

# EXTRA

Sharon White  
and Cooley  
On Show

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On Roads  
Strengthen  
Your Horse's  
Legs?

## 5 Exercises to Build Communication

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By Sharon White with Sandra Cooke  
Photos by Susan J. Stickle

# BECOME A SELF-CONFIDENT LEADER



Build communication with your horse using simple, time-tested tools to figure out what he needs—and let him know what you want.

**W**e ride and compete because for us there is nothing better in the world than the horse/rider connection. Yet we know it's not always perfect. I teach many clinics for riders of all levels, and I often need to help students who are passionate about riding but whose enjoyment of their horses is compromised by a lack of confidence.

I don't have a magic formula for building rider confidence, but I have something almost as good: tools a student can use to address just about any issue she is having with her horse. My starting point is that in the competitive partnership that is your relationship with your horse, there needs to be a leader and that leader must be you. Think about it. You're the only one in the partnership who knows the plan—where you're going and what you're doing. You're the only one who knows whether you're turning right or left in the dressage ring, when the water jump is coming up on cross country or which show-jumping fence in the ring is next on course.

So you have to be the leader. What's more, your horse likes having you in charge. A timid horse could need anything from detailed instructions to encouragement whereas a confident or aggressive type might do better with a minimal amount of suggestion and direction. In any case, the key to communicating with your horse, figuring out what he needs and letting him know what you want—in other words, making yourself the leader—is always the same: education and repetition.

**I am riding Royal Alyance, by Riverman son Royal Appearance out of My Martina (a Thoroughbred steeplechase mare). He was a stallion until late in his 5-year-old year. He has not been easy, for certain. He has a very big opinion of himself! So everything that's in this article is essentially what I've had to do with him. Because he was gelded late, I've had to establish at each point in his training that HE is not the leader of ME. As we'll see in these photographs, he loves to jump, but I've had to convince him that it's up to me to tell him when and where and how.**

## From the Ground Up: Establish Correct Mounting



Alynce is standing four-square and still, something he never used to do! We worked on this by having a ground person hold his bridle at first. The other element: If he moves away when I get on, then I get back off. Then I get on again, and if he moves away I get off, then I get back on. And if he steps away, I once more get off, then I get back on. Over and over. If your horse is very fussy, you might need to start with someone helping you on the ground. If he wants to move away a little bit but isn't being really naughty, just use the repetition of getting off, then getting back on.

I guarantee that if you persist, your horse will eventually stand quietly. It may take a while but he'll get to the point of saying "all right, I will stand." It's tedious, of course, because you want to get on with your ride, but it works. It took me a long time to get this horse to do this, but here's the payoff: He's standing quietly saying, "OK, boss, now what?" I have a nice soft rein and he's just waiting for my next instructions.

### From the Ground Up

Let's start at the beginning. Riders who have confidence issues tend to want to focus on problems they're having when they're actually in the saddle, but I encourage you to first think in terms of more basic skills. Suppose your horse won't stand when you mount. That's intimidating for some riders and can be a real inconvenience or sometimes a question of safety. The truth we tend to overlook is that all of these basic horsemanship skills are related. It's always about attention to detail. In my experience with some of the best riders in the world, their horses stand when they get on. Why? Because the riders pay attention to this skill. Their horses lead correctly because the riders pay attention to it. They pay as much attention to ground work as they do to work under saddle because they know it's all part of the whole of good horsemanship and good riding.

Of course, we know it's not unusual for a very good rider to go along for years casually allowing her horse to walk away as she's mounting, until something helps her realize, "This may be related to the fact

that my canter lead changes are always a little late." Again, the behavior is all related in your horse's mind. It's all a matter of does he know what you want and does he do it when you ask him?

If this simple but important detail is an issue for you and your horse, your trainer can probably suggest an exercise for teaching him to stand or direct you to a ground-work program. If you can teach your dog to sit, you can teach your horse to stand.

### The Basics in Motion

To continue building that sense of communication and confidence once you're on your horse, have a plan before you put your foot in the stirrup. The plan gives you something to focus on instead of nerves, and it reinforces your role as the leader in the partnership because you start right out by giving your horse something to do.

Does that sound complicated? It is not. Your plan once you're mounted and ready is to march off in a positive four-beat walk. We're back to the classical Training Scale here, the basis for everything: It starts with rhythm, which creates relaxation. Rhythm

is probably the single biggest skill I teach and that I pay attention to when I ride. If you get on feeling nervous and tense, it's hard to have rhythm because you're not allowing your horse to walk and move out, and then he will get tense. If you're having difficulty creating the four-beat walk rhythm with your body, think one-two-three-four in time with your horse's steps. If that doesn't work, count aloud. That's what I ask my students to do when they're having trouble establishing a steady walk rhythm. When you say it and hear it, your body responds to it.

