Taking Up the Reins

So far, we have had just a few easy rides in the past couple weeks, after the cold and nasty weather spell here. Just getting back to ‘legging up’ and taking it steady and slow. Too much too soon, with a soft horse, can make for problems. The lessons I learned from my event coach about interval training are remembered. Thank you Bob!

We start today with a walk around on the ground, some in-hand bending and suppling for Andy, and me stretching out a bit with my ‘mounting block’ exercises. Then I get on Andy to music by Ronan Hardiman, one of my favorite relaxing CDs. It is perfect for walking, - flowing and lovely. Easy to let my body go with the horse and the music!

I have no plan or agenda, just to get myself centered, and totally honest in my own position so Andy can move easily underneath me. I wait to see what ‘horse’ I have for the day, letting the music fill my senses and open my breathing. I am on a medium long rein, and checking in to my ‘self.’ “Are my seat bones even? Is my lower back released? Is my neck free? I feel the lift and swing of Andy’s back and suddenly we are totally matched with the music! It is what my friend Tom Nagel calls “Samadi” – being totally present. We are completely connected because I purposely did not ‘train’ or push and allowed time and space for this to happen. By making our warm up about ME, the rider, there is no tension and my horse is calm and relaxed.

We are both warmed up and connected and now I begin to ask Andy, very, very gently, to lengthen his back a little more, and take longer steps – still in the rhythm of the music. I simply drop my seat a bit, add a little intent to my psoas movement and he is reaching and moving thru his back into my hands. If I need
a bit more response from him, I am very specific – I tap clearly (but gently) once
or twice with my calves (NOT my heels!) then release my legs and sit quietly
with the movement he offers. Using too much leg aid, more pressure, and
nagging every step only creates a horse dull to the leg. I want my legs to feel as
if they are floating on Andy’s sides. He appreciates this, and has learned to move
forward when I RELEASE my legs.

We add some leg yield and turns – looking for flowing movement and reaching
through the back. I am always checking my own posture so that I do not get
involved in ‘doing’ or forcing any movement, but look for purity of gait always.
Then I play my ‘picking up the reins’ game. Get Andy flowing thru the back with
energy then very, very gently I shorten the reins a bit – tap, tap with my calves
if he slows down. I want him to keep moving forward to my fingers on the reins.
When he steps into my hands with his back up and swinging and neck extended,
I very slowly release the reins, keeping the connection clear yet soft. I want to
keep the flow going. The instant he loses energy – I tap, tap again, then release
my legs and allow.

We continue to play the rein game like an accordion – from a shorter and
rounder frame, to a longer, reaching frame. Always with energy and connection
and keeping the gait pure. If I am clear, quiet, fair and do not nag – Andy
rewards me with gorgeous flowing movement that sings like the music that is
playing. This is why we ride!

Thank you Andy!

*Notes from Karen: On this ride, we did about 30 minutes of walking only. The
previous day we did more work (walk and trot) and I like to alternate harder
work days with easy days. But do not underestimate the value of a great walk
session! It is real work for an out of condition horse to engage, with energy,
carry our weight and truly use their bodies effectively. Andy was ‘breathing’
when we finished, but not stressed. We finish every ride with walk on a long rein
for cool down. (See the mini lesson on ‘Pasture Potato’ for more info on getting
your horse fit!)*