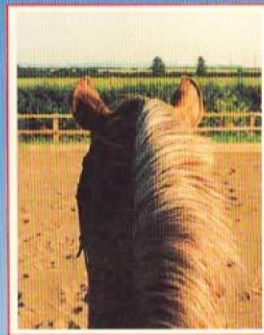


BALANCE...The Way Forward

# Straight Forward Riding



Lesley Ann Taylor  
and Carol Brett

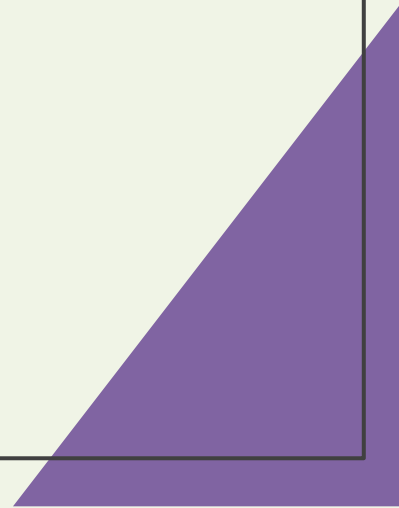


BALANCE...The Way Forward

# Straight Forward Riding

Chapter Two

## **The Contacts**



**The contact between horse and rider is obviously an essential part of any riding - good, bad or indifferent.**

When one talks about contact, it tends to be assumed that one is describing the rein contact. There are, however, other types of contact involved when one is riding a horse – namely, the leg contact and the seat/weight contact.



Before we go further, we ought to be clear about what I am talking about when I say use the word '**contact**'.

What I am talking about is a **neutral state**. It is positive enough to create a consistent connection and line of communication between the horse and the rider, but otherwise it is, in itself..... completely passive (inactive).

This state needs to be considered as 'coming home' and what we want to achieve for the majority of the time, whether we are talking about the reins, the legs or the seat and weight influence.

When we want to ask the horse to change what he is doing at this moment and.... for example, move the bit in his mouth with a stronger feel with one rein, it is no longer a contact, it has become a **rein aid**. **It is essential that we understand the difference!**

## **But let's start with the rein contact.**

How do you provide the horse with an acceptable contact?  
*(notice how this is phrased? To put the responsibility on the rider to provide what is acceptable to the horse?)*

Once you are able to provide your horse with an acceptable contact, he will readily accept it. It should not be assumed or expected that the horse should tolerate or accept *any old* quality of contact!

However, many horses end up having to learn to put up with riders who do not have the awareness, control or self-discipline needed to provide a neutral and comfortable connection through the reins.



There are many ways for the rein contact to be unacceptable and problematic for the horse.

here are a few examples.....

- **too heavy**
- **too restricting**
- **too light**
- **too inconsistent**
- **too confusing**
- **too painful**



It is the responsibility of the rider to discover what is making the contact unacceptable to the horse and to experiment with the qualities of the contact until he or she figures out what the individual is comfortable with.

When that is discovered, the horse can accept the contact and suddenly, a crucial line of communication is available to the rider and the horse to work with.

Unfortunately, the all-too-common course of action for many riders and trainers, is to completely ignore any idea that the horse might have the right to an opinion about the quality of the contact provided by the rider.



The rein contact is supposed to create a positive connection and means of communication between the horse and his rider.

It should not interfere with the dynamics of natural movement. The horse uses the positioning of his head and neck to co-ordinate and balance the rest of his body whilst in motion. If you take this on board you will see that when you are riding, wherever the horse has his head and neck is correct.

Now, I appreciate that that is a bold statement that might not immediately make sense..... so let me explain what I mean.



The main reason for the rein contact to become something other than a neutral and listening line of communication, is the misconception that if the rider can use the reins to manufacture a particular shape (outline) in the way the horse is holding its neck and head, it is improving the quality of the balance and movement.

The concept of the 'correct head carriage' being one specific and fixed thing, or that one creates a shape in the head and neck to improve the way the rest of the body is functioning, is just plain wrong!

