

COOL, CALM & COLLECTED, PART 3

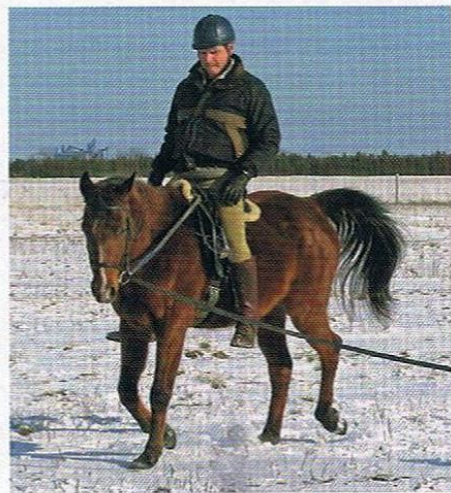
by Walter Mantler

In this article, the third in our series, we will be discussing contact. Correct contact is not only necessary for higher degrees of collection, it is a very integral part of establishing cool and calm as well. We must understand and pay special attention to contact throughout the entire training process.

UNDERSTANDING "THREE POINT" CONTACT

Most people, at some point in time, have heard the term used: "riding back to front". This is an excellent term used to describe how a horse should be ridden with regard to contact. Driving forward with our seat and applying our legs will initiate movement of the horse's hind legs to drive them forward. We drive the horse forward from its hind end into our hands which "aid" the horse in bending, balancing and collecting its movement. We need to think of the reins as aids that help bend, shape and direct, as opposed to a steering wheel. We have all, at times, used our hands to create a "headset" that looks desirable, or used the reins to turn a horse. In almost every instance, pulling on the reins will affect the movement of the horse in a negative way, both physically and mentally.

To understand three point contact is to understand that contact originates from our seat and legs which drive the horse into our hands. These are our three points of contact: seat, legs, hands. If you need more "roundness", drive the horse forward with your seat and legs into your hand – the horse will round out. Avoid trying to fix the horse's frame with your hands. Many horses will tolerate the use of our hands to fix things, a few won't. The few that won't are often deemed unruly and not suitable for "the program". Truth be told, these horses are often the best performance horses, they just demand to be ridden properly.



Developing an Independent Seat – The first thing we need to make absolutely sure of is that we will not be using the reins for our own balance. Lunging without reins and stirrups is an excellent exercise for developing one's seat without depending on the reins for balance.

This is not just a beginner's exercise. Even the most advanced riders benefit from being put on a lunge line regularly. A rock solid schooling horse would be preferable for this exercise.

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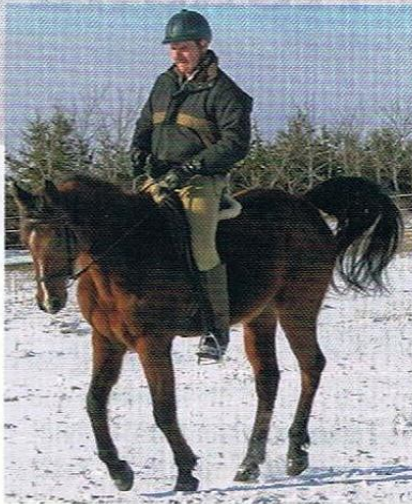
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Arm Position is important in order for contact to remain soft and giving. Arms need to hang off the shoulder relaxed, the upper arm slightly ahead of centre of the waist. The forearm should always form a straight line from the elbow to the bit.

Think of the arm as a shock absorber. With this position, both the shoulder and the elbow will absorb the shock. As the horse goes through his various gates his head will move up and down as well as from side to side. Contact should remain soft, steady and lightly giving with the movement of the horse's head. The rein between the hand and bit should never go slack, as a rein that goes slack could result in a bump to the mouth. A bump to the mouth will inhibit forward motion. Constant bumping is an irritant that will make it difficult for the horse to remain cool and calm during collection.



Driving with seat and legs into soft hands is the key to correct contact. In this photo I am driving Gem forward at the canter while on the left lead. I am driving him forward with my seat as his left hind leg leaves the ground. At the same moment that I drive him forward with my seat, I apply inside upper leg as well. This will encourage his inside (left hind) leg to come further forward making him really use his hind end.

I am driving him forward into soft arms and hands that allow him to move forward while softly collecting his energy at the same time. The result is a comfortable horse that is being ridden from "back to front". Putting Gem into this frame in this manner really makes him feel good about his work. A horse that enjoys its work will be happy to work and go into that frame again.



Constant attention to contact is required even at the free walk. The rider's seat bones and legs that were active at the canter are still active at the walk. Light, constant contact through all the gates is pleasant, helps the horse relax and demonstrates just how important contact is to producing a horse that is cool, calm and collected.




Fitting the correct bit is essential. Biting a horse is beyond the scope of this article, however, I would just like to touch on two key elements of fitting as they relate to contact.

First of all, make sure you choose a bit that is a correct width for your

horse's mouth. Generally speaking, a bit should be only slightly wider than your horse's mouth (about 1/4 of an inch). If too wide, it will slide back and forth from side to side bumping the horse in the mouth and the constant light contact we were looking for will be lost.

The second thing is to make sure your bridle is adjusted properly. As shown in this picture, I have allowed the bit to create one wrinkle on the corner of Gem's mouth. This insures the fit is neither too loose nor too tight.

DISCOVERING "THREE POINT" CONTACT

Discovering correct contact is something that may be difficult to find if you have not already done so. The important thing to know is that when you do make the proper connection between seat, legs and then hands your riding will never be the same. Take the time to do it right. It will pay huge dividends down the road. 

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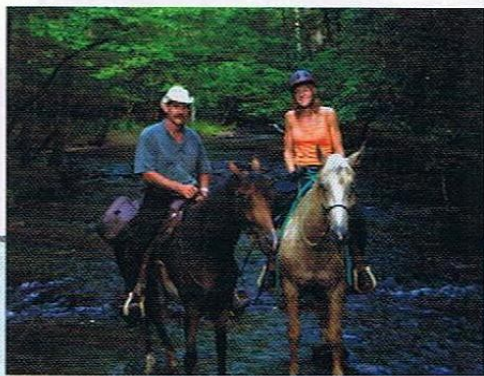
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Walter & Gisela Mantler own and operate Symphony Stables, a training

facility in south western Ontario. They have apprenticed directly under Chris Irwin for years and are recognized among his top trainers. They breed, start, train and finish horses for both Western and English disciplines and run a series of horsemanship and personal development clinics throughout the year. To learn more about their techniques and services, visit www.symphonystables.com