

Conversations with Riders

by Diana Mead

After publishing “Checks & Balances: Teaching the Half-Halt” online, I have received many email messages from riders with comments and questions, all of which developed into lively dialogue. Themes emerged, and here are some excerpts. Great thanks go to Beth Anne Wallace, Sheryl Weston, Emily Landis and several more riders for participating here.

Topics

Getting Started with the Half-Halt

[Stopping the Horse with the Body \(No Reins\)](#) [Hands](#) [Adding Leg Aids](#) [Integrating Newfound Skills](#) [Timing](#)

Heavy in the Hand

Instructors & Trainers

Saddle Fitting

A Saddle Story

Literature

The Final Word from a Rider

R – Rider D – Diana

Getting Started with the Half-Halt

R: Thank you for explaining the half-halt so clearly. My horse and I definitely benefit from it. As long as I follow your instructions it goes beautifully, but as soon as I brace and neglect to give a full release, well, you know what happens. Not a day goes by that I don’t ask myself, “Am I releasing my half-halt completely, or am I holding too long?” Without your article I never would have been so sensitive.

D: When you grab onto the reins, it can signal a lack of balance, fear or a need to control. To overcome this tendency, focus on trust. It’s remarkable how much the horse wants to cooperate. We can learn from his desire.

R: Trainers have told me, on one hand, “to drive with the seat and legs,” and on the other hand, “to slow the horse without using the hands!” For me, the obvious conclusion was that if the seat and legs drive, what do I have left to slow down the horse but the hands? I didn’t understand how the seat could have the dual effect of driving and stopping the horse. Consequently, I resorted to a variety of physical contortions and tensions. This led me – not to mention my horses – further away from understanding the half-halt.

It’s helpful for me to keep in mind the most important points that you make: (1) breaking down the half-halt into three separate phases: seat, hands and legs, (2) applying each phase within the rhythm of the horse’s movement and (3) staying mentally relaxed to allow myself to feel the horse. I find it very important to pay attention to the

relaxation phase of the stride. As you pointed out, the moment of relaxation gives the horse time to respond. Without this moment, the horse is bombarded with stimuli and never given a chance to answer the rider. As I see it, these are key points in providing me with greater awareness. It is very important to practice each part separately, thoughtfully and receptively, and to repeat these exercises in my warm-up and when I have problems. This may sound like a lot of work, but actually, it is liberating. I've had to concentrate on breaking old habits, but the rewards provide such great incentive that it is more like play than work.

D: The object for the rider is to become spontaneous with the horse – in tune, in balance, applying the aids, listening to the horse's response and instantly rewarding him by stopping the aid. In that climate, positive two-way communication can take place – definitely more like play than work.

Stopping the Horse with the Body (No Reins)

R: You say that as the knee bend increases; the hip joints open to the same degree. I found this hip joint opening to be very slight, almost unnoticeable relative to a very slight increase in knee bend. Also, if I bend my knees past a certain point, my seat lightens. I also felt my core had to engage as part of the process. In addition, the better I applied the aid, the more I felt squared up over the horse's center of balance. I'm familiar with this feeling, but in the past, I experienced it only by chance. I wasn't aware of how I did it.

D: The lightening you feel in your seat is actually bringing your center of balance forward where it will communicate the slowdown. Lightening your seat allows the horse's back to come up. Bending your knees and ankles opens the angle of the hips. That's all. It's purely mechanical. If you concentrate on the horse's response, you will get the results. If your lower legs are moving back, the saddle may be interfering with you.

At this elementary stage, the only thing to think about your core is that it is important to not allow your upper body to swing around. The horse will swim with your weight, wherever it is. So, the more stable your upper body is, the easier it is for the horse to balance your weight. Think of sitting on a ball. Extraneous movement of your upper body forward, backward or sideways will send the ball rolling. The closer you get your center of balance to the ball, the better it goes. Try not to think of engaging anything. Just focus on the balance. Engagement can be developed only when your balance with the horse is consistent.

