



# PRACTICAL LEARNING - UNDER SADDLE 2

BY BRENDAN BERGIN  @brendan\_cbergin

## EQUINE LEARNING - RIDDEN TRAINING (TURN/FEEL)

In the previous two articles, we looked at groundwork and developing ridden work. The relationship between training of these basic responses and connecting them to ridden work is critical to the successful training of our equine partners. The late great German horse trainer Dr. Rainer Klimke employed three core principles in the training of the horse; variety in the training, taking small steps and fostering the horse's personality. His philosophy was to train horses as individuals but in a systematic horse centred way. With a logical and flexible training plan you can truly train horses to their full potential. A pivotal component of the process is to understand where the horse's talent lies. Remember that a horse does not know they are talented but this is what usually comes easily to them. Selecting discipline by equine aptitude can often be helpful to securing training success. Many horses bred to show jump can make good dressage horses. However, I am at pains to be clear that consistent training beats talent every day of the week.

## TURNING FRONT LEGS

Turning the front legs of the horse is one of the pivotal requirements in any discipline, be it dressage, showjumping or eventing. The anatomy of the horse's forelimb and particularly their shoulder is entirely different from our own. With the absence of a collarbone, the horse's shoulder blades have a huge amount of flexibility both vertically and laterally. Instead of the collar bone, the whole thoracic sling is supported by ligaments, tendons and muscles. This makes turning one of the most challenging aspects to train reliably and consistently. Training reliability in these responses is a function of repetition; **practice makes permanent**. The success of training responses lies in consistent repetition. In training, it is helpful to think of the reins as in a sense "attached" to the front legs.

**Training the turn has two main aspects;**

### 1. Training abduction/adduction - taking a step to the side.

Associating the signal from groundwork to ridden work is the first step in the directional puzzle, you have to put the piece that fits in the right place. Remembering back to the first article in this trio your horse has to understand the tap signal to step the leg over. The most regular ridden aid for stepping over is using an opening rein which also links closely in with the moving the horse's centre of gravity over the stepping leg. Using sequential

learning you map the groundwork to ridden work. First, you apply the opening rein aid and then use the groundwork signal. Once this is reliable then you can try under saddle, for this, you will need a knowledgeable assistant to operate the groundwork signal as required. You apply the rein aid if the horse does not offer the trained groundwork response then your assistant can use the reliably trained groundwork cue. With good timing, the horse will catch on remarkably quickly.

### 2. Controlling the pace of the individual front legs - being able to slow down one front leg.

Slowing down individual front legs is a key crossover point between stop/go/turn. Bulging shoulders are a major problem for training both on the flat and over fences. Lack of shoulder straightness is often caused by one foreleg moving faster than another or by the hind legs trying to "pass out" the forelegs. Training each foreleg to be individually responsive to slowing aids builds your shoulder control toolbox. Training these cues involves mapping cues from the groundwork to the ridden work. Usually, the rein aid used to slow an individual front leg is pressured back keeping the hand close to the neck on that side. First, on the ground apply pressure to one rein and tap the corresponding front leg until the horse steps back that leg. Once this is reliable on the ground progress to ridden work. With a knowledgeable handler on the ground, you can apply the rein aid and if the horse does not offer the trained response your assistant can apply the trained groundwork cue. By repeating this with good release timing the horse will start to have a reliable response.

## DEVELOPING AWARENESS OF THE RESPONSES UNDER SADDLE

In training new skills you need to develop the responses to integrate them effectively into your training programme. In order to put these skills together under saddle, one of the key rider skills to develop is feel. Many believe that feel is an innate ability that cannot be learned and while some find connecting the dots easier than others, it can be learned with the right help. The gap in progress for many riders is poor timing in the release of pressure. Remember that one of the most important precepts of training is that **pressure motivates and release trains**. Developing your timing is the difference between training your desired response rather than random or undesirable responses. The value of a coach and trainer with a true understanding of how horses learn is invaluable. This is where we should all be investing!