

The Concept Of Contact

Contact is the connection of the riders hand to the horses mouth, well that's the basic explanation but its much more complicated than that!

So why is there so many issues with contact? Well mostly because its extremely difficult to achieve a true fluid connection to the horses mouth and many things can influence this along the way. This means that its not just about the reins and the mouth. Everything within the horses body is connected, so yes this means when you use the reins you are not only influencing the mouth but other things too, either directly or indirectly! It is extremely common these days to see the use of various nosebands, specifically designed bridles and thousands of different bits to tackle this on going issue that seems to have occurred, so what's going on?

Well firstly we need to consider how the horse moves naturally. If you think back to a time when you saw your horse moving freely in the field one of the things that you may have noticed is how the horse uses his head and neck. The horse moving free uses the jaw, tongue, poll and neck to balance and we often see this area move away form the direction of the body. Our horses choose to counter balance their body weight with their jaw, poll and neck. This means when they turn or corner by themselves they move the head in the opposite direction to the body. Therefore when turning to the left the head and neck moves to the right and the body moves to the left. When turning to the right they will bend the neck to the right and move the body out to the left. Most horses keep the left side of their body longer than the right so hence the explanation above is not a complete mirror opposite description according the turning direction.

However, when we ride them and wish to turn or band we expect the head, neck and body to follow one line in a designated direction. This is very difficult for the horse to comprehend and goes against all natural instinct. The horse then tries to find a solution to this issue and contorts the body in some way. Taking away the horses ability to balance itself as if would in nature leads to all sorts of issues for both horse and rider. Now don't get me wrong here I'm not saying we should all let our horses bend how they want! But teaching a horse to use the jaw, poll and neck to turn in balance to carry the rider will lead to a more confident, free moving and soft connected ride.

Another element that needs to be considered when discussing contact is the horses natural movement pattern within each pace and what this means for the rider. If the rein contact interrupts or blocks this natural movement pattern especially through the jaw, head and neck. It creates a restriction and over time this restriction becomes the new normal restricted movement pattern. A rein contact that doesn't allow the free movement of the jaw,

tongue and poll due to incorrect timing or no release when necessary means its impossible to create a true connection that allows both horse and rider to move as one.

Typical issues that arise from the above - is tension in the mouth, head tilting, dropping the poll to deep, bracing the underside of the neck, issues with the tongue, grinding the teeth, opening the mouth, leaning on the rein, losing rhythm, general loss of balance and the list goes on. The equine industry has come up with a huge number of solutions for these problems as already mentioned, nosebands to close the mouth, bridles that stabilise the jaw, and all sorts of bits that claim to stop these happening.

But... does the problem go away by changing equipment? No absolutely not! The underlying problem still exists the symptoms have been masked by whatever solution or solutions that have been used.

With regards to biting the right bit is very important in terms of fit and comfort. the width of both upper and lower jaw should be considered to determine the correct size bit. The structure of the mouth such as the size and thickness of the tongue, along with how arched or flat the roof of the mouth is will determine to type of mouth piece that the horse can accommodate. The shape and thickness of the bars is also important as this is a contact area for the bit (narrow and angled bars can be extremely sensitive). the fleshiness of the lips needs to be considered too, again this is also a contact area, really fleshy lips can be pinched or rubbed easily. Finding the right bit is about comfort and fit and not about solving contact issues unless they have arisen from poor fit or incorrect mouth piece for the mouth conformation.

The facts - What we have learned so far is the horse manages to turn and bend on its own without any of the symptoms we see as a result of contact issues. However! when a horse is carrying a rider in order for both to remain in balance through a turn or bend or just generally during motion the horse still needs to be able to use its natural balancing apparatus to achieve this.

It's the riders job to teach the horse to understand what's required from the horses body when the rein is in use. Horses do not just know this, they try hard to find a solution usually to the detriment of their body. Riders must understand what is expected from them when the horse is in motion. A restrictive contact or ill timed rein aid will impair balance and movement rather than improving it. Restrictive equipment that masks symptoms of unconfort or misunderstanding is not the answer.

Using the rein should be effortless for both horse and rider and should aid the weight distribution and connection in the body not hinder or block it. Its

our job as a rider to understand how our horses function and to enhance and teach them how to carry us with ease. During competitive riding judges should understand the importance of function (yes the jaw needs to move), natural movement and true connection. A riders hand should be soft and allowing and should be used with in the natural flow of motion in order not to block the horse. Symptoms such a tension in the mouth, opening the mouth, leaning on the rein should not be masked by equipment and should be addressed to find the route cause, yes very often the riders hands.

Knowledge is power using strength, quick fixes and force is human weakness.

If you'd like to find out more or to learn how to develop a better contact please get in touch

www.longdrvoedc.co.uk

taraoz@mail.com

+447971187955