

developing feel

Second in a series of articles
from trainer, Carlos Tabernaberi

Feel not only gives you a better understanding, focus and ability to recognise things before they happen, but also the ability to know when your horse has understood and responded to your request.

Feel is about communication and understanding between you and your horse.

In the last article, we discussed becoming aware...aware of where your horse is at mentally and physically and aware of how you think and act; what your body language is saying and what things you focus on. These all have an effect on you and therefore on your horse. That's why awareness is fundamental to developing feel, timing and balance. When you are fully aware of your horse, you will feel the way his muscles move; a slight tensing or relaxation, a shake of his head. Subconsciously, you'll be aware of his every movement.

I hope you've had a chance to think about these ideas and to start working on developing your awareness. It will help as we start to look at the concept of feel.

When I talk with my students, these are some of the points I like to share. While nothing beats demonstrating what I'm talking about or answering your questions to make sure you understand, I will try my best. Hopefully, you'll get a better idea why things don't seem to work at times and your horse may have difficulty understanding your request.

I'll start by giving you an analogy. Analogies are how life was explained to me, and they made it easier to understand more serious things.

Feel is like sugar. To know how sweet sugar can be, you have to taste it because no one can describe a 'sweet taste' in a way that is meaningful for you.

Let's look at it another way. I am a great believer that tools do not determine the quality of a tradesman's job—it's the skill involved. You can get a

carpenter with a nail gun to do your deck in half the time or less that it would take another carpenter using a hammer and nails, one at a time. While the process used by the second carpenter may seem tedious and backwards, it doesn't make the carpenter with all the great tools the better of the two. The feel and skills developed through on-the-job experience will determine the quality of the work. Without a feel for how the finished job needs to look; without

a vision of how to achieve it, neither carpenter will do an outstanding job, regardless of the tools used.

I often explain to my students that when we

think a lot when we ride, we get ourselves into trouble. By all means, a thinking rider is a more prepared rider but a rider with more feel for the horse's movements and actions will be the better rider. Young riders have an advantage over teens or adults learning to ride because they generally have a terrific sense of balance, a better sense of using both left and right sides of their bodies, great trust in their horses, and the ability to easily imitate what they see without the need to ask lots of questions. They just do it.

From an early age, I had to develop feel for the horse because no one taught me to ride. I either developed this feel or I came off...sooner or later! Your feel for your horse should be as acute and important as feel is for a visually impaired person whose life depends on it. When you're riding, in essence your life depends on your ability to feel your horse. When we become complacent, we lose feel.

Remember, with feel, you don't need so many tools but your end result is better. Feel gives you a better understanding, focus and the ability to recognize things before they happen.

I like to use bareback riding to develop feel. It's great because you've got a direct connection between your seat and the horse's hooves. And if you don't know how to feel where your horse's feet are, you can't control where those feet go!

"A thinking rider is a more prepared rider but a rider with more feel for the horse's movements and actions will be the better rider."

Feeling the walk

I should say here, that before doing any ridden work with a horse, I always do my groundwork. We'll talk about that in a future article but you can read about it in my book, *Through The Eyes of The Horse* if you're interested. Good groundwork has a direct connection to the work you do under saddle, and feel is essential to effective groundwork. When your horse is able to focus on you on the ground and follow the feel of your body and feet, he (or she) will be light and



responsive under saddle.

This is one of the times that it's easier for you to see what I mean if I show you through pictures. The six year old Thoroughbred you see in these pictures had twice thrown and seriously injured her previous owner (who had been told the horse was green broke) and two others. Her current owner bought her for just one dollar (you can read more about Nava on my website). Nava came to Whispering Acres for four weeks training, but this is the first time she has ever been ridden bareback.

Pics 1-3: As she walks forward, her belly swings out over her supporting leg. As a result, the hip over her supporting leg rises, while the hip over her swinging leg lowers. I just let her move my seat and stay in balance. Notice that as her belly swings over to the supporting leg, my leg is moved out to the same side and my seat bone rises on that side also.

