

## (Please Don't) Get a Grip!

It's easier to form a good habit than to try to break a bad one.

"Right, why didn't they tell me that before I started?" That's what a zillion riders say when they try to relax their hips and thighs and envelope the horse with their legs. I heard it just the other day from a student . . . "My first instructor yelled at me any second I wasn't pinching with my knees as hard as I could. Now I can't keep from gripping."

I sympathize. My own history is much the same. I learned to ride as a late teenager from my then-girlfriend and her family. Aside from some paradise by the dashboard light moments, from those days I particularly remember having it drilled into me that the key to mastering this equestrian stuff was to have a strong, gripping leg. I was being groomed to go foxhunting. After ring work, we used to hack out on the cinder roads on a three mile loop—down into the hollow, around the neighbors' farms and the gas well, and back—and if I managed to squeeze as tightly as I could for those entire three miles, I felt my ride that day was a success.

Were I only going to foxhunt, this style of riding would have worked out pretty well, but these people were also trying to apply it to the three phases of eventing, and there its limitations became more apparent.

Have you ever noticed that most students don't just ride as their instructor teaches? They ride the way *their instructor's instructor* taught. Unless some cataclysmic event overwhelms them—I'm thinking an asteroid and the dinosaurs, for instance—a glacial inertia seems to inhibit changes of technique and philosophy and drags them out over generations. My teachers had gone to a Vermont riding camp back in the '50s run by Captain Fred Marsman. He had learned the forward seat from Vladimir Littauer, its main civilian proponent in the U.S. Littauer had immigrated to the States from Russia around the time of the revolution having concluded that former czarist officers would become a bit unpopular with the new Marxist regime. A decade before that—prior to World War I—a delegation of Russian cavalry officers had returned from Italy where they (and other officers from all over the world) had learned the new fangled forward seat being espoused by its inventor, Frederico Caprilli. Gripping was *de rigueur* and passed down—all the way to me.

Caprilli's formulation was rapidly supplanting the manege-based, high school training system which cavalries had used for centuries. However much we all devote ourselves to dressage, no one can deny it wasn't a very effective way to train light cavalry cross-country horses. It was unfortunate for them (though not for later civilian show jumpers and event riders) that this innovation only slightly pre-dated the common use of machine guns and tanks in warfare—inventions that put the kibosh on the cavalry charge idea and shortly put the cavalries themselves out of business.

Before we get back to my woeful knee grip story where this will eventually end up, I wonder if you recognize the name "Todd Sloan?" He was a turn of the century American jockey who, simultaneous to Caprilli's work, began using his own version of the forward seat to ride in flat races. Despite his technique being derided in some circles as the "monkey crouch," he won races and fame on both sides of the Atlantic with it, as his position, which unburdened the horses' backs, shaved many seconds off their times on the racecourse.

If you'll permit me one more digression, years ago I found another fascinating antecedent to the forward seat. This was an illustration in a battered, musty volume I stumbled across in an old farmhouse. The book was dated 1856—forty years before Caprilli—and it depicted a rider in almost exactly the balanced, angulated position we think of when we imagine galloping and jumping. In this case, however, it was prescribed for riding a horse *swimming!*

I've been pinching with my knees for the past six paragraphs, and indeed, I might have done it the rest of my life, but a few years later I was exposed to real dressage for the first time. On a scholarship to the old American Dressage Institute, I was put on the lunge line to develop a more useful seat for these new tasks at hand. "Stop pinching!" I kept hearing.

"I'm not!" I would insist, and I really believed that. I encounter that reaction all the time in riders. You're so used to a viselike leg, that you aren't even aware of it. If called out, you'll deny it because not knowing any differently, your unconscious pinching feels normal.

Nine years later, I first rode at the Violet Hopkins/USDF National Instructors Seminar in Michigan. In the interim I'd had help from Tom Poulin, Lockie Richards, Colonel Ljungquist, and many clinicians. Back then, the Hopkins Seminar ran almost two weeks, and was conducted by Colonel Sommer from Denmark and Major Lindgren from Sweden. Vi, who has been described as "the godmother of all American grassroots dressage riders," observed my riding but said nothing. I took my horse back to the seminar in both '83 and '84. At both of those gatherings and monthly for the year in between, I also rode under Sally Swift and her Centered Riding eye.

By the early '90s, the seminar Vi had founded had moved to the campus of the University of Nebraska (where the football players think that the big "N" painted on the center of the field stands for "knowledge"), and I had graduated to become a member of the teaching staff. We had "participating instructors," auditors, and demo riders who were guinea pigs for the "PI"s to practice teach on. Our own job did not necessarily include getting on the horses; however, in one situation a "PI" I was supervising simply couldn't get her horse round. This had gone on for several days, so finally, I bent the rule and in front of a hundred auditors climbed on him. To everyone's relief, the horse responded appropriately and gave in. Mission accomplished, we broke for lunch.

Vi, now well into her '80s, had been watching. She caught up to me in the hallway, and in her prim and rather schoolmarm-ish way, touched my arm, and said in her Gilda-Radner-as-Emily-Litella voice, "Well, Bill," it's *so good* to see that you've finally stopped pinching!"

Vi and I hadn't exactly been hanging out in the same bars over all those years. If we had, I hope she would have noticed the change sooner. But a bad habit can be that hard to break.

I guess, that means if you're a "gripper," you better start now!