

Please Release Him; Let Him Go

(posted 9-21-10)

Freedom, as Janis Joplin sang, is "just another word for nothing left to lose." It's also one of the most important qualities we seek to maintain in our horse's gaits.

As your horse's trainer, your job always is to guide, shape, mold, and direct your horse but not make him feel restrained or restricted. Sometimes absence of freedom is obvious, as in the case of riders' hands which pull or jam the horse into a frame. Nowadays, most of us know better than to do this. Less immediately apparent is the inadvertent restriction which horses inflict on themselves if they aren't stabilized in their tempos in each gait. In those cases the horse runs himself into the hand, and in order to keep him from speeding up, the unaware rider supports him with a kind of passive restraint.

Two problems then arise. Internalized tension develops which tightens and "un-supples" the horse's back and topline and inhibits his movement. And if you're busy limiting the horse's ability to *think forward*, it's impossible to ride him from back to front into a receiving hand.

In any gait, if you release your hands forward and the horse loses his balance and increases his speed, he's not in enough self carriage and you've been riding him in restraint. Only by not holding him back can you truly ride him forward and let your horse express the freedom and elasticity that judges want to see and that makes your horse a real joy to ride.