One exercise I find helpful is a strong, working, rising trot on an open repetitive pattern, say a large figure eight or just continuously crossing the diagonal in the arena. Concentrate on finding balance and feeling soft, even contact with the upper and lower legs and with the hands on the reins. When you feel in balance, choose a spot, say X, and in the sitting phase of the posting trot, use your body to slow the trot for two or three strides, then go back to the working trot.

By asking for the half-halt for two or three strides every time you go over X, the horse will learn it and anticipate it. Then, as the horse anticipates and slows down, you can practice your own balance in the half-halt. Thus, the horse helps you synchronize with his balance and movement.

R: Initially, I worked on slowing and/or stopping, using only my body, no reins. At first, my horse ignored my body aid, so I took breaks from applying it and kept starting again. Then, to my surprise, he responded. He slowed down in the walk, and I rewarded him by relaxing my legs. Then he responded nearly every time by not only slowing down, but also by lifting and rounding his back. I could feel his hind legs come more forward toward his center. I repeated this several times and then decided to continue applying the aid after he slowed the walk. This brought him to a square halt, lifting and rounding his back and square with his hind legs well under himself. What a wonderful surprise!

D: When you ride in balance with the horse and don't pull on the reins, he is free to organize himself. Offering a square halt toward the end of the ride, the horse gives us a unique opportunity to give him his ultimate reward – dismount. This practice contributes to consistent square halts.

R: Next, I tried the seat aid in an active working trot on the long and short sides of the arena and across the diagonal, applying the aid over X. The response was instant. He came back to walk every time I asked. I dismounted and put him away after that.

The following day, I repeated the same sequence. He ignored the seat aid at first but soon responded the way he had the day before. This time, I experimented with using the aid more softly over X to slow the trot and then applying it again on the next diagonal, enough to ride from trot to walk to see if I could regulate the response. Then, I tried applying it on the long side as well. It worked nearly every time I applied it correctly; meaning I had to relax and stay supple in my joints between applications. So, I would say it went well.

D: Every warm-up can be a pre-flight check. Are you in balance with your horse in walk, trot and canter? Is he responding to your body aid to slow him down? This is the beginning of a beautiful ride.

Hands

R: I'm beginning to realize that I've been carrying way too much weight in my hands. It's a challenge for me to give up that pressure. Now that my balance has improved and the horse is responding so beautifully to my body aids to slow him down, I'm more and more willing to ride him on a loose rein.

D: Once you get the slowdown responses worked out with your horse, you can add light contact with the reins. Then, when you apply your body aid you should feel a slight increase of weight in your hand, just in that moment. The next moment, the weight in your hand should decrease to the original light feel you had before you applied the aid. This is the beginning of combining the aids. Remember, from the article:

"Once the exercise of stopping the horse without reins has been mastered and the rider has established, a light contact of both reins with the bit, these two elements can be combined. The rider can increase pressure on the bit by applying the body aids against steady hands. When the rider alternates action with a moment of relaxation, the horse is given an opportunity of complete freedom to respond.

“Repeating this rhythmic action/relaxation provides the horse with ongoing opportunities to respond. Thus, a friendly conversation between rider and horse is established.

“When the horse yields to the reins – either by softening in the jaw or poll or by slowing down – it is critical that the rider *never* pull back or down on the reins. The rider may feel the need to pick up what is perceived as slack in the rein. If the horse has not been previously abused in the mouth, it is most likely that the horse is just giving to the rein pressure. Whether or not the horse has been abused, it is judicious to give the horse the benefit of the doubt and keep practicing the exercise.

“Thus, the rider and the horse can begin to feel the difference between a softening of the contact and a dropping of the contact. This distinction is critical, for if the contact is dropped, the rider must re-establish contact before proceeding. The horse must never be punished in the mouth.”

Adding Leg Aids

R: I am learning that the seat (slowdown) aid works in concert with the leg aids. Without the slowdown, the leg aids either do nothing (horse gets more and more dead to the legs) or he runs on the forehand. Instead, my legs need to ask for or restore activity. I didn't feel much when I started thinking of activity because I wanted to feel more speed (old habit), and I wasn't allowing myself to pay attention to a different response. I've been asking for speed for years – forever, even though I knew it was wrong; it was all I could feel. But when I started to combine the seat aid for forward/reaching with the leg aid for activity, I nearly fell off with amazement. My mature Thoroughbred has had a lot of professional training, but I could seldom bring out the engagement and rhythm with him that my trainer could, and when I did, it was always with force. Typically, my horse moved with short, choppy strides. I could sit this trot but I knew it was wrong and not good for him. Now I can consistently engage him and make small transitions within the gait, both the trot and the canter.

