

Riding in Strides – Part 2 – The Five Points

by Silke Hembes



With an idea and a plan, one can act goal oriented and constructively, especially when it comes to riding on foot.

Before we get practical, i.e. practical on foot that is, let's consider our options to prepare for well thought out and positive results involving all of our senses. Walking an exercise session is of great help but is rarely – if ever – utilized. It is a very effective means available to us in order to indeed improve our riding.

Without question one of the best ways to learn how to ride are good lessons with an experienced coach. On the other hand, exclusively practicing riding via remote control from the coach is not the be all and end all.

Even if many people prefer this path, in comparison to reflecting deeply on what one would really like to do together with one's horse.

Practicing exclusively via riding lessons only works if you have the chance to take many good lessons on well-schooled horses and over a longer period of time.

This means not just once a week on a tolerant school horse that is carrying the third rider of the day.

Or on your own horse that otherwise stands around in the paddock or pasture or – worse still – in a stall. Simply drilling in the saddle without reflecting on what we are doing also makes our horse pay the price for many a false start.

Accordingly, it makes much more sense to think through and visualize the planned exercise before we get on the horse.

Point 1: Visualization

In order to approach riding with all of your senses, first of all remember the exact descriptions of the lesson you are working on right now, explanations you may have read about it or talks and discussions you may have listened to. Try to visualize the perfect execution of the situation. Consider arguments that sound



promising and plausible. Use the points along the education scale, no matter in what order. And while you are visualizing, consider those details that are personally important to you. Discard everything that falls under pressure, punishment, force and aggression so that the imaginary lesson with your horse you are visualizing, creates a positive mood.

Be constructive and imagine every detail:

- How you have soft rein contact and can see the top part of the bridle in front of you, enjoying the fact that your horse is in no way too tight. If it were tucked in too much you would not be able to see the top part of the bridle.
- How you can feel soft contact to the horse's mouth, how the horse takes the bit with its tongue, and how it takes your hand via the weight of the reins into the nodding rhythm of its walk. Your hand is soft and reliable and the connection with the rein as fine as possible.
- How your gaze and your sternum are directed forward so you can send the horse from behind through a corridor of aids to the front – together with you into the exercise.

Visualize

- How you sit relaxed and deep.
- How you are moved by the horse and carried in an alternate left-right rising and sinking motion of walk or trot. Or to the apex of each canter jump – diagonally from outside hind to inside front.
- In walk and trot your knees are bent supple and your thighs, from the hips, are supple and lightly touch the saddle.
- Your loosely hanging lower legs are carried along by the horse in an alternating motion.

- And your ankles allow the motion your horse passes on to you, to leave, alternatingly with each step. Your heels lower in turn.
- The suppleness required for a good seat, depends on sitting deeply and relaxed.
- The required stability and positive body tension springs from the erect, balanced posture of head, neck and back.
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Imagine...

- How you and your horse become one.
- How your horse moves, between your calves, on your seat, framed by your reins and in mutual balance with you
- How both of you together – with your head and your horse's legs – form a union, and the horse is not just a means of transportation.

At first all this may sound a bit pathetic, but it won't be any longer once you actually experienced riding in harmony at its most basic level. A positive vision of what you aspire to in the arena, is the prerequisite for a good result. This is the same in the dressage ring, as well as on the oval track. I need to be fully concentrated and have an image of what I wish to achieve, in order to ride with a clear head and full of joy. On a day when I am not able to concentrate to this high degree and to engage with my horse, I should probably go for a hack. This can also be the result of the visualization exercise: today I am not able to clear my head.



Simply clear your head...

Thus I use these moments with my horse in order to achieve exactly that: a clear head in my precious spare time: by trail riding, free playing with my horse, going jogging with it in hand, or brushing it extensively...

Anything is better than get into the riding ring in a bad mood, stressed or frustrated. Look into the faces of many riders in an arena, no matter what shape that arena may be, and you will know what I am talking about.

Of course you want to see in reality what you had visualized. What better way to do that than to observe?

Point 2: Observation

Why not simply watch videos of your riding? Such recordings are of course very helpful and clearly show our strengths and weaknesses. But – I made the experience that we often don't look at ourselves as objectively as other people. Very self-critical people are often stunned in the beginning when they watch themselves and may fall into a small or even large rider crisis. Other riders are so full of themselves that only they recognize their beautiful riding. Very often this is the large discrepancy between self-awareness and outside impression – and it is almost impossible to discuss this effect.

