

Five of the Most Important Skills of Riding

by Barbra Schulte

INTRODUCTION

No matter what kind of riding you do no matter which riding discipline you love when you continually hone the following five skills, you will experience more success and enjoyment than ever before.

These abilities span the physical, mental, and emotional realms simultaneously.

Nothing we think goes without a feeling and a biochemical response in our body.

No emotion we feel exists alone. There is always a same-time thought and physical response (i.e., muscle tension or relaxation, heart-rate increase or decrease, just to name a few).

Nothing we do with our body goes without the other two counterparts having their say.

The good news is that when you understand how to harmonize the inseparable three parts of this triangle, you take a shorter route to achieving your riding goals.

FIVE SKILLS TO TAKE YOUR RIDING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

I. Connect to Your Core

What this is:

Connecting to your core is balance for both you and your horse through your core abdominal area. You stay in sync with your horse's center of balance. The sensation is balance, stability, and harmony in motion with your horse. Emotional control is a big bonus, too.

Why it is important:

Your physical center of balance is located deep in your abdominal area. A horse's center of balance is deep in his rib cage area.

The physical seat of your emotions is also located in this exact same core area of your body!

Without this essential connection to your core, *everything* else you do on a horse will be off by at least the amount your core is not grounded with your horse. Poor effects could include being in your horse's way as you try to do high performance riding, being unsafe, or falling and having a traumatic accident.

Nothing is a more fundamental and a more key foundation riding skill than having a strong core connection with your horse.

Tips:

1. Physical:

Get very clear about your seat position in the saddle for your style of riding. Absolutely know how your shoulders, hips, and ankles should line-up. Become highly disciplined about accuracy regarding your seat and alignment. Be fastidious about checking in with your body and make the corrections.

Avoid poor balance and alignment habits. They will undermine your riding, and they are hard to break.

Breathe into your abdominal area. When you exhale, pretend that the air drops through your tummy softly into your horse beneath you. Be easy about this. Don't "try" too hard. Play with feeling the connection with your horse through your seat.

2. Mental:

Imagine that your core is soft, round, heavy, and can ever so easily drop into your horse's midsection.

An effective mental skill is to talk to yourself with words that evoke feeling. Instead of telling yourself to "Sit", try more demonstrative words like "Collapse deep. Stay soft". The latter has more color and will help you achieve the sensation.

3. Emotional:

When you feel a nauseous or tight feeling of anxiety in your tummy, try the ideas outlined above. Focus on softening your abdomen; make it heavy. Breathe easily and connect with the movement of your horse. You will feel calmer and ride more focused.

II. Choreograph Your Eyes

What this is:

Choreographing your eyes refers to planned, disciplined control of your eyes at all times during your ride. This includes: looking toward where you want to go, having a broad field of vision, and keeping your eyes up to maintain focus and confidence.

Why it is important:

When your eyes are up and looking in the direction of your next move, with a large field of vision, you stay focused on your job. You remain on target with the maneuver you and your horse are attempting. You keep your options open, and you remain confident.

There must be something similar to lightning that connects your eyes to your horse. I am not sure how this happens, but wherever your eyes go, your horse follows.

All disempowering emotions are associated with dropped eyes, i.e., sadness, anxiety, anger. As you

make sure your eyes stay elevated and focused on task, you will stay much more calm and confident.

Tips:

1. Physical:

Choreograph your eyes. Know exactly where your eyes should be at all times from the in-gate of the arena until you exit. If you ride on the trail, stay focused on where you are going with a broad field of vision.

2. Mental:

Coach yourself to "Look beyond the jump" or "Look to the top of the herd". Remind yourself where you need to look. Pair that with "Breathe", and you will maintain a wide field of vision.

3. Emotional:

No matter what happens and no matter how anxious or disappointed you feel, keep your eyes up. This discipline of never dropping your eyes is powerful and will help you let go of an error immediately and move on, focused on the next task.

III. Learn Basic Horsemanship Skills

What this is:

There are basic horsemanship skills that make or break your ability to communicate well with your horse and insure your safety and success.

The following is a short list of these basics:

- Safe practices on the ground, with tack, and astride.
- Balance and body alignment as discussed above.
- Clarity about what response you want from your horse; clarity about your feet, seat, or hand cues used to ask for that response; clarity about how much energy to impart through your cue; clarity if the horse has granted your request (or not); release of the cue, or a new cue as your response to the horse's response to you. Repetition of this sequence during the entire time you ride.
- Accurate evaluation of your current level of riding and a plan for how to take appropriate steps to advance. Confidence-building instruction and a suitable horse are key.
- Knowledge of equine body language so you don't put yourself or your horse in a dangerous situation.

There are many more basic horsemanship skills. The purpose of this writing is not to list all of them, but rather to point out to you HOW IMPORTANT it is for you to study these skills.

Why this is important:

I often see people who are trying to do

Trial and error is certainly part of the learning process. But because riding is so much fun and can be thoroughly enjoyed on a well-trained horse (with very little effort from the rider), it is easy to skip the discipline of becoming a true horseman or horsewoman. The result of lack of interest in this department can be a traumatic accident, discouragement because the horse won't perform, consistently low competition scores that don't improve, or burnout just to name a few.

Some people feel basic horsemanship is boring and will come with time on its own. That's a big mistake. Unfortunately, I often hear stories of loss of confidence from accidents, frustration, or poor competitive rides. When I dig a little deeper, often basic horsemanship skills are missing.

No amount of mental confidence training information can make up for poor skills in this area.