There are times when your horse shouldn't start at the walk, for instance, because he's too cold, too tight or too nervous. In that case it's better to trot, but again you need to have a plan as the leader. I tell my students, "Give your horse something to do before he gives you something to do." Instead of just trotting around, focus on something: serpentines on a loose rein, inside leg to outside rein, suppling one side of his body and then the other until he relaxes into the rhythm and begins to seek the connection with your hand.

## The Basics in Motion: Marching Off



Here's the starting point: Alyance is standing squarely and quietly, ready for whatever we're going to do. My signal for him to walk off is to sit tall with my upper body, sit deep in the saddle, keep my leg still and add my calf—just a gentle squeeze. When he starts forward I think one—two—three—four. If he doesn't do what I want when I ask the first time, then there is a consequence: First I add a little heel, then a little spur, and if there still is no response, a little crop until he learns. I wouldn't leave it at that, however; I don't want him thinking that he needs a big aid to walk off.



My eventual goal is to get a response from minimal aids. Again, I accomplish that with repetition so that when I say "walk on" with my seat and my calf, he marches off in a steady, rhythmic gait as he's doing here.

### Sharon White: 'You Can Do This'

"As the rider who is a student, you want to be learning with someone who makes you feel like you can do this, whatever the challenge of the moment is," says five-star international eventer Sharon White. The teaching/training program at her Last Frontier Farm in Summit Point, West Virginia, is just such a source of encouragement and confidence. Her students' appreciation is obvious to anyone who has ever experienced the wave of cheers from orange-clad supporters who follow Sharon around the cross-country course.

Sharon's career has been shaped by some of the greats in equestrian sport. Early on, she rode with eventing legends Bruce Davidson and Torrance Watkins. A consistent influence has been international star Jim Wofford, who continues to be a sounding board for her riding and her overall career. "She is an unusual package," Jim says. "She's a super rider and horsewoman and a wonderful instructor. Unlike many elite riders, she tells her students what they need to do to get better—not what Sharon would do." FEI 'O' judge and Grand Prix dressage rider Linda Zang also comes to coach at Sharon's farm regularly.

Sharon has over 25 years of competitive experience, is an active member of the USET Eventing Team, has competed extensively in the United States and in Europe and is a USEA ICP Level 4 instructor with distinction. She has represented the United States as a member of the Nations Cup Team at Boekelo

in 2014 and she was named as a Reserve Rider for the 2018 World Equestrian Games. In 2018, Sharon placed third at The Fork CCI\*\*\*\*-S and eighth at the Land Rover Kentucky CCI\*\*\*\*-L, both with her Irish Sport Horse gelding Cooley On Show. She continued to rack up top placings with Cooley on Show and Holsteiner gelding Claus 63 in 2019, and most recently finished sixth in the 2020 Mars Eventing Showcase with Cooley on Show.

In addition to being an accomplished event rider, Sharon has her USDF Silver Medal and has competed successfully in show jumping through the Mini Prix level.

If you'd like to know more about Sharon, visit her website at [www.lastfrontierfarm.com](http://www.lastfrontierfarm.com).

## The Basics in Motion: Ride a Figure Eight



Figure eights or serpentine at a trot are a good way to remind a tense or fidgety horse that you're the leader. They also are a great way to warm him up for the next thing you plan to do: You're warming up both sides of his body as you give him a chance to stretch one side, then change direction and help him stretch the other side. Here we're going straight across the diagonal at a good steady trot. Alyance is in a connected frame, though it's early in the exercise so I'm not asking for a lot of engagement. I have even contact on both reins and I'm keeping my posting light and low.



As we turn to the left, my head is up and my eyes are looking where I plan to go. My inside rein is soft, and I'm guiding him in a forward manner, pressing him into the outside rein, which determines the size of our arc, with my inside leg. The size of our loops depends somewhat on the size of the area in which we're working and how fit my horse is versus how attentive he is. If his attention is wandering, I ask for smaller figures. Again, it's a matter of repetition. The result does not happen in the first loop. I keep repeating until I get the trot I want.



This photo was taken after Alyance and I had been working on the figure for several minutes. You can see that he is more forward and more active behind as we go across the diagonal in the opposite direction from Photo 1.



A few repetitions later, I can definitely feel that inside leg/outside rein connection on the bend through the left turn. See how far under his body he's stepping with his right hind. His back has come up under me and he's looser and listening more.

