

# **The Many Types of Leg Aids in Dressage**

How many times have you heard your instructor say, "More leg," and wondered how much more leg you had in you? As with most aids in dressage riding, more is not always better, and it is the type of aid and the timing of it that matter most. In this article, I describe several different types of leg aids and their most common uses. I hope it helps you explore the myriad of ways in which you can communicate effectively with your horse.

## **The Neutral or Hanging Leg Position**

Before describing the various leg aids, I should describe the neutral-hanging leg position. The neutral-hanging leg position is one that "feels (not squeezes) the horse's hair through the boot." It can be described as the leg that hangs down from the rider's hip joint just as the arm hangs from the shoulder. Ideally, the rider's ear, shoulder, hip and heel are all in alignment and the rider's saddle and stirrup length make this position easy to attain. Depending on the rider and saddle's conformation, the neutral-hanging leg hangs in the area just behind the girth, or where the stirrup bar is just behind the girth. The rider's calf makes contact with the horse just below the saddle flap. It is easy to find this position by "posting the walk." While the horse is walking, try posting a few steps. If it is difficult to rise out of, or sit back into, the saddle, then your legs are probably too far forward. Move your legs back a bit and try again. While the leg is for the most part stationary, it might move rhythmically in and out with the horse's motion. This leg position is not an aid, however, because it indicates "status-quo" to the horse. It is from this position that leg aids are initiated. It is important that the horse recognize that the neutral leg means "auto-pilot" rather than "stop." For the horse that stops when the rider's leg is in neutral, a supplemental light tap of the whip behind the leg reinforces the concept that neutral leg means "Horse, please carry yourself."

## **The (Go) Forward or Driving Leg Aid**

The forward-driving leg aid is one that indicates to the horse that energy should be released in a forward direction. This leg aid can be used in upward transitions from halt to walk or walk to trot. It can also be used for transitions within the gait. This leg aid is applied with both legs simultaneously and is applied at the same position as the neutral-hanging leg. While a person on the ground will typically see its application, he/she does not usually see the subtle movement that makes it unique. One way to describe this leg aid is to imagine the rider rolling the lower leg on the horse's side so that pressure is first applied from the flat part of the rider's calf and then ends towards the back of the calf. While the lower leg does not move forwards or backwards, the pressure varies. When the aid is exaggerated, one might see the rider roll the calf from a toes-forward to a toes-out position. As a result of this rolling motion, the horse feels a slight push or drive in a forward direction. Even though the forward driving leg is initiated from the lower leg, it is easy to feel that the application of this leg aid helps put the rider in a subtle pelvic tilt and thus the horse finds it easy to move forward. To enhance the sensitivity of the horse, the rider does not continuously squeeze the horse until he/she goes, but rather applies this aid as a rolling massage, a pulse or perhaps even a slight bump indicating that forward motion is desired. For the reluctant horse, a light tap of the

whip behind the leg reinforces this aid. Once the horse responds positively to the forward-driving leg, the rider's leg becomes passive and neutrally hanging again.

### **The Lifting or Rebalancing Leg Aid**

The lifting-rebalancing leg is one that indicates to the horse that energy should be put into contracting the belly and raising the back. This has the ultimate effect of rebalancing the horse as in a half-halt. This leg aid can be used anytime the rider wants the horse to engage his/her core and is a great pre-transition aid. This leg aid is applied in the same position as the neutral-hanging leg and its application is subtle. In exaggerated terms, this leg aid is applied as if the rider were to take his/her knees off of the saddle (think bow-legged) and squeeze the lower calf and feet together. The result should be that the horse tucks the belly, lifts the back and puts the feet more underneath the body. By softening the thighs and seat, the rider allows the horse to fill the space under the saddle. I like to introduce the horse to the "belly and back lift" concept from the ground while grooming. With a curry, carefully give your horse a belly rub. (Be careful since a tense or ticklish horse may kick when you massage its belly). The horse should engage the belly and lift the back. My horse moans to indicate his pleasure! Be sure to praise any attempts and practice daily. If your horse's back is more locked up, then you might find you have to encourage your horse with a hoof pick belly massage. Once the horse understands the belly lift, move to the mounted exercise where the rider sits on the halted horse and a ground person gives the horse a belly lift massage. Notice how the horse will almost always "go round" to the bit in this exercise! Sometimes the horse will attempt to walk forward in this exercise. The rider can then apply a small rein aid that says, "energy up, not forward." I like to describe the lifting-rebalancing leg aid and "stay here" rein aid as the first parts of a half-halt. As with the forward-driving leg, the lifting-rebalancing leg is applied in small pulses rather than continuously and can be supplemented with a tickling of the spur on the more advanced horse. Once the aid is given, the rider resumes with the neutral-hanging leg or with another leg aid.