D: You are fulfilling a basic goal of the half-halt. Once your body, hands and legs are applied in balance with the horse, you have countless combinations of aids at your disposal. Herein lies the secret body language of the rider and horse.

Integrating Newfound Skills

R: I've had a chance to practice and play with most of the exercises. I find, not surprisingly – but I actually was taken by surprise – that riding even a simple exercise compromised my newly acquired following skills. I fell back into my old habits while riding familiar exercises that I've always ridden with force and tension. But I soon caught myself and returned to the warm-up to regain my balance and feel again. It's challenging to keep these qualities in the exercises. What's important, though, is that riding now is more an interesting challenge, like a game or puzzle and less of an angry frustration.

A very important discovery I've made is that when I apply an aid, I inadvertently stop following the movement (old habit). It's as though I can't do two things at once. But I find that I can, if I stay mentally relaxed and receptive,

supple in my body and follow the movement. So, it's using the aids in time with the horse's movement and also following while doing that. Now, with the escape routes you've given me, I can get back on track and restore looseness and relaxation and stay out of my own way.

D: By practicing the half-halt, you automatically increase your sensitivity to the horse.

R: I've been playing with that on a 20-meter circle in rising trot and canter, and now I get a true bend (alignment) without working till I'm exhausted and the horse is fed up. That's a first for me, except when it would happen by accident. Going to the right, the horse wants to carry his haunches in and his shoulders out. Before learning the half-halt, I would struggle and fight to get him to track evenly on the circle. It was a labor without end. Now I follow his movement and use very soft aids – more of a nudging – and it takes a very small correction compared to what I did before...which never worked. I don't get it instantly; I have to play with it, but I do get some very nice responses. Before it was like moving dead weight. Now it's like moving a light and willing object. What is it about the half-halt that allows all this to happen?

D: The first order of learning the half-halt is to find your balance with the horse. Riding in balance is the foundation of riding. It provides the optimum starting point for all effective aids – seat, legs and hands. When the rider is in balance with the horse, the horse is free to respond to the rider's aids. When the rider is not in balance with the horse, the horse is struggling to stay in balance and respond at the same time.

To be clear, the optimum starting point (that is, the point from which the rider can effectively apply aids) requires the rider to be in balance both longitudinally (front to back) and laterally (not weighting more to one side or the other) – central.

R: I'm amazed at what I'm learning: things that come to my mind; pieces keep falling into place every day. Yesterday, for instance, I realized that I can use the half-halt in a forward way as well as a collecting way. I knew this intellectually but I've never understood how to do it! I've hit around it at times but could never quite make it work. What came to mind was what a local junior level trainer told me about 30 years ago. She said there were two kinds of half-halts, one that collects and one that goes forward. I had no idea what she was talking about, and no one else seemed able to answer my question about it, so it remained unanswered in my mind all these years. Finally, I know what she meant! Thank you.

Timing

R: For the first time in my life, I'm beginning to understand how to relax the horse, physically and mentally – how he responds to a following rider, a quiet rider – how the aids need to have a beginning and an end and not be constant, and how important that moment of relaxation is to giving the aids within the dynamics of movement. The horse doesn't get bored or discouraged in this work even though it's very simple in terms of patterns and exercises.

Now I feel that I often have a horse under me that is more rideable, more steerable, rounder and more responsive to light aids and that the aid can be light if given in the right moment. I don't need to use strong legs if I use them tactfully. And I'm capable of finding that tact and timing. I can go a little deeper and trust my instinct. It's more intuitive, not something that can be described in a list of physical actions. Breaking down the half-halt has helped profoundly. I'm trying to apply the seat aid and then the legs in the very next moment.

