

WHAT IS FEEL.....?

You may have seen or heard about great horsemen and women and how they seemed to have a natural feel for a horse. You may (like most people) have wondered what this illusive feel actual was, what it meant to the rider and the horse and how it impacted on they way they work together. You may even have asked various instructors what feel was and may have received a multitude of different answers making the mystery of feel all the more intangible.

Feel isn't about any one thing, it isn't a button you can press or a technique you can learn or a gadget or tack you can put on the horse to make him work "better". Feel is about listening instead of talking, clearing your mind and living in the moment, visualisation, breathing, application of aids, timing and responsibility. Feel is a way of living and working in harmony not against nature and the living beings that share our world. Feel is a heightened state of consciousness.

I often ask my students about the difference between their riding and a top Grand Prix dressage rider. Some laugh and start to list a whole series of "things" that make them think they are inferior riders to the top dressage elite. They are often taken aback when I simply say that there is no difference between them and a top rider other than their timing and the application of their aids. The one thing that separates most riders from the top echelons is this illusive feel. A really good rider will have trained themselves to "listen" to their horses, to "feel" what they are thinking and anticipate any questions the horse may be asking and correct them in the blink of an eye. A Grand Prix horse may be spooky or fresh and may want to shy away from the pretty flowers round the ring or throw in a buck out of sheer enjoyment. A Grand Prix rider will be able to "feel" this excitement and tension in their horse or the anxiety they may have and will be able to override these emotions with calm and focus sent down through their seat and reins and expertly applied aids to correct any potential deviation from their tests. The overall picture is one of complete harmony as the horse seems to do the test themselves and the rider is along for the fun of it. This is the mark of a good rider, someone who makes it all look easy, don't be fooled though, they will be working very hard to achieve this and their efforts will go largely unnoticed.



As I mentioned earlier, in order to start to "feel" properly what the horse is doing you must "listen" to what they are saying. This means that you may have to stop applying aids for a moment to give the horse the chance to respond to your request. In other words you need to stop nagging and shouting. You will find that a horse will respond very quickly to a quiet soft application of an aid much better than a hard, sharp application continuously applied. If you ask your horse to walk and he does then simply leave him alone and stop asking. By sitting quietly you will start to "feel" if he is stiff on one side, or lacking energy or impulsion or unbalanced and a little lost. You will start to hear "questions" from your horse as he looks for your guidance, you can then take steps to "answer" his questions with the

appropriate aid and support. You cannot do this if you are continually nagging because then my friends, you are constantly talking!

Once you start to ride this way you will be amazed at how much communication there actually is between you and the horse and how often he will ask you questions. Sometimes it is simply "have I to keep moving at this pace?" as you will "feel" a slight hesitation in his step, you can then apply a soft aid to say either "yes" or "no". Because your aids will become lighter and more subtle your horse will become more intent and will concentrate on what is going on, in other words he will start to "listen" to you. You may have heard instructors should "make him listen!" and you may have seen an explosion of aids and flustering coming from the rider and the horse may start flustering right back! Perhaps the better expression would have been "ask him to listen!" this would give the rider the chance to think through what they need to do and the best way to encourage anyone (even the horse) to listen more intently is to whisper rather than shout!

How you approach this way of riding is very dependent on the type of horse and his previous experience with riders. I taught the Stirling University Riding Team the basics of this approach and allowed them to ride some of our horses who had always been ridden sensitively and who were open and honest with their own communication. It was a revelation to the students as they realised how subtle riding can be. One of them commented that this was all very well on these trained horses but they had to ride riding school horses, some of which were classed as "dead" to the leg or hand. I suggested that they try to ride these horses in exactly the same way as I had shown them and think of them as one of our "trained" horses. This they did and they were absolutely shocked by the result. In a matter of a few minutes even the most "dead" and "lazy" of the school horses picked themselves up and responded to the softest of aids with enthusiasm and an eagerness to please. It must have been a relief for them to have a rider actually stop shouting at them for a moment and to encourage them to give feedback.

So this is what it means to the horse. A relief from the constant nagging that some riders do, a chance to ask questions and be answered calmly and softly, without any shouting or swearing or smacking with a stick. A chance to build up a rapport with a rider and follow their directions which a horse will receive clearly, calmly and in a manner appropriate to the situation. In other words they will have a chance to build up trust in a rider as a reliable leader not as an uncompromising dictator.

When both horse and rider start to listen to each other then they are well on the way to achieving "feel". As time progresses the rider will be responding so quickly to their horse that it will almost become instinctive, they will no longer consciously think about applying a command, their body will do this automatically and the rider will start to "think" and "visualise" where they want to go and how their horse can carry out a manoeuvre. It will all begin to flow into one seamless stream of movement and dynamics as rider and horse become united in mind and purpose. This is feel. The ability to find and connect to the unspoken bond that can exist between man and horse. This bond is fragile and delicate, it is soft and translucent, it is almost intangible but the rewards are infinite.