

'Feel' – How do we develop more feel?



'Feel' – is a word often used in horsemanship. It is the key difference between poor or mediocre horsemanship and the highest levels of horsemanship. Bill Dorrance, brother of the renowned Tom Dorrance – wrote a book called True Horsemanship through Feel. 'Feel' is everything. So what is 'Feel'.

'Feel' is a sense that goes deeper than sight and seeing, deeper than sound and hearing, it is associated with touch but can go deeper beyond the physical level of touch to an energetic level of feeling. Like feeling an atmosphere, an emotion or “just having a feeling about something”.

In terms of horsemanship, 'feel' might be related to how you pick up the rein or the lead rope. It might be feeling the amount of energy or the phase you need to use to stimulate your horse. It might be feeling the position you need to be in while at liberty with your horse, feeling when to draw back and how fast to step in. When riding, it might be feeling the timing to ask for a transition, direction change or feeling where the horse's feet are.



When you are doing things with your horse you are essentially having a conversation. The word conversation implies that both parties are equally involved in both giving and receiving information. This conversation is happening with your thoughts, intentions, energy and emotions as well as your positioning, body language and physical touches and cues. You are both feeling for and responding to each other – well hopefully that is what is happening. For example even with something as simple as asking for lateral flexion of the horse's neck at the halt, you would ask and then wait until the horse starts to respond. If he didn't respond you would increase the intent of how you asked. When he does respond you either release and reward or ask him to continue depending on how the conversation is going. The conversation going on in your head is how you put 'feel' into the technique of slowly closing the fingers one at a time. The conversation is always as polite, friendly and encouraging as possible “ Hey mate, look around this way”. Just talk to them in your head like you would another person – it is not really about the words but it is the energy and the feel that is connected to those words that matters. If you feel the horse resist you just wait for them rather than pull against them and then when they start to follow that feel around, you just go with them and ask them to continue bending their neck around. That is 'feel' and it happens through the conversation.

Pay attention to the words and the tone of voice that is going on inside your head and you will become aware of how polite your conversation is or isn't. There are times you might need to be more direct and assertive with your conversation for example if the horse is just not paying attention and it is important for your safety or his that he gets his mind back with you. To read more about this go to my website and read the articles 'Connecting with Horses – Getting in the Zone' and 'Groundwork – Having a conversation through your thoughts, tools and body language.'

Developing 'feel' comes through:-

Increasing your awareness of what is going on in your body. When you can feel what is happening in your body, how your ribs move, how your pelvis moves, then you can start to feel what is happening in your horse's body when you are riding. You will feel the horse's ribs bulging more to one side when they are crooked, you will feel where the weight is and know when to ask for a downward transition or a turn.

Lie on the floor or in your bed and close your eyes and relax completely and feel the energy in your body, the rhythm and pulse of your circulation and energy flow. Place your hands one on top of the other, over your heart on the upper left of your chest and feel the rhythm and energy of your heart. Place your hands over your belly button and feel the energy there, stay there for 5-10 minutes, relax and keep your attention internal with a soft focus. If you notice any tension in your body anywhere – just talk to that part of your body and let that tension go. Notice your breathing and then consciously start to breathe more fully. A very good technique is to breathe in through your nose and exhale out through your mouth. Breathe in until the lungs are full and you can't fit anymore air in them and then breathe out until all the old air is out. Breathe fully but very softly, not forcing the air in or out. Breathing increases your feel – subconsciously we don't breathe when we don't want to feel. Become aware of your toes and fingertips and a feeling of 'aliveness' in them. There are many other body awareness and body balancing exercises that I teach in my courses but this is a simple one that will get you started feeling more in your body.

Quietness, Stillness and slowing down – In quietness and stillness we can be more perceptive. Practise speaking slowly and moving slowly to slow yourself down and get into a place of stillness. When we slow down we actually are more efficient and get more things done, being conscious of your breathing as explained above helps here also.

Centredness as opposed to being scattered – We are either in a state of centeredness and alignment of our mind, emotions and body or we are scattered. When we are scattered we feel like our mind and energy is everywhere and we can't think clearly. Your centre (centre of gravity and your emotional centre) is below your belly button. Take your attention there and breathe as described above to centre and quiet yourself. Scattered thoughts and energy affect horses negatively.



Attention – Following on from being scattered – learning to have all of our attention on what we are doing is essential. Our thoughts need to be there with what we are doing, not thinking about what we are having for dinner, what happened at work today, what will happen tomorrow or the argument that we had with our spouse. Thoughts like 'I can't do it' or 'I am not getting it' or thinking about what others will think about what I am doing are just taking our attention away from what we are doing. We need to be so connected to the horse that we are feeling the rhythm of his gait in our body as he moves whether we are on the ground or riding. Paying attention to the feel and the consistency of the rhythm is another way of keeping your attention on what you are doing.

Letting Go – We have to consciously let go of all the negative thought patterns that restrict us and take our attention away from what we are trying to do.

Being in the present moment – This is an extension of paying attention. The more you can be in the present moment as horses are, the better everything will go. I remember the best ride I ever had on a horse was when I totally was able to get into the present moment. I did this not by blocking out everything else around me but by heightening my senses and taking in and noticing everything around me. Not only did I notice everything around me, even more importantly I appreciated everything around me, every sound, the subtlest bird calls, the gentlest of breezes on my skin, the glitter of sun on the leaves on the trees. The result was that I ‘turned loose’ in myself mentally, emotionally and physically so then my horse could do the same and he offered and maintained the most amazing trot, with lightness in his feet, perfect alignment in his body, self carriage, lift, suspension and power. He was no longer grabbing for the ground with his feet but floating over it. The thing I remember the most about that ride was that when the horse turned loose that much in his body how critical it was for me to be totally in balance. I felt that if I was to get one hair off balance that would get him off balance. I then realised the degree of how impossible it was for a horse to really be free in it’s body if the rider wasn’t free in theirs. While ever I could stay in that mental space I could have the ‘feel’ to totally stay in balance with the horse, and I did. I was able to maintain that for the rest of the session.

This intrinsic quality of ‘feel’ is something that we can all develop. One of the most inspiring things that some one once said to me was “The only difference between a really good rider and a not so good rider was that they were doing things differently in their bodies. So all you have to do as the teacher is change the patterns in their bodies.” The more I worked with that idea the more I was able to really help riders really start to ‘get it’. The further down this track I went the more I realized that to change patterns in the body at the deepest level I had to change patterns in people thoughts. So now you have a few more keys to develop ‘feel’ into your techniques and remember - ‘feel’ is everything.

