

The Aids?

Zero, Zilch, Nada

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Occasionally I've heard "dressage Zen" guys claim they don't use any aids at all. They just *think* the movement they wish to do. When you get this, it's usually from clinicians with exotic plumage and an elaborately constructed personae. I don't buy it. Either they lack much introspective self awareness about what's really going on, or they're trying to sell you snake oil.

But in the real world, what are the best aids? . . . the least you can possibly use. As described in the Rulebook, the horse "should appear to do *of his own accord* what is required of him."

Of course, you can't start out with too tiny inputs—you're likely to find that your horse will decide not to be very impressed with them—or you. But once you've upgraded his awareness and compliance by traversing that long road of second order conditioning, you don't need to keep using all the same aids you began with. In fact, you may be doing him a disservice if your aids are "shouting" at him when he's already trying to comply. An obvious example is in riding flying changes. While a horse who is green to the changes may need a substantial thump to persuade him to swap over, continuing in that vein over time will likely frustrate him or build in tension that makes him progressively more anxious about them.

When you're training a horse, his understanding of the aids is supposed to change. Riders who don't appreciate that fact often inadvertently chase their horse out of balance or out of collection. In short, *if he's already going, don't push him!* I see this all the time with inexperienced riders trying to make shoulder-in. If your horse is stabilized in that movement, you may want to engage him or lift him a little more, but that's different than running him off his feet just because a voice in your head is saying to constantly drive with your inside leg.

From junior high English grammar, you may recall the tedium of endlessly diagramming sentences. I still can hear Mrs. Kipness demanding, "In the sentence in the imperative mood 'Let the dog out!', what is the subject?" The tricky answer, of course, was YOU (understood), as in *YOU let the dog out!* In the same way, at times the aids can be implied without actually being stated.

In the beginning when you're either learning them yourself or teaching your horse a slew of new movements, you usually apply your aids in a repeating cycle.

Picture a leg yield to the left: your inner (right) rein supples and positions the horse away from the direction of motion. An instant later, as his inside hind leg lifts off the ground, your right leg displaces it laterally, under and across his body. Then, in the next beat, your outer aids act to rebalance him—either by sending his left hind forward

into the bit or by catching his sideways-tipping shoulder to make it wait for the back end. Then in sync with his rhythm, the cycle repeats and repeats—stride by stride.

With experience, you discover that in some strides, your horse won't need a particular input within the cycle. The push of your inner leg isn't necessary if he'll willingly take the next stride over without that push. Or the "catch" of your outer rein won't be needed if he's keeping his lateral balance. For that stride that particular aid is "understood." You skip it, go onto the next input in its regular time in the cycle, and wait to feel if he's going to need that help the next time around.

The more advanced your horse becomes, presumably the more finely tuned and respectful of the aids he will also be. The more he will maintain impulsion, bend, balance, and self carriage, your trust in him can grow, and the less reminding you'll need to impart every stride. You'll be able to give him only what he needs to perform. Many individual aids can become quiet—not absent—but passive as second or third order responses take over. As long as the assumptions you make are provable, it's to your advantage to allow your horse (as a military commander instructs his troops as he departs from a briefing) to "carry on" as he had been doing—and not to give him a needless hassle micro-managing what he's willing to give you without one.