

Reprint of article in
Dressage Today, June 2010

The Secret to Correct Contact

Q: After years of riding dressage, I feel I still haven't mastered the art of having a good contact. Could you explain what things to look for? Colleen Daniels, Asheville, North Carolina

Gail Hoff Carmona

A: Correct contact is a bit difficult to define because it is an ever changing feeling. When a horse is well balanced and in self carriage, contact with the mouth is so light it is nearly nothing. It is almost like having just a thread connecting your hand to the horse's mouth. On the other hand, if a horse loses balance and falls on the forehand, the contact may become quite heavy until the horse is rebalanced and once again in self carriage.

In the most basic terms, contact refers to the situation when the reins are stretched in a straight line between the mouth of the horse and the hands of the rider, with no loop. As an observer, a correct contact looks like this: The line from the rider's elbow, (which should be held above her hip) to the mouth of the horse should extend unbroken. For this to happen, the rider mustn't have hands too high or too low. They should be held roughly just above the pommel of the saddle. Also, the fists must be closed with the thumbs being the highest point of the fist, as if holding a glass of water. Many riders ride with what I call 'piano hands.' While the reins run between the ring finger and the little finger, the hands are turned over as if playing piano. That position prevents riders from having sensitive feeling with their horse's mouth.

Many riders try to have what they consider a very light contact by opening their fingers in the piano position. However, instead of having light, feeling contact, they have almost no contact or no feeling.

If you hold your hands correctly, you feel a connection with your horse. When he chews the bit, you feel a small vibration on the reins. A bad connection is like picking up the telephone and then setting down the receiver on the table.

To feel the horse, you must also sit correctly – using your core muscles to hold yourself in balance. The principle is related to Pilates. Your arms and legs are extensions of this correct position, and are gently relaxed. Elbows hang straight down right above your hip. In this position, if the horse pulls, you have the whole strength of your core to brace against, keeping you from being pulled forward. If your arms are too far forward and the horse pulls, he can easily pull you out of the saddle, or you have to release the contact to keep from falling forward.

To remain correctly seated, simply visualize yourself as a tree. Trees do not give nor pull and they do not get tense. If the horse pulls forward and/or down, don't give and don't pull; just try

keep your arms from moving forward. Sit quietly using your core muscles to stay in balance. Let the horse rebalance himself.

Contact can be ever-changing based on the balance and the self-carriage of the horse. There are moments in training when everything doesn't look ideal and perfect. For instance, if the horse falls on the forehand, he may get heavier in the hand. There's only one way out to re-create balance. Instead of trying to fix this problem by pulling on the reins (which is a challenge since it seems like the horse is pulling on the reins because he feels heavier), you need to react by sitting extra correctly to keep your balance and core centered. In addition, you need to use your seat and legs to help re-balance your horse by performing a half halt. For this purpose, let's call the half halt a small downward transition. For instance, if you feel your horse getting heavier in your hands during the medium trot, just imagine that you are going to ask him to walk. Don't give or take with the hand, but do one or more half halts by embracing the horse with your leg and squeezing your buttock muscles while leaning very slightly back in order to engage the hindquarters of the horse more and allow his forehand to raise. The purpose of small downward transitions (half halts) is to sit the horse back on the haunches so that he can regain and hold his balance. When the horse rebalances himself, the contact automatically becomes lighter again.

Always think of 'framing your horse' by your seat and leg aids directing energy generated by the hindquarters to your hands. The seat and legs create a channel through which the horse is allowed to go forward to the contact. The horse is animated through the activating aids of the seat and the leg, together with the receiving aids of the hands. The forward impulsion created by the legs causes the horse to raise his withers and neck. Then, on finding resistance at the bit, it yields at the poll, and assumes the correct head position, with the poll being the highest point and the nose slightly in front of the vertical.

The key to correct contact, the key is to ride from your seat and leg, riding that small downward transition if the horse loses his balance, remaining seated using your core muscles, and never pull backward on the reins. This way your horse learns that if he loses balance and self carriage, he will create more pressure on his own mouth but if he can hold his balance, it will be more comfortable. He can trust the contact because he is the one who is determining how light or heavy it will be, and you can communicate with your horse with nearly effortless tension and relaxation of the muscles in your fingers.