

## The ABC's of Good Riding

By Lynn Acton

When I was younger and knew so much more than I do now, it was obvious to me that the best riders were those who got on any difficult horse, and stayed on no matter what. I realized later that just defines the most athletic riders with the least common sense. Maybe “correct form” defined a good rider? But that didn't explain riders with pretty posture and poor horse control, or those with a casual slouch, yet relaxed, cooperative mounts.

Then I read, “**If you are considerate of your horse, everything else will take care of itself.**” It's splendid advice, putting the focus where it belongs: on the horse's welfare. It means riding in a way that makes the horse's job healthiest for him mentally and physically. Considerate, mind you, refers to the horse's best long term interests, not his immediate whims. Requiring good behavior is considerate because a well-behaved horse is calmer, safer, gets more positive attention, and has better prospects in life. The foundations of considerate riding are the ABC's:

### **ATTITUDE, BALANCE, & COMMUNICATION**

**An Attitude of benevolent leadership encourages maximum cooperation.** Horses' drive to be dominant is much overplayed. The image creates drama that sells training videos, and is logical to ambitious humans, but in truth most horses are more interested in feeling safe and comfortable. Much of what is perceived as “dominance” on the horse's part stems from the equine logic that *someone* has to be in charge. If the horse doesn't get clear signals, then he thinks he is *supposed* to take charge. We can take charge with minimum fuss by being politely but relentlessly consistent. That means calmly redirecting behavior we don't want the instant it starts, before it becomes an issue. If my horse wants to trot to catch up to the horse ahead of him on the trail, I remind him to walk, gently but immediately, every single time. The rider who allows a behavior one time and punishes it the next looks like a bully who can't make up her mind.

**Correct Balance is defined by the laws of gravity.** A horse works best when the rider's center of gravity matches his. Poor balance can make a horse nervous, especially if he has to negotiate tricky terrain, obstacles, or jumps; it can hamper him athletically, cause sore muscles, and over stress joints. Imagine carrying 20% of your weight, and think how quickly you'd have a sore back if that weight were even slightly off-balance. Side to side balance is obvious. The horse's spine, the center of the saddle, and the center seam of your jeans or breeches should all line up.

Front to back balance requires that your head, shoulders, hips, and feet line up vertically, just as when you stand on the ground. Many western

riders brace against the cantle, lean back, and push their feet out in front. English riders often push their feet forward to keep their heels down (actually less important than keeping your feet underneath you), then counterbalance by leaning forward. When we violate laws of gravity, there is a price to pay. Off-balance riders often grip with their legs, giving the horse a constant speed-up cue. Bracing is hard on the rider's hips and knees. Leaning back makes the horse susceptible to back pain, a common cause of bucking and other "behavior" problems. A rider who is ahead of or behind the vertical posts less smoothly, landing harder than necessary on the horse's back, another source of pain for the horse.

We should lean forward only to follow a change in the horse's center of gravity: jumping, galloping, or going up a hill. Leaning back is necessary only when going down hills or when the horse trips. Either way, feet should stay underneath the seat.

**Communication goes two ways: giving clear signals and reading the horse's response.** The clearest cues are precise and gentle. Large gestures irritate and confuse the horse, and unbalance the rider. For example, a rider who pulls too hard on the reins usually leans forward (telling the horse to speed up) or backward (pulling the horse's head up and making it harder for him to stop).

A good goal is to make your signals invisible, so that someone watching can't see you doing anything. If you're thinking, "But my horse won't respond to subtle cues," remember that he can feel a fly land on any part of his body. Then try this experiment: Always give a whisper soft cue first, slowly increasing the pressure until the horse responds. You will be amazed at how quickly he starts responding to the first hint of a cue.

Reading the horse's body language helps the rider recognize the instant the horse responds, so she can release the cue, thus telling the horse his response was correct. An attentive rider short-circuits problems before they develop. She notices the forward lean that says the horse is about to trot without permission, the tension that says he's getting anxious, the tail swish that announces he's irritated, or the arrhythmic beat to his gait that says he's lame.

The ABC's of considerate riding create a rider whose *attitude* elicits cooperation from her mount, whose *balance* helps him move his best, and whose *communication* with him is clear and subtle. This is the elegant ideal that judges look for in show rings, yet it does not require great technical skill or athleticism. Considerate riders of any level are a pleasure to see, because they bring out the best in their horses by giving their best.