

Snippet 14: Three 3 Words – Contact, Connection, Collection

Too often when these words are spoken, neither party has a clear definition nor a clear picture of what each means. The first one, Contact, speaks to the appearance and the feel of the reins from the bit to the rider's hands. The way the reins should look to an observer is that they draw a steady consistent straight line from bit to hand. There should be no loops, sags and snaps, up and down Jumpiness nor should it look like there is a tug of war going on.

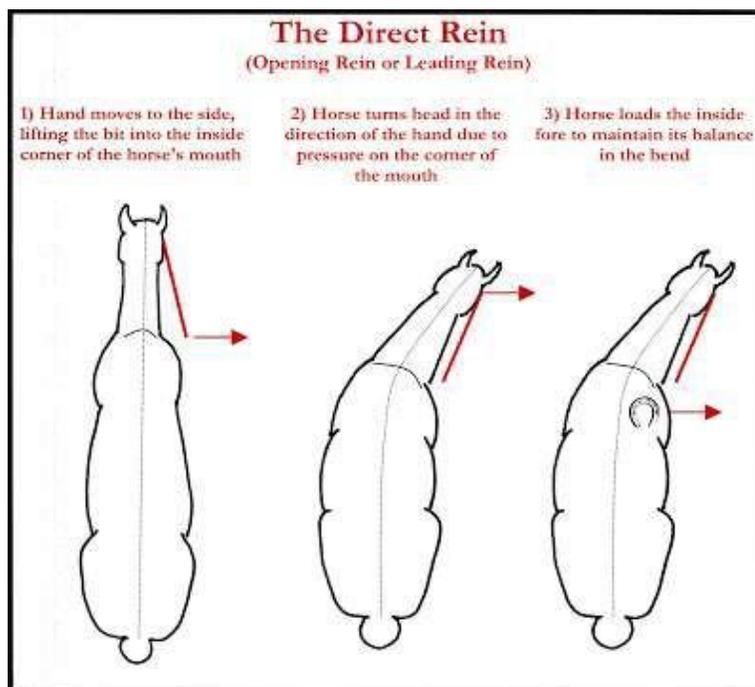
If a person on the ground lightly moved the rein, it should feel elastic enough to softly but immediately return to the same look. An example of "elastic" can be understood with a rubber band. Slip a rubber band over two of your fingers. Stretch it enough that if you pointed your fingers downward, the rubber band will Not fall off.

If a tug of war is suspected, the observer needs to look at the corners of the horses' mouth. If the bit is stretching the lips up in the corners or the horses' mouth, or sliding out on one side, or if the mouth is open, the contact is too strong – overdone contact. Probably the rider is braced in her shoulders or even leaning back behind the vertical. She might even be in full "waterskiing mode – feet forward, elbows locked in front of her body and upper body clearly behind the vertical. Not good for her or the horse.

If the head is over flexed with the poll lower than the crest of the neck, this is Not a rein problem. Rather the horse is not producing enough activity in the hind legs to carry itself in the proper back to front balance no matter what its level of training it is.

A training level horse should be level along its top line. That is, its poll, withers and croup all should be level. If a carpenter's level were placed along that topline, the bubble should be in the middle. That means that the horse's body is in level back to front balance around its center of gravity. This is located about a foot underneath the withers in the center of the horses' body mass.

When viewing the reins, they should lie almost on or very near both sides of the horse's neck almost touching his hair. This place also is about midway between the horses' shoulders and his throatlatch. Of course, nothing is static on a moving creature, so this description is more the idea of a "home base" place. A rein may be moved up or out or even in closer to the horses' midline, but it always come back to this home base position until the next instruction is needed from rider to horse.



Changes of lateral balance of the horse also change the outward appearance of the reins. When on a bending line, the horse should be balanced slightly up and out onto its outside two legs in order to follow the curvature of that bending line. Therefore, the outside rein (and leg) will be filled by the curve of the neck and the shift of the rib cage. This appearance is described as “putting the horse into the outside rein (and leg)”.

Contact comes through the rider as well as from her to the horse. Her shoulder blades should be flat and downward with weight flowing down into her “heavy” elbows. Her forearms are carried lightly from those heavy elbows and her hands are closed around the reins. Individual relationships between horse and rider are huge here. Riders perceive that they are light or heavy or sharing from their own perspective. I have had interesting hand holding experiences with many people and the range of what is heavy and what is light is Very Broad. The term “share the bit” seems to cover this concept the best. Other images abound. “Curl your fingers around the bit ring as if there were no intervening rein” is the idea taught by Sally Swift. “Lift your share of the bit in your curled finger” is another idea about which to think.

Then the suggestion to, “feel the horse through your elbows” comes from Kyra Kyrklund and often helps complete the contact circuit. This starts with one half of the bit, goes up the rein, along the outside of the rider’s forearm, through the elbow, around the shoulder blades and down the opposite side of the riders’ arm to the other side of the horses’ bit.

This circuit of communication should produce harmony and partnership with the horse. This is Contact.

Horses too have opinions. Some like continuous pressure, some like quietness, and some like constant comments. The rider needs to listen to and accommodate the horse’s opinions.

Then Contact is complete – and ever changing!