D: Assuming you are in balance with the horse and he is responding well to your body aid to slow him down, think of your legs as receiving that slowdown. The legs catch the slowdown and keep the horse from falling out the back door. Catching the slowdown, the legs can ask the horse to activate the hindquarters (raise the back). This activity can direct either a transition upward in gait or just more lively activity within the same tempo.

With your calves, locate the sensitive areas of the left and right sides of the horse's barrel. Remember to keep your thighs loose, not gripping. Think of embracing the horse's barrel from your seat bones down through your calves. When you find the right spots to apply the leg aids, the horse will respond to very light aids.

Your legs are on the horse at all times and especially during the moment you ask the horse to slow down with your body aid. And, your legs can become active instantaneously, to the degree needed to effect the change you are seeking.

The horse will teach you this moment. Close your eyes as you try this. When you feel the horse slip behind your legs as you apply the slowdown body aid, you have waited too long and you have lost him. So, you may find that the legs will be applied so close behind the time that you apply your body aid that it seems as though you are applying them simultaneously, especially as the horse becomes very quick to respond to your slowdown body aid. Practicing this timing in canter – where there is more time within each stride than in trot – can be helpful. The rhythmic play is the beginning of a beautiful melody.

R: Since I can't always apply perfect timing and since not every half-halt is effective, I started to play with looseness and rhythm between the half-halts. I'd ride a couple of half-halts and then just follow and lighten my seat, even if the horse wasn't exactly the way I wanted him to be. I allowed myself to be guided more by feel and less by conflicting thoughts. I had a feeling I liked better, and the quality of the gait improved. The horse felt more engaged and round for a few strides, and then I could anticipate losing my balance. I started to feel that little irregularity or whatever it is that happens right before he gets strung out, and I began to catch it before it happened.

D: You're on the right track. Practice makes perfect.

Heavy in the Hand

R: As long as I have been riding this horse, he has been heavy in my hands. How can I change that to light contact?

D: Essentially, the horse is leaning on the bit for his balance. Many causes can contribute. Looking at them from the standpoint of correcting the problem can be helpful. Here are the critical pieces:

- It is crucial to confirm that the horse is sound and has regular rhythms in his gaits. A horse that has a physical problem will lean on the bit for balance and to take pressure off the aching area. Really, only a sound horse can comfortably travel light in hand.
- Correct saddle fit for horse and rider is also critical to provide the optimum lightness. (Saddle fitting is mentioned below.)
- The rider must have body control, substantial flexibility and normal reflexes to ride the horse light in hand. This criterion requires practice under the watchful eye of an instructor. The rider can begin every ride by going through a checklist of body control and flexibility in the joints as well as contact with the many communication points – lower legs, upper legs, seat bones and hands. All of this effort contributes to riding the horse light in hand.
- Of note, the seat bone is not a point. It more closely resembles a ski, thus providing several points along the seat bone to make contact with the horse's back. This oft-overlooked fact creates confusion in many riders. The rider can practice moving weight to various points along the seat bones – front, middle and back. One simple way to practice is to lower the knees, leaving the legs softly on the horse's sides. The effect is to shift weight to the forward part of the seat bone. This exercise exposes the potentially many variations of the aids that the rider can apply in communicating with the horse.

Given all of these critical pieces, the rider is in an optimum position to be in balance with the horse at all times. This is a dynamic, moving balance. It is the rider's responsibility to stay in balance, to continuously hone in on the horse's center of balance. A rider who is out of balance with the horse will contribute to heavy in the hand. When a horse becomes heavy in hand, the rider's first order of business is to check her balance on the horse.

If all of the above is operative and in order, then the rider can train the horse to go light in hand. If a horse travels heavy in hand and if the rider continuously provides support for the horse to lean on the bit, the horse will oblige and continue its heavy pattern. Don't carry the horse. If there is a tug of war going on, the horse will always win. I have seen a four-foot girl riding a 17 hand Warmblood light in hand, the horse happily and willingly going through his exercises. And I have personally experienced training a heavy horse to go light, so I know it can be done.