### **The Shorter Strides Leg Aid**

The shorter strides leg aid indicates to the horse that the stride length should be shortened. This leg aid is great for transitioning from a lengthened/extended gait to a working/collected gait. Like the forward-driving and lifting-rebalancing leg aids, this aid is applied bilaterally (with both legs) and in the neutral-hanging leg position. Unlike the other leg aids, the rider applies the aid by squeezing the thighs more than the calves. Many horses naturally shorten their strides when this leg aid is applied so the rider just has to fine-tune this leg aid. At the walk or trot, try squeezing your legs together and feel the result. Some horses do better with an upper-thigh squeeze while others respond to a lower-thigh or upper-calf squeeze. A horse that isn't listening, or is fighting with the bit, usually does not pay attention to this aid, so a rider should make sure that there are no other discussions going on when introducing this aid. If the horse still doesn't respond, a slight restraining rein will help reinforce the aid. After the horse has reacted sufficiently, the rider can return to the neutral-hanging leg or supplement with a lifting-rebalancing leg aid as necessary.

### **The Lateral or Yielding Leg Aid**

The lateral-yielding leg aid is one that indicates to the horse that a sideways movement is desired. Side-pass and leg yield are movements requiring this leg aid. Like the forward-driving and lifting-rebalancing leg aids, this aid is applied with a gentle and pulsing bump or squeeze. Unlike the other aids, it is applied unilaterally (one side only), slightly behind the neutral-hanging leg position, and it is most effective when the horse's corresponding hind leg is up. Timing, rather than placement, is the most important aspect of this leg aid. For example, if a rider wishes to move the horse to the right, he/she will apply the inside, or left, lateral-yielding leg aid when the horse's left hind leg is up. This is because the horse is naturally unbalanced when a hind leg is off the ground and is best able to comply with a "move over" leg aid. Unlike the forward-driving and the lifting-rebalancing leg aids, the rider applies pressure to the horse's side with the entire leg including thigh, calf and perhaps heel. To duplicate this feeling from the ground stand with your feet about shoulder-width apart and then draw one leg towards the other by engaging your inner-thigh muscles. In order to avoid collapsing at the waist, be sure to stabilize your upper body with the outer-thigh and core muscles. When using the lateral-yielding inside leg, the outside leg remains passive in the neutral-hanging leg position unless needed to regulate the amount of sideways movement desired or to indicate that some forward energy is required as in leg yield. The horse should respond to a light aid since this it is difficult for the rider to apply this aid with much force. A common problem occurs when the horse doesn't respond to the lateral-yielding leg and the rider moves his/her lower-calf further back hoping to affect the horse's hind legs. By moving the leg back, the rider ends up working harder because the rider's leg is in a weak position and the horse is not as sensitive in the flank area. Desperately, the rider strains and recruits muscles in the waist; this in turn collapses the waist, torques the hips and pushes the outside leg forward. All of these movements inadvertently block the horse's ability to yield and work against the rider. In a last-ditch attempt to affect the horse, the rider crosses the inside rein over the neck and ends up executing a movement not yet defined in Dressage. Since brute strength cannot move a horse, I like to sensitize the horse from the ground by asking the horse to yield from a pulsing push with my hand or whip. After the horse understands the concept, I move to the mounted exercise with a ground person. Eventually, the horse will understand the request from the rider alone. To help a horse that is resistant to moving laterally, slow down the tempo or move to a slower gait and attempt the sideways movement. A few small taps of the whip just behind the leg can also encourage the horse so that the leg becomes effective again.

### **The Continuous-Bend or Bending Leg Aid**

The continuous-bending leg aid asks the horse for continuous bend rather than yielding. Movements that require this leg aid are a volte, travers (haunches-in), renvers (haunches-out), shoulder-in and half-pass. While both legs are used in this leg aid, their placement differs between inside and outside legs. Because the horse is asked to bend more or less continuously though many strides, this leg aid is given continuously

throughout the movement. The inside leg stays in the neutral-hanging leg position or perhaps even at the girth, while the outside leg is applied slightly behind the neutral-hanging leg so that the horse “bends” around the inside leg. It is crucial to not exaggerate this leg aid, however, since bringing the inside leg too far forward or the outside leg too far back torques the rider’s hips and works against the desired result. I like to think of the inside leg as my May pole and the outside leg as a ribbon that wraps the horse around my May pole. It is important to remember that the bend should occur in the body of the horse and not in the neck. While young horses are able to bend only slightly, the bend will become more natural as the horse becomes accustomed to this request.

Often, casual observers of Dressage marvel at how quiet and still the rider appears on the horse’s back. Any experienced rider knows, however, that while Dressage looks effortless, there is much that goes on behind the scenes. Jacob Braude once said, “Always behave like a duck - keep calm and unruffled on the surface but paddle like the devil underneath.” I like this quote because it can be interpreted to mean riding with more leg and less hand. In Dressage, more leg can mean many things. By using clear and concise leg aids, a rider can influence the horse in subtle and powerful ways. It is my hope that you will try these leg aids with your horse and experience how effective they are at communicating your intentions.