs are designed to push under the horse's body to send him forward, where and where not the horse's neck should naturally flex - is essential. So are matters like pressure points and how gravity affects not only our own body, but also that of the horse.

Second, we must be logical in our approach. The idea of Push-Pull! for example is obviously illogical. Common sense should tell us that to command the horse to go forward from the leg at the same time as we say the opposite with the hands is flawed thinking. Yet many riders do just that! It was Francois Baucher who preached "legs without hands, hands without legs" ... An over-simplification maybe but so much better than the alternative which will only end in confusion.

FEEL GOOD FACTOR

The road to success is to provide the easiest option – a way out of trouble. This is especially beneficial when introducing something new. The clever rider is the one who places her horse in a balance that enables him to respond to her cue out of *choice*. After a while he learns to respond instinctively to that same cue every time he feels it. And if all this feels good, he will want to do it, time and time again. In the early days we open the right rein to indicate right and the horse gladly moves into it because it feels soft and allowing. This establishes the idea of positive reinforcement. In such a case, we can gradually reduce the cue until it becomes the proverbial 'whisper' on the rein coupled with a mere 'touch' of the leg.

NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT

When cues are given in a crude, unpleasant way, they are less easily learned. For example pulling back with the rein instead of allowing will constitute negative reinforcement, as it drags on the bars of the mouth. So is constant kicking or pushing with the seat. Under these conditions, the horse may still obey, but he does this out of resignation rather than motivation. He has learnt that things will get worse if he resists. Some horses however are too sensitive or proud to give in, and develop real behavioural problems which may even lead to their early demise. This is very sad indeed.

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