When we refer to the bio-mechanics of natural movement as our reference and guide as to what is appropriate, we will see that way the horse is holding its neck and head is a direct result of its state of balance and quality of movement.

The organisation (and shape) of the whole body, from nose to tail is a 3 dimensional 'picture' of the state of the horse's balance, efficiency, power and intention, in any given moment.

In other words, ..... the positioning of the head and neck are how and where, they need to be!

So, here are some examples.

- ☹️ If the horse is out of balance laterally and leaning its weight more onto its inside shoulder, the head and neck will be positioned to the outside to counterbalance that.
- ☹️ If he is trotting faster than he can be balanced at (not something one tends to see in nature, but frequently seen in ridden horses) he will want to extend his head and neck forward and sometimes up.
- ☹️ If the natural mechanics of his back are disabled through discomfort from a tight saddle, his back will be contracted (pulled down) and the response to this will be to raise the head and extend it forward

In each of the examples described on the previous page, the head and neck positioning could be described as ‘wrong’ or undesirable to the onlooker and yet, it is simply giving valuable information about the state of the horse’s balance and organisation.

Three images below with the same horse and rider showing different states of balance and consequently, different outlines. The rider is allowing her horse freedom to show her his state of balance. The first two definitely not in balance but the third shows a better organisation and balance, therefore a more desirable outline, as a consequence.



Now, think about this: the moment you accept this concept you will have a very reliable way of gauging the consistency of your horse's balance and co-ordination, from the positioning of his head and neck.

Obviously, a young horse is *not* going to have a very consistent head carriage, because he will be losing his balance quite often, while he discovers how he needs to move, in order to cope with the unnatural weight of his rider.

As he develops his skills and confidence, he should lose his balance less often and therefore he will not need to change his outline so often in order to re-balance, or compensate.

Far too many trainers and instructors fail to respect this and set about trying to manufacture what they perceive as the 'correct head and neck position' with no understanding of what they are destroying when they over-ride (literally) the truth of what the horse's body is expressing.



The image above shows just how horribly distorted things can get at the extreme! 😞

The desire in riders and trainers to see horses who are carrying their necks in a lifted arc with the poll at the highest point, and the face of the horse just ahead of the vertical or on the vertical when very collected, is understandable and is, in itself a good aim.

**However, that organisation and ‘look’ has to be arrived at as a direct consequence of good movement, balance, elasticity, power and straightness in the horse and rider, not manipulated and manufactured by the rider into artificial fakery.**

Horses seem to need a particular combination of qualities in the contacts from the rider, and there is a word that can help to remember these qualities. That word is **P.E.A.C.E.**

**P** for **Positive**

**E** for **Elastic**

**A** for **Allowing**

**C** for **Consistent**

**E** for **Equal**





# P.E.A.C.E.

## **P for Positive**

**Positive** means a definite feel, that is like getting a secure and firm handshake.

Not limp and flaccid

Not bone crushing and painful.

## **E for Elastic**

**Elasticity** in the contact requires that the rider's hands, arms and their whole body have to move enough to allow for the full range of natural movement of the head and neck, so that it doesn't restrict or block the use of the neck and the rest of the body.

# P.E.A.C.E.

## A for Allowing

**Allowing** means that the rider has to be aware of the range of movement that the horse needs to nod and position its head and neck in order to use its body correctly for the movement or state of collection required at any moment.

Then she has to be able to create that freedom within the contact without it restricting or losing the connection.

## C for Consistent

**Consistency** is essential for the contact to be a neutral state of connection.

Remember that this is the state one is trying to achieve for the majority of the time. If the contact is consistent, the horse will notice a small difference when the rider needs to use the rein to give an aid. If the contact is inconsistent, how does the horse know which accidental pull and jiggle is an aid?

# P.E.A.C.E.

## E for Equal

**Equal** is an important state to keep returning to, in order to provide a neutral connection between the horse and the rider.