I believe that a rider can benefit from a video of her riding if she is able to call upon each of the following five points separately and use them. It makes sense to observe in reality everything we visualized before. What better opportunity than to observe other riders? Please look at other riders – but of course without making unsolicited comments!

Look, observe action and reaction of rider and horse, and draw your own conclusions. Do you find ideas that look promising and could be your model? Also be aware of anything you definitely won't want to do. Thusly prepared, you get to

Point 3: Experiencing on Foot

As we carry on with this series of articles, we will come back to this point in detail and at length, with many tips and suggestions for specific exercises.

Walking an exercise on foot may be a completely new experience for you?

You are now familiar with thinking through an exercise, watching, analyzing another rider's training and the attempt to execute the ride.

Now try to make your idea of the lesson and the good riding you observed, happen on foot – fluently and in balance.

And pay attention to work constructively forward and to avoid those mistakes you clearly noticed other riders make. Remember the corrections you continuously heard from your

coach. On the ground, you can practice as long and as often as you like – ideally in the company of kindred spirits.

Try it, be amazed, be amused – you will be surprised about how much fun it will be and how enlightening. I experience it myself at every clinic, enjoy it and profit from it myself every time, for my own riding!

- Walk all walk exercises you are interested in, jog them in trot and skip them in canter
- And: don't be embarrassed!
- Try to consciously use the turning of your head and shoulders from your waist, and the alignment of your pelvis
- Look towards where your posture carries you
- Observe whether you consistently move along two tracks or whether the tracks of your feet cross each other – especially along a curve
- Feel what effect putting more or less weight on one foot or the other, has on the direction in which you move.
- Feel the difference between putting more weight on your heels or your toes.
- And notice again and again how detrimental it is for your complete way of moving if your gaze is not focused.



Like a skier who mentally runs the upcoming slalom over and over (many of us will remember the pictures of highly concentrated athletes before their start at the Olympic winter games in Sotschi), we will also walk through our lessons before riding them. We can do this repeatedly and as often as necessary. Well prepared and with a clear image of how to manage the lesson, we will then get on our horses.

And now that you intensively and on different levels concentrated on preparing for a ridden lesson, you will barely be able to await the next point.

Point 4: Riding

On the horse you will feel how readily you profit from extensively having grappled with and addressed lessons you planned to ride.

You will begin your lesson with a clear understanding of how to proceed. You will recognize much more readily when an attempt might lead to the correct result.

And when you make a mistake that might lead to losing fluidity of motion, balance or direction.

After a while you will recognize better and better when you are able to still correct a lesson and when it is more sensible to break it off and start over.

You will become more secure and clearer in what you do – and why you do it. And you will notice much sooner when you are on the correct path and will be able to better motivate your horse with the positive re-enforcement of your praise.



If horse and rider are very comfortable with each other, it is even passable to ride the horse just with the seat, in order to master the bend as a union in perfect beat and supple balance, as shown in this picture.

Point 5: Reflection

After your ridden attempt you will be able to feel cause and effect. If your preparation, the starting point, the execution and resolution of your ridden exercise were clear and as subtle as possible, your horse will not have lost its suppleness – and the exercise is a success! If it did not work, you will have noticed the exact point at which the lesson was lost and be able to be better prepared the next time. You will recognize where your weakness was or where you made your mistake. Was there not enough suppleness, an uneven beat, loss of contact to the horse at the seat, the leg or the rein? Or did the horse's shoulder or hind end deviate from tracking true on the straight line or a curve? Maybe your horse was not able to collect enough for the requested lesson?

You will be aware of where you need to start and what you need to optimize or clarify so your horse has the chance to understand and execute what you ask of it.

Use our five points during your daily interaction with your horse and you will soon be clear about your path, even without a coach present. Your horse will tell you every time whether you are on a constructive and clear path – or not. A good coach is of course able to cue you correctly at the correct moment, lead you to the next level and help you when you are stuck. But – a really good coach will always be working towards your being able to help yourself at all times, even without him. This could mean being able to resolve a situation quietly by stopping without stress – without losing your cool and having the horse ignore all aids.

Retaining authority in difficult situations makes all the difference, especially for the horse: between a pleasant rider who is mentally relaxed and because of that is physically in balance, and one who unnerves his horse because it cannot trust the fact that the service unit on its back will act concisely and fairly.

More knowledge provides relaxation. And force starts where knowledge ends. In part 3 of 'Riding in Strides' - which will appear shortly - we will talk about many practical exercises. We will practice the turn seat and with it walk a volte.

More articles by Silke Hembes are here: <http://www.toeltknoten.de/english.html>

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