



## Using the legs

If you've read our previous articles explaining the use of and importance of the rider's hand you could probably be forgiven for wondering whether we are a little bit crazy, since nowadays most people favour using the legs for steering or changes of gait and regard any use of the hand as more or less a bad thing. To really understand the use of the legs and their modern-day popularity, we first need to explore a little background.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, France, with its numerous academies of equitation, was the leading light in riding education. According to the authors of that time, the rider's legs are secondary aids that can be used from time to time to support the actions of the rider's hand during the process of educating the horse to understand and respond to the mere indications of the seat. The reasons they give for this are very simple: Indications of the hand, which affect one end of the horse's spine via the reins, are relatively 'powerful' and very difficult for a horse to ignore. This makes the hand an incredibly useful tool for someone who knows how to use it well but also potentially disastrous if not used with care and skill. By contrast, the rider's legs are situated midway along the horse's body, which makes their influences on the overall position of the spine relatively weak, easy to ignore and much less likely to cause trouble if mis-used by riders who had not developed the necessary tact.

Prior to The French Revolution in the 1790s, highly skilled riding was the preserve of noblemen who dressed in tall, powdered wigs and hot, heavy clothing and who valued the appearance of ease, grace and elegance in the saddle. Despite these apparent handicaps, they were able to perform the high airs seemingly effortlessly on magnificent horses guided literally with one hand. Thanks to the Revolution, however, the equestrian landscape changed dramatically. More or less overnight, any connection with nobility became extremely unpopular and bad for one's health. The School of Versailles was closed, the instructors exiled or executed and the horses turned over to cavalry uses.

An early problem the new cavalymen encountered was how to ride these incredibly finely trained and newly liberated horses without having developed the necessary tact and with only the grooms of the former School of Versailles as instructors. In addition, they no longer had years to practice and develop the necessary skills. A new method of riding had to be established very quickly – one that would enable a soldier to stay on a horse and go to war in as little as 30 days. The solution they devised was to limit the use of the hands as far as possible and to promote the relatively weak and ineffective legs to a primary role.



(Using the legs cont.)

Although this solution was totally logical and solved the immediate problem, it did so at the cost of introducing other difficulties.

The natural consequence of this line of thinking is a system of riding known as 'opposition of the aids', where the rider's legs drive the horse onto a bit that acts as a 'passive' barrier. It is the historical source of the vast majority of modern day dressage teaching, which in turn is actually based on the regulations of the German cavalry manual published in 1912. The intention is that the hands 'receive' the push of the hind legs with the overall balance of 'driving' and 'restraining' aids resulting in the desired movement. It has the convenient side effect that the rider's (restraining) hands naturally correct any mistakes they make by overusing their legs, while at the same time the legs (by driving the horse forward) naturally correct any mistakes (blocking) made by the hands.

The inherent problems with this method, however, include a tendency to destroy a horse's natural impulsion as well as risking disturbing his state of mind. When a horse 'ignores' his rider's leg aids, often because their hands or seat are accidentally blocking the horse from moving in the first place, the risk is that the rider instinctively uses them more and more strongly perhaps even adding spurs as crude instruments to 'make' the horse respond. In fact, the popular analogy of the late 1800s, that "*the horse is like a steam engine with the rider's legs creating the steam and the hands regulating it*", is perhaps even more apt than many realised. Unless the rider has at least a reasonable degree of tact, horses ridden in opposition frequently either 'shut down' or become irritated to the point of being driven crazy (depending on the individual horse's nature) - just like a boiler that's about to blow!

So, unless we are off to war on horseback in the next 30 days or content to make our horses pay for our own lack of riding skill, it seems useful to investigate how the legs can be used most effectively – always assuming, of course, that the rider's hands are educated and sensitive and therefore not causing any problems such as blocking forward movement.

In the old literature, there are two ways in which the legs were used: an 'impulsive' action to request and encourage movement and a 'positional' effect, used to support and clarify indications from the rider's seat and hand. Both uses are extremely light and gentle and based on opening spaces for the horse to step into rather than physically pushing the horse around.



(Using the legs cont.)

All effective aids, whether from hand, leg or seat, are nothing more than slight exaggerations of the movements the horse and rider are already making.

At the walk, for example, the horse's belly swings from side to side creating a natural moment where the rider's leg 'touches' the belly while at the same time the rider's opposite hip and thigh are being gently lifted up and away from the horse's flank. With a horse that is sensitive and listening to his rider, he or she can 'invite' their horse to increase the amplitude of his movement by 'touching' and then slightly emphasising the 'lifting and opening' phase of each leg, backed up in the beginning by an appropriate wave or touch of the stick if necessary. If done well, this impulsive aid from the leg is absolutely invisible to any observer but is clearly felt by the horse. Think of shifting your bones inside your skin without the external surfaces visibly moving.

When not being actively used to ask for more energy or attention, the rider's legs are allowed to relax and hang as loosely as possible from the hip joint (*descente de jambes*, in French). This may even involve allowing the feet to drift slightly forward from the 'textbook' shoulder-hip-heel alignment, which is actually another feature of military regulations and only rarely, if ever, seen in the etchings and sketches illustrating the work of the old masters themselves.

If spurs are being used, the impulsive action is no more than a light, brief, 'electric touch' of the hair followed by an immediate release to produce 'excitement' in the horse's nervous system. NB: the aids should never be required to *maintain* forward movement - unless the horse is being blocked by the hand or seat.

In a similar way, lateral displacements of the hindquarters can be invited and encouraged by the rider opening just one leg, creating a space that the horse is invited to fill rather than pushing him across with the leg on the other side.

The second effect, the so-called 'positional' leg, is even more subtle and used mainly to draw the horse's attention to the influence of one rein more than the other. Once again, though, absolutely no physical force is required. The positional effect is created by a slight bending of the rider's knee and a slight outward rotation of the hip bringing the calf (and tip of the spur, if present) into light contact with the horse's flank. This prolonged but gentle touch of the calf draws the horse's attention more to the rein effects on the same side of his body and can be used to clarify the rider's signals should there be any sign of doubt or confusion in the horse's mind (a left 'positional leg' to clarify left direct rein as opposed to right indirect rein, for example).



(Using the legs cont.)

Clearly, using the legs in this manner is a world away from ‘kicking’ to produce movement or teaching a horse to yield sideways from the pressure of a single leg. The effects are almost entirely psychological rather than physical and are key to understanding how to ride “*by the weight of the reins and the draft of the boot*”, the goal described by General L’Hotte in his famous book, *Equestrian Questions*. The positional and impulsive leg effects can also be used to help with suppling and collection by influencing the way in which the hindquarters engage, topics that we will explore in more depth when discussing lateral work in the next article.