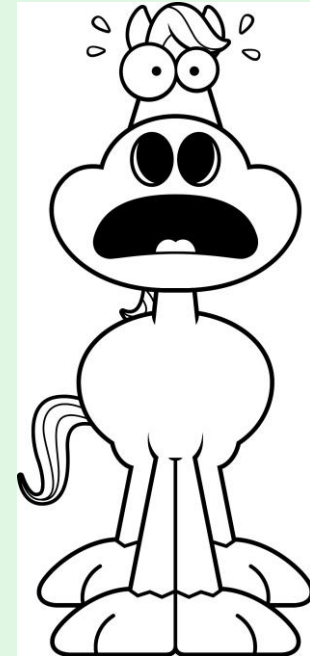
The only time that the left and right rein contact changes is when it becomes an aid for only as long as necessary for the horse to respond, and then it returns to equal.



## P.E.A.C.E. continued...

Unfortunately, many riders are not in control of their own body and limbs enough to be able to provide a 'PEACE-full' rein contact.

Instead, the reins and therefore the bit/bridle are constantly moving and either too strong and inhibiting or too weak and inconsistent, so how is the horse supposed to understand which jiggle or pull is an aid and which is just the rider being unbalanced and unable to be consistent?



## **P.E.A.C.E. continued...**

It's interesting to note, that many riders assume that all horses would prefer a very light rein contact.

However, this is not always the case depending on the state of the horse's balance, the type of bit being used, and the quality of the rein contact that the rider can provide.

**Keep in mind that the lighter the rein contact is, the harder it becomes to keep it consistent.**

**The heavier the rein contact is, the harder it is to provide the elastic quality that the horse needs.**

Somewhere between very light and very heavy, there will be a sweet spot that the horse finds most acceptable during any particular riding session. It's up to the rider to experiment and offer the horse some choice and then observe and feel for the response.

## P.E.A.C.E. continued...

Carol and I sometimes refer to this approach as the ‘**Goldilocks and the 3 bears**’ way’ of riding. 😊

**In order to know what is ‘just right’ we have to be willing NOT to assume that we know what is ‘just right’, by trying some different options.**

Some horses prefer a heavier contact than one would imagine, because the thing that is most helpful for them is the quality of consistency. While others want a lighter contact, particularly if the rider is too braced in their body and arms, because the quality of allowing is more important to them than consistency.



## P.E.A.C.E. continued...

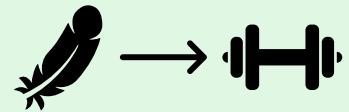
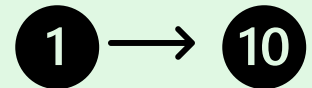
This is where it is really helpful to make use of a simple method of numbering certain qualities within the contact, in order for the rider to notice and explore the pros and cons of changes that she offers the horse.

For example: Let's assume you have the horse in a steady working trot.... pick up the reins and create what feels like your normal contact with a bit.

Notice whether both reins feel the same. Very often they don't, but could you create an equal contact in both reins?

Then give the amount of weight in the contact a number between 0 and 10.

Of course, 0 is no contact and 10 is the heaviest contact you can imagine taking. There is no right or wrong number it's just a starting point.



## P.E.A.C.E. continued...

You have now created your starting point with its number.

Let's imagine that the number you've given it is a 4. So now are you in a place where you can offer the horse a 3 feel in the reins. Allow the horse to explore that for a circuit and notice whether that improves the overall quality of the trot, the consistency in the head and neck position etc.

Then go back to your number 4 feel and notice how that feels by comparison. Better or Worse, Hotter or Colder 😊

Now you can offer the horse a number 5 feel down both reins and see how the horse responds to that.

Remember that the higher the number in terms of weight, the more important the quality of elasticity is!

Spend a bit more time in trot with this slightly heavier feel and be curious about how the horse responds.



