

Use of Natural Aids

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Radio Interview / September 16, 2014

What are the natural aids?

Eyes, Ears, Voice, Legs, Hands, and Weight. Weight can be further divided into weight distribution (moving forward, backward, and side to side), seat bones, and core balance. The parts of the body we are born with and use to communicate with the horse.



What are artificial aids?

Bits, chin straps, tie-downs, martingales, crops, spurs. Anything that we put on the horse or use in conjunction with training a horse other than our natural aids.

How does the horse communicate to a rider that the rider is not properly using their natural aids?

Many times riders think their horse is misbehaving. They'll blame their horse for behaviors that are interfering with what the rider wants to do with the horse. They will call their horses "stupid" and "idiot". Or question the horse's motivation: "Why is he doing this?"

Much of the time the horse is communicating to the rider that the rider is not using their aids correctly. Some of these behaviors include:

Worried look

Showing white in the eye

Holding their breath

Head:



Elevated head

Pulling the bit out of your hands

Behind the bit

Ear Pinning

Stomping their feet

Brace in their neck

Won't move forward

Tail Swishing / Wringing their tail

Backing up which can be the beginning stage of rearing up

Breaking gait

Bucking

Rearing

Run-away despite your pulling back

Laying down and trying to roll you off



What are common mistakes that riders make where the natural aids contradict themselves?

Mistake: Asking the horse to go forward with your seat and legs and keeping pressure on the horse's mouth with the bit. Solution: Pushing your reins forward will free up the horse for forward movement.

Mistake: As instructors we frequently hear riders' confusion. "Why is he speeding up when I'm doing everything right?" When you allow your body to tip forward, the horse frequently will increase its speed – even if you think that you are riding correctly. When you lean forward, the horse moves faster in hopes that he can get under you to re-balance. Solution: Sit back. Pull your belly button to your spine and tilt your pelvic area to assist in sitting deeply in the saddle.



Mistake: When you look down your weight falls forward and the horse sometimes speeds up. Solution: Look up. Keep your eyes level and look out in front of you. Even if you are going around a low obstacle, look at the obstacle by casting your eyes down, but keeping your head up.

Mistake: When turning, the rider drops his shoulder, arm, and hand into the turn. This puts the rider and horse off balance. Solution: Imagine a construction level on the back of both of your hands while you direct rein. For the most part, keep your arms and hands level – even when extending them for a turn.

Mistake: When trying to stop a horse, the rider pulls back with the reins and tightens the thigh and calf muscles. Mixed signals to your horse. He is feeling the stop with your reins and the go with your legs. Solution: Learn to use your natural aids separately. Be able to pull back with your arms, stay upright with your body, and relax your legs. . . and exhale.



Mistake: When asking the horse to move laterally – like a sidepass – and the rider is blocking his movement by being on the incorrect seat bone and blocking with the leg. Solution: Learn to recognize what seat bone you are on. Shift your weight to the opposite side of the direction that you want the horse to move into and relax the inside leg.

Mistake: If you are riding Western and neck reining instead of direct reining, don't pull the reins off to one side of the horse by 6 inches or more. This tips the horse's head in the opposite direction of travel. Solution: Neck reining is actually about directing the horse with your seat and legs with very little rein movement.

How can natural aids be used to increase and decrease the energy in a horse?



It's pretty amazing to watch a successful partnership between a rider and horse. To observe the subtleties that the rider can use to control the horse's energy and quality of movement.

After body position instruction - like heels down and look up - what is one of the most common instruction?
Breathe! We can forget to breathe when we're

concentrating on another aspect of riding. Breathing allows your body to stay soft enough to ride WITH the horse's movement.

The opposite of "breathe" is "exhale". The use of the exhale can slow a horse down and even stop a horse.

Your seat rhythm can increase or decrease the horse's energy and movement. Slowing down your seat can slow a horse down. Increasing your seat movement can speed a horse up.

The use of leg pressure definitely influences the horse's energy level. You can increase the energy and movement by how active your legs are. You can decrease the energy and movement by slowing your leg movement, by relaxing your thigh muscle, and your calf muscle.

Your arms and hands can slow a horse's energy by learning the proper use of the half halt or "check and release". It's a technique of putting rhythmic pressure on the reins and bit. Too much pressure and you can break gait.

And, leaving the best to last. . . your energy level will greatly influence the horse's energy level. If you approach a horse with a high energy level - or become excited or afraid - that energy will transfer to your horse. The horse will become more animated. If you approach a horse with a low energy level that energy level will transfer to your horse. Good horsemen learn to voluntarily control their energy level which then transfers to the horse.

How important is our body language?

When you look at our natural aids as a total picture. . . our voice, arms, legs, eyes, weight . . . and where we physically place our bodies in relation to the horse . . . it all adds up to the concept of body language.

Horses are non-verbal animals – meaning that they don't communicate with each other or with other species using any form of words. They communicate primarily with body language. Their vocalizations are limited.

Our body language allows us to communicate effectively with the horse in the horse's communication style.



Stated differently, our body language explains to the horse what we expect from the horse in our herd of two: the rider and the horse. We can explain to the horse in a language that the horse understands what our expectations are for leadership and respect. As we control the horse's space and movement, the horse understands who is the more dominant in your herd of two. Once explained, the horse says, "Oh . . . you're the one in charge." And his demeanor will become softer and more willing. This respect will generalize from the ground to his back and riding.

In addition to the herd aspect, when we are riding we need to learn how to effectively use our voice, eyes, hands, legs, weight, seat bones, and balance. This body language communication will result in softer, smoother, and more precise riding movements and maneuvers.

Where else can natural aids be used besides while riding?

Catching the horse in the pasture

Going into a stall

Leading

Grooming

Tacking up

Ground Work

Lunging on a lunge line

Lunging at Liberty

Ground tying

Getting the horse to come to you

Trailer Loading



Basically, any time the horse can see you or interact with you, he is observing your natural aids: body position, how you are moving, what your energy level is, what your arms and legs are doing, where you are looking, and where you are in relation to his body.

Which brings me to my last thought. Your journey riding your horse takes mastering small skills. Your small skills will add up to larger maneuvers which will result in a unified relationship. You'll become almost one in your thoughts and riding. You'll refine your use of your natural and artificial aids. It's a wonderful feeling. An important end-goal is to ride from your seat and legs with a suggestion of guidance with your reins. It will take time and practice and be worth the effort.



Find a good instructor to help you and a good horse to be your partner in your journey.

For more information on Gerrie Barnes and Progressive Horsemanship, go to **ProgressiveHorsemanship.com**