

ASK THE EXPERTS

Quiet Hands

Q I'm struggling to keep my hands quiet. They move around, and it seems I have no control over them. Strangely enough, my seat is rather quiet. Could you give me a few tips or exercises to help me get quieter hands?

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MARY FLOOD

A This is a problem that plagues many riders and has a strong impact on your horse's performance. Although your hands are supplementary and complementary to your seat and leg aids, they are critical to the ability to maintain throughness ("the letting through of the rider's aids") in the horse. Your hands have many responsibilities: They contain the energy created by your legs and seat, control speed, help maintain the horse's balance, indicate direction, control the amount of bend and aid in maintaining the horse's outline. If your rein contact is inconsistent, your horse will lose his sense of security. Good hands are essential to harmony and trust.

The ability to control your hands stems from your ability to control your core. Unsteady hands are only a symptom of the lack of inner core control. Think of the ripple effect of dropping a pebble in a calm pond. The rings get bigger the farther they are away from the center. Your hands show the exaggeration. Another example is when you flick the longe line from your wrist action. The end of the whip has the most movement.

To achieve quieter hands, start by working on your seat. I suggest working on the longe line with a competent instructor and a comfortable, balanced longe horse. (The horse should be wear-

ing side reins.) You will make quicker progress if you are on a horse that is comfortable to sit and regular in his cadence. This way, you can work on absorbing the concussion that the horse gives you as he goes from the landing phase to the suspension phase.

Any tension in your shoulders or neck can make it difficult to control your hands. If you have tension in your shoulders, you may be out of vertical alignment, which will cause your upper body muscles to try to hold your position. Check your vertical balance by standing straight up from your stirrups. Keep your hips over your knees. You probably will need to shorten your stirrups two holes for this exercise. You do not want to use your reins to support yourself. If you can stay in this position in all gaits, you have good core control to stay in balance with your horse.

To develop control of your hands, try these specific exercises. Learn these in walk first, then practice them in the trot.

Exercises with a handhold (grab/bucking strap): A handhold that is attached to the D-rings of the saddle can be useful in improving your balance and stabilizing your hands. Here are several exercises you can use with a handhold.

1. Put your soft, closed fists lightly around the handhold close to the D-rings. In trot, post up through your hands toward the horse's ears leaving your hands in the same place without pulling up on the strap as you rise. If you feel more pressure in the up part of rising, your hands have gone with you. Release any tension you may have in your armpits as this will help relax your shoulders. Let your lower arms feel empty. This will allow you to follow the horse's movement with your arms better and quiet your hands.

2. With your hands on the handhold, close your eyes (best to do this one on the longe) in sitting trot and allow

your body to feel and absorb the horse's movement. Increase and decrease the tempo. When you start gripping with your hands, you have lost balance. Decrease the tempo to the point at which you can stay with your horse's movement and your hands become steady again.

3. With your hands still on the handhold, post one beat and sit two beats; post two beats, sit two beats; sit three beats, post one; sit one, post three. Do each of these exercises once around the arena in each direction. You can also do these exercises without holding on.

Additional exercises on the longe to develop coordination and control:

1. Put your hands out in front of you, and put one palm up and one palm down, then reverse their position in timing with the horse's trot rhythm. Do the same with your hands out to the side.

2. With soft boxing fists that are level with your shoulders, alternately push your hands toward your horse's ears in time with his footfall. When his right front foot goes forward, your right fist goes forward.

3. In trot, put your hands in front of you as if you were holding the reins. Extend your little fingers until they touch the saddle or the horse's withers. (This can depend on your arm length or your horse's conformation or both.) Do not lose the connection with your little fingers whether you are sitting or rising.

4. While holding the reins normally, put your thumb in your other hand. Both hands are connected together. This can help one hand feel what the other hand is doing, so they can work more in unison.

5. Carry two identical dressage whips, one in each hand. Place them across your thigh with each sash pointing toward the horse's hocks. Keep the whips in contact with your thighs while trotting as you practice both rising and