## **P.E.A.C.E. continued...**

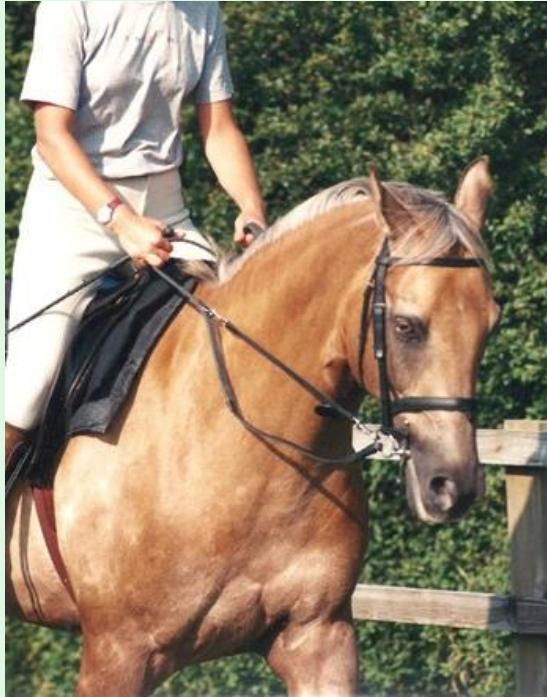
This way of riding makes sure that the rider isn't assuming that they know what the horse finds most helpful, but instead, asks and respects the horse himself to provide reliable and honest feedback, or maybe we should use the term feel-back.

When Carol and I started to teach in this way we noticed how often riders were reluctant to offer the horse enough weight in the reins to really be sure of how much was too much!

So often, they worried that anything more than a light contact was unkind, or so braced in their own bodies that they couldn't offer the horse a firmer contact to try without blocking its movement through a lack of elasticity.

**With this in mind, we set about creating a very simple 'training aid' that the horses could use to teach their riders what they want!**

## P.E.A.C.E. continued...



Eeezy Reins © consist of a normal set of standard continental webbing reins, but with an additional D ring, set part way along the reins. This allows the attachment of a set of elastic sections. The positioning of the D rings and the degree of stretch is calculated to allow the elastic sections to be utilised first, but for the solid reins to come into play if the horse gets too impulsive and the rider needs to have a more fixed connection. Having the option to use one elastic section can be very helpful when helping a rider with a dominant hand to change their habits. 😊

## **P.E.A.C.E. continued...**

The fact that the reins have the elastic section, helps riders to feel more confident about experimenting with what they might describe as a heavier contact than they have assumed was 'correct'.

They know that the horse still has the freedom within the stretch of the elastics to move its head and neck and many are surprised to discover that their horse is happier in a firmer/heavier, elastic (and therefore consistent) contact, than a much lighter but inconsistent contact.

They can provide the horse and the rider with the feel of what a consistent contact actually feels like, sometimes for the first time!

**Once that feel has been discovered, the rider can remove the elastics and explore what they need to do in their own bodies to recreate that same feel without them.**

## **P.E.A.C.E. continued...**





I have deliberately focussed this chapter on talking about the rein contact, but when you think about it, all of the contacts need to have this PEACE-full quality.

The leg contact needs to be positive, elastic, consistent and equal unless the legs are being used to give a clear aid, which should be quick, clear and then return the neutral/PEACE-ful state.

The seat/weight contact needs to have the same qualities.

So, the rider's aim has to be to understand the difference between creating a PEACE-ful contact or an aid and be physically capable of doing either of them equally well!

## To conclude:

-  Pay attention and notice whether you are aware enough and disciplined enough as a rider, to be able to create a state of PEACE in your contacts, so that when you need to ask your horse to change what it is currently doing by giving an aid, it is clearly different to the neutral feel of the contacts.
-  As soon as the horse has responded to your aid, make sure you return to your neutral state, which rewards the horse for his willingness to comply with the aid.
-  Remember that every riding session is unique and so the best contact you offer today, might be too much or not enough next week, depending on many factors.
-  Use the numbers game to help you to test whether the contacts are as helpful to the horse as you think they are. Don't assume!

In the next chapter, we are going to be looking at more of the important ingredients in our recipe for successful riding and training.

- **Speed**

- **Rhythm**

- **Impulsion**

- Why are they important?
- What impact do each of them have on the horse's way of going.
- What happens when they are changed?