Tips:

- Become a voracious reader of magazine articles about everything from safety to horse care, to how to communicate with your horse effectively through cues. There are wonderful general interest Western and English magazines as well as discipline specific publications.
- Reining for Western riders and Dressage for English riders provide fantastic basic training for all riders. You can become directly immersed in either of these disciplines all the way to the Olympic level if you so choose, and you will have a wonderful experience.

If your only goal is to get solidly grounded in how to effectively communicate with your horse to supplement your current style of riding, I highly recommend studying the horsemanship information of Reining and/or Dressage.

- There are multiple DVDs, CDs, books, and TV shows presented by the greatest horsemen and horsewomen of our time. Research them and delve into their philosophies. There is in-depth information available to you from the ground up. Take what you like and leave what doesn't suit you. The point is to do your homework.
- Ask your discipline specific trainer to give you tips on your personal horsemanship. Ask about your seat or how you are using your feet and hands as you warm-up your horse. Take their advice and work on it.

IV. Stay Focused on What You Want

What this is:

Focus on what you want is the ability to keep the maneuver, skill, or rhythm you desire in your mind's eye at all times.

It is as simple as that. For example, if you want to stay centered and balanced in the saddle, think about how it feels; check in with your body alignment and find your seat.

Why it is important:

If I could share only one mental strategy with you, it would be this one, because nothing is more powerful than seeing, hearing, and feeling within what you are wanting to do.

The HUGE challenge is that we are conditioned, unfortunately, to do just the OPPOSITE. Without mental and emotional disciplined skills, a natural tendency can take over for us to dwell on what is, instead of where we want to go. It's as if we accept our errors as punishment with a sentence to stay there for the rest of our lives! It's easy to have a pity-party about our shortcomings and weaknesses.

Here's a huge insight: you will be learning and growing FOREVER. That process is part of our nature. It never ends. Use your shortcomings as welcome indicators of the next step on your fun adventure of riding. Know what you want, work on it, master it, and oops, there's the next thing to learn around the corner. Enjoy the process.

When you focus on what you want as a replacement for your areas to improve, you advance in the most efficient and fun manner possible.

Tips:

1. Physical:

If you don't know what you want, either from a personal perspective or from lack of knowledge, seek help from respected mentors or professionals. Many people feel stuck because they truly lack the clarity about what it is they need or want to do.

2. Mental:

Visualize with feeling. Ideally, practice twice daily in a comfortable, undistracted environment. Breathe and relax. Then enjoy seeing yourself doing exactly what you want to do. Get into it. Feel it. Smell the smells. Don't worry if you don't know exactly how to do it, just imagine you do! If it's easier for you, pretend you are your favorite rider.

Second, talk to yourself about what you want. Plan your words. Tell yourself "Look to the top" instead of "Don't drop your eyes". This mental coaching is a powerful technique.

3. Emotional:

As you think about your challenges, consciously get excited about how it's going to be when you "get" this new skill. Know it's coming. Make the commitment that you are not only going to get past the roadblock, but you are going to be terrific at your new skill. Feel thrilled about this next step. Wahoo!

V. Learn to Relax on Demand

What it is:

Relaxation on demand is the ability to go from a highly stimulated mental, emotional, or physical state to a less stimulated one.

The mental sensation is a perceived slowdown of thought. The emotional feeling is calmness. The physical experience is reduced heart and brain wave frequency with a multitude of other physical

parameters.

Why it is important:

There is a state of mental, physical, and emotional balance that, when attained, allows you to perform at your peak. It is just the right amount of increased mental and emotional energy accompanied by just the right amount of muscle tension, heart rate, etc. This combined state is identified by the Human Performance Institute as "The Ideal Performance State (IPS)". You may recognize it by the term, "The Zone".

Interestingly, you know if you are there by how you feel calm, focused, energized, ready, motivated, mentally clear.

Notice this state is all about positive emotion.

Depending on what we are doing, we all fluctuate at energy levels at, below, and above IPS. These fluctuations are good. Life occurs in waves from our heartbeat to the four seasons. It's the way the world is wired.

In riding situations however, if we find ourselves in an overly stimulated state due to negative emotions (anger, frustration, fear, or anxiety) we will ride below our potential. These negative states evoke too much muscle tension, increased brain wave and heart rate frequencies.

If you can't relax to reset your emotional, mental, and physical states you will take the long road to your desired riding success.

Remember the discussion above about the lightning bolt that connects your eyes to your horse. There's another bit of lightning that connects your emotions to your horse. If your emotions remain overstimulated, your horse's performance will suffer too.

Tips:

1. Physical:

Breathe. You don't have to do an extensive breathing exercise, although if you like one in particular, that's fine. Just remind yourself to breathe. The thought alone will immediately cause you to take in more air which will in turn simultaneously lower your heart rate and decrease erratic brain wave patterns.

Open your shoulders. Raise your chin. Keep your eyes up. Connect that to breathing and you will immediately begin to relax.

2. Mental:

Talk to yourself about what you want, i.e., "Relax. Everything is fine. I can handle this. No problem." Pair that with a reminder to breathe and you will start to condition the *skill* of relaxation on demand.

3. Emotional:

Develop the habit of noticing how you feel. Whenever you are in a negative emotional state, pay attention and take the above actions to relax.

Because this is a skill, the more you practice the more skilled you will become. Then when you are in a pressure situation and the heat is on, you will be able to get your mind, body, and emotions back to a more relaxed state. Then, and only then, can you resume a highly positive energized state that allows you and your horse to be your best.