

## Eyes, Why Shut?

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Fifty years ago my football hero was a wide receiver out of the University of Oklahoma named Tommy McDonald. This was back in the day before the NFL had become a commercial juggernaut, when pro football players held regular workingman jobs in the off season, and when the players were slightly larger but relatively normal physical specimens. Tommy McDonald wore number 25 and played for my hometown team, the Philadelphia Eagles. He was a “little” guy—only 5’10—and tough, the last guy other than a kicker to play the game without a faceguard on his helmet. Even in the coldest weather he never wore long sleeves which meant that all his pre-teen admirers had to risk freezing our nibs off in order to emulate him.

McDonald was an over-achiever. Back in 1959, or thereabouts, I remember sitting in a barbershop after school, awaiting my crewcut, and paging through a now-defunct sports pulp where I encountered a story about my hero. In it, he recounted as a young teen lying on his back on his bedroom floor, tossing coins into the air. He would watch them start to ascend, and then close his eyes and try to catch them without looking. His idea was to fine-tune his spatial perception and hand-eye(less) coordination so that he could figure the flight of a football thrown his way with only the briefest glance at its trajectory. Whether or not this contributed to his Hall of Fame career is unknown, but I always remembered that concept and much later applied it to my riding.

Whether you’re swinging a five iron or trying to make collected canter on a 20 meter circle, complicated physical activities require an awareness of literally dozens of inputs and individual muscle motions. NOBODY can keep track of that many things simultaneously! But if you can make enough of those motions become automatic and able to be performed without conscious thought—if you can conjoin handfuls of them into a few larger feelings—it frees your mind to concentrate on other important elements that do require more constant monitoring.

So at some point years ago, I began to practice this routine: I would stand in an open area, mark a spot on the ground, and with my eyes shut, try to walk a 20 meter circle. When I thought I had completed the circle, I’d open my eyes and see if 1) I was back where I had started, and 2) whether my footprints traced some semblance of a round figure. Eventually, I began to do this while mounted—first in the walk, later in the trot—until round, properly-sized figures could just “happen” for me. Or my programmed kinesthetic sense would warn me if the horse was deviating from that figure.

More recently, I experimented with this technique in lateral work. Try it yourself: Turn down the centerline into a shoulder-in. Once you’ve established your line and the horse’s alignment on it, close your eyes. Ride a dozen steps or so before you peek to see if you’re where you’re supposed to be. Get good at it. Yes, you want to have a visual focal point to aim for when your eyes are open, but this exercise seemed to relocate my inner ear into my seatbones. Practicing it can hone your awareness of the sensations your horse supplies to your internal gyroscope and will let you stay on your

desired course with less conscious thought. Meanwhile, you can concentrate on creating an elastic connection, engagement, and brilliance.

Let me add: There are limits to how you should apply this training tool. I used to teach a woman who took flying lessons as well. Her flight instructor booted her out of the airplane for good when he noticed that as she approached the touchdown point of each landing, she would hold her breath and close her eyes. The “eyes wide open” method has its place too!