



Gaited Horsemanship

with

Larry Whitesell & Jennifer Bauer.



Feeling the Rhythm of the Feet

By: Jennifer Bauer

One of the most common problems that I hear from gaited horse riders is that they can't go riding with other horses on the trail, because there are some horses in the group that go too fast, while other horses go too slow. The most common thing that happens when a horse goes too fast on the trail is the rider puts a bigger bit in the horse's mouth to slow their horse down. On the other hand when horse does not want to go, the rider uses spurs to speed their horse up. For horses that go too fast, this leads to larger and more severe bits, while the slow horses get kicked and spurred. This also leads to another common problem which is known as "herd sour" horses. In the short term, you can cover up the problem with larger and more dramatic equipment, but eventually you will run out of equipment. What we need to do is fix the problem, which is that your horse is following the other horses and not listening to you!

In my travels around the USA, I get to see a lot of horses and riders. We will commonly have horses that are very agitated. Their owners use large bits to try to gain control of their horse. Some riders are scared to ride their horse in the clinic because their horse is out of control, so I get to ride their horses. The first thing I do is use my saddle and my bridle with a snaffle bit. I prefer my saddle because of the way it sits me in a balanced position. I use the snaffle bit as a training tool, we will describe in later issues why we prefer a snaffle bit versus a shank bit. The snaffle allows us to work with the horse that needs training, not intimidation.

When I get on a horse that goes too fast it typically will start by running off. To work on this I focus on one of the horse's feet that I want to follow and concentrate on that one foot. I don't try to pull the horse around or jerk on the reins. It's not time to punish the horse; it's time to work with him. Once I can feel my horse's foot going up and down and start to follow that foot, I can start to move that foot or slow that foot down through my seat. As soon as I feel that foot and get my seat and my body leading that foot, I can get that horse to walk, gait & canter. It doesn't take a lot of time, but it does take a lot of practice and patience.

A horse that won't go has the same problem. When I ride this kind of horse, I still think about following one foot. Once I get in rhythm with that foot I can ask that horse to walk stronger by squeezing with my calf each time that horse brings his foot up so that way the horse will take a longer stride. As soon as the horse finds he can move more freely and in rhythm with me, he

will begin to move easier and more relaxed.

In both of the examples above, the only exercise I work on is feeling the horse's feet through my seat. When you feel your horse's feet, you can control your horse's feet and when you get control of your horse's feet you control your horse's brain. So...FEEL THE FEET, CONTROL THE FEET, CONTROL THE BRAIN = SAFER HORSE

How do you do this you might ask? What the rider wants to feel is the horse bringing his foot up. When you can do that and you can concentrate on one foot at a time, you can ask that foot to do anything. When that foot is up, the rider can ask that foot to extend, move left, move right, back up, or slow down. If your horse has its foot on the ground, his weight is on that foot. It is impossible for the horse to move his foot if it's on the ground, if you ask him to it will only confuse him.

Once you can feel the horse's feet, it is time to have some fun. When the rider feels the hind feet come off the ground, the rider can ask that foot to extend or speed up. The rider can put light pressure with their calf on the foot that is coming up allowing the horse and riders hip to extend. If the rider wants to slow the horse down, all the rider has to do is slow their hips down. This is something that you can practice while the trail riding. It will take some time and practice but once you are aware of what your hips are doing, you can do more!

If you are wondering what I mean when I say extending your hip or slowing your hip down, try to picture a child riding one of those spring ponies or a play rocking horse. When they want that spring pony to rock faster they allow their hips to increase their motion, moving more forward and backwards. When the child wants to slow down, they slow their body down by slowing down their hips. Keep in mind, if the child uses their whole body to try to get that rocking horse to go faster, the horse might tip over because they are out of balance with it. If the child gets out of rhythm with the rocking horse, it won't work anymore or she might even fall off.

Not only will feeling the horse's feet help with speeding up and slowing down, this will also help with gaiting. This helps with gaiting because you are loose in your hips and it will allow the horse to work underneath you.

As you practice feeling the horse's feet, practice feeling the horse's feet at a gait. When your hips get into rhythm with the horse's walk, this is the feel the horse is going to have at gait. When you ask the horse to gait, try to keep your hips in this type of rhythm. One thing to remember when working with different horses is that each horse has their own rhythm, so you as the rider have to change how you ride to get into rhythm with them. Once you get this feel for the rhythm of the horse's feet, it is an amazing experience to be in balance, timing and rhythm with your horse.

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