There is a difference between allowing a horse to carry the bit with an ounce or so of weight and giving in to a horse that pulls your arms out of their sockets. The horse must learn to carry the bit lightly. It is only in that context that the horse can yield to the rider's aids.

A rider who wants the lightness must not play the heavy game. The rider must take the initiative to change the situation. Here is one option. In the case of a particular moment in time, for example, the rider can suddenly drop the contact, that is, slacken the reins. In response, most often the horse will raise its neck and slow down. This

reaction brings the horse into a new balance where he is not relying on the rider's hands. Whatever the reaction, the rider can repeatedly let the horse know that she is not going to support his weight in her hands.

For long-term correction of the heaviness, teaching the horse to slow down within the gait or to a slower gait, say from trot to walk, with the use of the rider's body aids only is the best key to solving the problem. Again, we are assuming that all of the above criteria continue to be met.

Instructors & Trainers

R: In your description of Hands, you say "the rider can increase pressure on the bit by applying the body aids." When my horses get strong, I've been instructed to softly **work** the contact (squeeze and soften) nearly constantly and allow my hands to breath in response to the feeling I get from the horse. This application of the hands alone has actually been referred to as a half-halt. Can the half-halt be applied effectively in this way without the use of the body aids you describe?

D: No, not in my experience. I think of it more as an elastic connection of the rider's hands to the reins. There is play, but not work.

In order to move brilliantly, the horse must have complete freedom of the neck. He needs his neck for balance.

Working the contact can interfere with that freedom. A trainer may be making assumptions that the student knows what to do with her body while **working** the contact.

R: Teachers have instructed me, and I have done everything in my power to respond with my correct action on the horse, but I inevitably fail. Now I am trying to affect the half-halt as you describe it, and I'm having the same difficulties.

D: Just because we mentally understand the instruction doesn't necessarily mean that we can get our bodies to respond. Here is where other body awareness activities can be helpful – Yoga, Pilates, Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique and/or physical therapy. Our body patterns develop at a young age. Sometimes a rider must take steps to change these early patterns.

In addition, riding in the same saddle day after day, sometimes for years, a rider can become oblivious to balance problems that may be related to the saddle fit. Regular, proper saddle fitting can be very helpful in maintaining optimum conditions for riding the horse in balance

R: My trainer can get on my horse and ride him forward, through and straight and engaged in 30 minutes. The quality of his gaits improves visibly, and he moves fluidly through his body. Most importantly, he seems to be enjoying himself, and his expression seems to register relief. This isn't a new experience for me. My former trainer got similar results. The experts can do it because they've had years of experience with a large number of different horses, they've had excellent instruction at some point in their careers, they've had the opportunity to ride well-trained horses, and many were born with innate ability.

In contrast to this, when I say I've been studying dressage for 20 years, that means I work in an office all day and ride my only horse after work and on weekends, and I am lucky to have a lesson a month, and often, only every two or three months. Given this disparity, do you really think I can learn to do with my horse what I described above that my trainer and other trainers can do? I would be happy to generate in my horse what my trainer produces in, say, a week or a month, but years go by and progress is painfully slow – discouraging for me, but downright painful for the horses.

D: At the outset, we must remember what attracted us to the horses in the first place – enjoyment. This critical piece will help us to keep our perspective.

With regard to trainers, many are so automatic in their own riding that they overlook key points when teaching their students. Many excellent horse trainers ride instinctively. They are not necessarily consciously aware of what they are doing on the horse – specifically when it comes to balance and the combination of aids. While the student is riding, the trainer/instructor will communicate important information to the student; however, the information is often more appropriate to what the trainer would do on the horse than what the student needs to do to get the desired results.

Generally, trainer/instructors do not intentionally mislead their students. In all my years of riding, I only ran across (and I really wanted to run her over) one instructor who was so competitive that she withheld information from her students.

And we might ask the question, just who is the trainer, after all? Unless you have a full-time professional trainer, you are the trainer, as far as the horse is concerned. He is listening to you. We each are on our own journey with the horses, unique and intuitive.

Saddle Fitting

R: My trainer rides a variety of horses in a variety of saddles and gets good results with her riding. Why can't I?