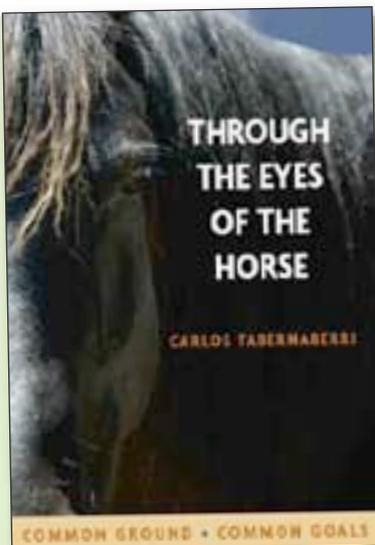
It's a good way to tell which hind leg is on the ground.

Pics 4-5: At first, you may find it's easier to place your hand on your horse's hip and turn to watch the movement of the hind feet but beware...your seat bones will shift when you

turn and your horse is likely to go in a circle as a result!

Soon you'll be able to tell which foot is hitting the ground without looking. This will come in handy when you're learning to rise at the trot or to give the correct canter departure cue.

continued next page...



- Understanding how horses learn and how to communicate with them.
- Awareness of how your actions and attitudes influence your horse...and how to change them.
- Horsemanship skills on the ground and in the saddle.
- How to develop feel, timing and balance.
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Feeling the canter

Most people are taught to look at the horse's leading leg to determine whether the horse has picked up the correct canter lead. In reality, the ability to feel where his hind feet are is far more critical, as a horse pushes off into the canter from the appropriate hind leg. Being able to feel where that hind leg is will enable you to give the horse the correct cue at the correct time, when he will be able to respond to your request. For now, let's just focus on feeling those feet.

Pic 1: On the first beat of a three-beat left lead canter, the horse's outside hind foot is the only one on the ground. It comes under the horse's body, taking the full weight of horse and rider, allowing the horse to push off.

Pic 2: On the second beat of the canter, the inside hind leg (left) and the outside fore foot (right) a diagonal pair, are on the ground at the same time.

Pic 3: This is the third beat of the canter, the leading leg, where the inside forefoot is the only foot on the ground.

Pic 4: After the third beat, all four feet are off the ground or 'in suspension'. Here the outside hind leg is just coming



back to the ground, getting ready to push off again on the first beat.

Now that we've had a brief look at awareness and feel, we'll look at balance in the next issue and how it relates to those essential elements of awareness, feel, balance and timing. Until then...happy and successful training!

Give it a go!

If you're new to bareback riding, it's always best to work with someone on the lunge at a walk. This gives you the chance to relax and really concentrate on how your horse's muscles feel as he moves and how that changes with each footfall. Here I'm working with Paris and Phoenix, a six-year-old Welsh Mountain Pony. This is Paris' first time riding bareback...see what she thought of it at the end!

Start by simply walking in a circle, thinking about your balance and how looking in the direction you want to go changes the feel of your seat bones on your horse's back. How does your horse respond? How does your seat shift with each step?

Concentrate and see if you can call out which foot is being raised, just by how it feels, and have the person helping you correct you if you're wrong (near

fore, near hind, off fore, off hind).

When you feel comfortable, try this with your eyes closed. You'll find that this can affect your balance, so you may want to take up a bit of mane at the start. Then try putting one arm straight out to the side...and then both arms. How does this feel to you? How does it affect your horse? Don't forget that the person helping you may be able to help describe what's happening.

If you're feeling really confident, you may want to try a walk off the lunge—you're well on your way.

So what did Paris think of her first bareback ride?

"It was a bit scary not to have a saddle. It was harder to keep my balance, but I could feel his muscles when his feet hit the ground. He was really warm...and dirty! But I would do it again because I can see how it can help me be a better rider in a saddle." **hw**

