



Contact – What's in a definition

'Through the hand.....we have an opportunity to develop an intimacy with our horse.'

Contact is something that I imagine we all have very personal feelings about. To help me get started I asked for some help from my friends on the A Matter of Horse (AMOH) forum. Everyone had a pretty good idea of what they felt contact was and what they did and didn't like about the contact that they saw in the competition arena. In line with what I regularly read, in magazines and on the net, most advocated a sensitive contact that evolves from the horse working correctly from behind into an accepting hand. This quote from Mark Rashid (thanks to Ben Moxon for providing it) came up in discussion "Contact is the space between you pulling on the horse and the horse pulling on you." and leads me to my first question, just what is contact?

The way I train horses eliminates the concept of pulling by either party but Mark Rashid highlights for us surely that contact is the point of balance between horse and rider; it's the point at which we can both release ourselves and become one.

If I take this back to the simplest form then contact is something that primarily exists between our hand and the mouth of the horse; in the same way that in an electrical circuit a contact is something that allows current to flow. This is

just the start as the current flowing to all elements of a circuit will allow all individual parts of that circuit to work; just so in our contact with the



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"short reins win medals"*

horse, the act of two things touching in a physical and emotional/communication sense allows us to connect to the whole of the horse.

Contact from the horse to our hand is given and is not something we can take for ourselves. So why do we often misinterpret our own ideas on contact, do we get frustrated by the enormity of the task once in the saddle? I feel certain that it is many things and perhaps different things for different people. When I describe riding without a contact I'm only describing the work that I must do to achieve true contact; true connection between all parts of horse and human are what will result in a perfect contact NOT the holding of the rein and waiting!

So perhaps it is a chicken or egg dilemma for many riders? Do we establish a contact and then ride our gymnastic exercises waiting patiently for the horse to submit or do we ride those same exercises on a loose rein, allowing the horse to find its own balance and thus offering us the contact. The former sounds pretty much like the German system on which most modern competition riding is based and the second more like the French/Latin system of lightness.

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In my previous article I wrote of the 'fusion' of methods that we see today which in itself can lead to great confusion as new converts to a system of 'legereté' just abandon the reins and allow the horse to go it alone. The resulting dippy backs offering no hope of either contact or connection. The hand/mouth communication is a conduit for connection without which the horse will just drop and cut off at the wither making all chance of true collection impossible.

This honest quote from Sarah Cameron hit me because I've also been there myself, she says "I have seen it so many times that a rider has described their horse as being light or in self-carriage but they're just not at all! And I know because I have been there myself and I have wrongly used those terms because I didn't know any better."

What then is the difficulty with our interpretation of the classical masters and why do we find it so difficult to establish and maintain contact when we can all regurgitate the quotes and speak in flowing terms of what we are looking for?

Perhaps it's a question of comparing apples with pears, water with wine, untrained with highly trained? Charlotte Dujardin recently addressed a conference in the USA and the take home message was "short reins win medals" and if you watch this Olympian and her counterparts perform this is quite an obvious statement. So what every aspiring dressage rider goes out and does is take up a short rein in order to ride correctly as instructed by those at the top of the sport not understanding that the

short reins of a mature horse in collection have evolved over years of working on the relationship between all parts of the horse and the rider's hand; at least that is the theory!

To my mind the work on contact begins before you place any form of 'harness' on the horse, this is the point at which the horse begins to get an idea of what might be expected of it by a human, mess up and it's always going to be a battle.

It's hardly surprising that humans chose to control the power of an equine via the head. Imagine sitting astride a horse with nothing to steer with, worse still stop with. As we learn more about equine behaviour and the way equines learn we are challenging our forebears and re-writing the manual on control. The New Age of Natural Horsemanship shone fresh light on our ability to control, leadership became the mantra; be the herd leader for your horse. The latest buzz word is choice. Of course I should point out here that I have ridden my horses without any conventional means of steering or braking and lived to tell the tale. The truth being that however sensitive (and therefore easier to control) the mouth of a horse is, it has nothing on the sensitivity of its brain!



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Often quotes taken from the old dressage Masters, measured by our modern rules, can be at the very least misleading yet De la Guérinière reads like a regular NH trainer at times when, for instance, he describes the three qualities of a good mouth as corresponding to those of a rider's hand, which must be light, gentle and consistent. In his definition of contact in Ecole de Cavalerie he talks only of the relationship between mouth and hand. Unsurprisingly some of my AMOH friends felt that contact was about the 'whole' picture, de La Guérinière describes this as 'putting the horse between hand and legs' and is possibly what the opening quote from Mark Rashid was getting at because the way to avoid pulling from either party is to balance via the seat (including legs).

Rightly or wrongly then I'm going to define contact as the relationship between the mouth of the horse and the hand of the rider. Ah well that's that then...except that it's not if you ride without a bit! In defining contact as purely something between the rider's hand and the horse's mouth that assumes that when riding bitless one has no need for contact. I therefore have to define contact as the ability of the rider to communicate with the front of the horse, to release tension there and direct it accordingly. Through the hand whether via the bit, a cavesson, headcollar or bitless bridle we have the opportunity to develop an intimacy with our horse (thanks Jennie F for the idea of an intimate connection). We shouldn't fear contact but we should learn how to use it tactfully with the interests of the horse at the fore. Positive reinforcement techniques have shown me it is entirely possible to teach

cues from the hand that really allow the horse to take a big part in the learning process but whatever method you choose it has to be achieved in small steps, sometimes smaller than you may believe possible especially at the outset.

Having established a very basic definition of contact then how do we teach this concept and where does it lead us? I'll be looking at these questions next time along with some thoughts from my favourite authors, let me know any thoughts you have beforehand.

Links

A Matter of Horse forum, www.amatterofhorse.com

Mark Rashid <http://www.markrashid.com>

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