D: In a nutshell, the trainer has racked up many more miles of riding than you have. She approaches each horse with a fresh feel. In addition, I'll bet she draws on an arsenal of saddles, girths, shims, pads and girth covers to accommodate fitting the various horses she trains in her barn. Remember, you are riding just one horse in the same saddle, day after day – a challenge to maintain a fresh feel in the saddle.

R: Why is correct saddle fit critical?

D: An ill-fitting saddle can deter the rider from riding in balance. Here are some circumstances that can affect the way the saddle fits the horse and rider: The horse's physique changes over time. Changes in age, from young to old, will affect his shape, as will training.

Horses tend to travel crooked. Often, they naturally develop more fully on one side, the stiff side. You can see it in their shoulders, especially among untrained horses. A symmetrically stuffed saddle will not accommodate this

condition. Undue pressure may be placed on the horse's back, especially the stiff side, and, at the same time, contribute to creating *a hole* for the rider's seat bone and leg on the hollow side. It can contribute to a sore back in both the horse and rider, and it can exacerbate the crookedness and the rider's lack of balance.

The girth line, that is, where the girth will naturally rest on the horse's belly, will often be more forward than the saddle allows. In many saddles the girth billets sit too far back to accommodate the horse's girth line. As a result, once the saddle is girthed, it will be pulled forward. So, a saddle that looks well fit as it sits ungirthed on the horse's back will suddenly be poorly fit when the girth is tightened. This fault can create undue pressure on the horse's back, especially around his withers and spine. Many new saddles are designed to overcome this problem.

While saddle fitting does not preclude good riding, it is an ongoing element of successful riding. A good saddle fitter is part of your team.

A Saddle Story

D: For 12 years various trainer/instructors trained a horse and rider. The horse was heavy on the bit. All trainers recommended and rode the horse in increasingly heavy bits. The result was that the horse obediently performed, but with flat movement.

These trainers are successful professionals. All missed the ill-fitting saddle as the real problem for horse and rider. They all rode the horse in the saddle and still missed the problem. Over the years, three different saddles were used. Two of them were so-called custom fitted. Four saddle fitters tried to solve the problem. All of them missed it.

In the thirteenth year the rider found a saddle fitter who fixed the problem, which was this: while the saddle sat on the horse's back without the girth, the saddle fit fine. When it was girthed up, the saddle placed the rider behind the horse's center of balance. Essentially, the girth line on the horse was more forward toward the horse's shoulder than the girth billets. Thus, when the girth was tightened, it would slide forward into the horse's girth line, causing the pommel to tilt up and the cantle to tilt down. Undue pressure was placed on the horse's back toward the cantle. In addition, the girth caused sores behind the horse's elbows.

The new saddle fitter fit a saddle that provides a range of locations for the girth. As a result, the girth falls easily onto the horse's natural girth line without disturbing the position of the saddle on its back. From that point on, the horse performed brilliantly in complete balance and harmony with the rider – light in hand in the mildest of bits and with complete freedom through the back.

Literature

R: I've been reading all night for answers. A friend gave me a copy of *Dressage Masters*, in which the author interviews Balkenhol, Hoyos, Shulten-Baumer and Theodorescu. They confirm what you've been saying! I've read

their advice many times for many years and continued to misunderstand the same points and therefore ignored them. Now I've only scratched the surface, but I have a whole new understanding of the same old litany!

D: Certainly, reading has its place. We can get inspiration and information, yes, and also confirmation of what we already know. Thus, reading can be helpful. However, solving the mystery of riding isn't in the books. It is on the horse.

The horse doesn't care what we read. So, when one is seeking the truth of the matter, reading plays at least second and maybe third (with a good trainer/instructor) to riding itself.

The secret is in the wordless body language between rider and horse. From that critical point of departure – where the rider is in balance with the horse – the horse will tell us the truth. The horse is on our side.

The Final Word from a Rider

R: Every day I am amazed at the willingness of these beautiful animals. They try so hard to please and have so much patience. I find that one of the beauties of dressage is how it provides a mirror for our issues – like the need to control. It's always a reminder to ask and wait, and give a lot. If we can apply what we learn in riding to all our relationships, we can become better people.