## Canter a Pole and Halt



This exercise is useful for improving communication with any horse who finds it so exciting to canter a simple pole on the ground that he loses his balance or lands running. In this photo Alyance, who loves jumping, is getting a little jazzed up by the pole on the ground, as indicated by his rapt expression and forward-pricked ears. My eyes are up and looking where I want to go. I have a soft contact, and I'm sitting in a light three-point position with my upper body forward and my seat grazing the saddle.



I'm getting ready to ask Alyance to halt: Because he's a young horse, he will halt through the trot. My seat is closer to the saddle, my upper body is more vertical and I've closed my fingers on the reins. He's still cantering but his ears indicate he's getting my signal.



I'm in the down, or sitting phase, of my post here and Alyance has come back to trot so cooperatively that I'm thinking, "Wow, this stuff really works!" As these pictures show, a downward transition is always a forward transition: At each point I am riding my horse to the connection and giving him a chance to do what I'm asking. At this moment I'm not pulling back on the reins. I'm pushing him into the bridle with my seat and leg and I'm patient. Depending on the horse and the amount of energy he has, you might not need to push. If you have one who's fairly enthusiastic, you may need to use more restraining aids until he gets it, but he will.



If you ride forward into the downward transition, you end up with a square halt. This halt shows the result of patient repetition. Alyance has halted four-square on a steady contact. His ears are attentive but relaxed and his tail is quiet. He's waiting for me to tell him about the next plan.

Now you're not worrying about your own nerves; you're using a simple tool to communicate with your horse.

It's not unusual for riders accustomed to working in an enclosed area to lose some confidence when outside the ring. Riding out in a field is no different from riding anywhere else: You need to know you can go where you want to at the speed you wish. Time for a plan! Decide before you ever leave the barn how you will keep your horse and yourself busy outside the ring with simple schooling figures and upward and downward transitions. You can use this strategy to maintain leadership throughout all of your flatwork.

## Now Over Fences

Building confidence in jumping is no different than strengthening your confidence about riding in general. Assuming your horse already knows how to jump, does he go exactly where you want him to go in the ring or out in the schooling field and does he go at the speed you want?

If I have a student whose confidence over small, simple fences is really weak, I don't hesitate to go all the way back to rails on the ground. If you lack confidence, it's usually because you feel you don't

have control. How do you stop when you want to stop? Go when you want to go? Turn right? Turn left? Everything—including the Training Scale, straightness and rhythm—is some version of that. You have to know that you have control to feel confident over fences. You can do anything with rails on the ground. Trot one and halt. Canter one and halt. Trot or canter through a series of them. Make a figure eight or an entire course. With this work you're re-establishing your driving and restraining aids and the aids for going right and left on a daily basis. With repetition you can fine-tune it so that when you think something, your horse does it.

In my clinics, we often have horses who land over a jump and speed up. This can be a confidence issue for a rider who is already a little tentative about jumping. There is a simple tool I use to help students. Speeding up after a fence is actually a loss of rhythm. I tell students to make a downward transition to trot immediately after the jump, then pick up the canter again only when the horse relaxes into a rhythm. If you have this plan in mind from the outset, it increases your confidence. It really works. And if you repeat the downward transition enough times, I

guarantee that eventually your horse will jump the fence and then slow down.

It's interesting to me that some riders are reluctant to use this tool, almost as if they think it means they're somehow not as good as they should be. In fact, I have a favorite story about it. Years ago, a good friend (who is also one of my owners) signed us up for a clinic with Greg Best, two-time Olympic individual show-jumping silver medalist. My friend is a fairly novice rider and I am an FEI-level professional. We ended up in a group where we were jumping about 2 feet. I was riding a Prelim horse I was very proud of, but he was a strong horse, and that day I could not make him do what I wanted. He kept speeding up after the jumps, and finally Greg said, "Your problem is that you can't maintain your rhythm. I think you should do a trot transition when you land. Stay on course, do a trot transition, then pick up the canter again." It was so simple and so effective. And my friend was so tickled!

## Don't Hurry

The final word on becoming your horse's leader is something Canadian Olympic show jumper Ian Millar told me: Never be in a hurry with your horse. He will learn

## Over Fences: Fix Rushing After a Jump



Alynce is jumping over a crossrail to a small oxer, but it's apparent by how much he overjumps this small fence that this is what he loves to do. I am keeping my heel deep, my lower leg correct and my contact consistent, staying with him over the fence.



You can see his enthusiasm as he sizes up the little oxer. I'm in my three-point (sitting) position for these canter strides, following his motion and maintaining the contact by opening my elbow.



Alyance takes another big jump over the oxer, a moment in which many young horses start to pick up steam. I'm up in two-point position, staying with him, keeping the contact, looking ahead and planning my next move to keep him from rushing after he lands.



I came back to a light three-point after landing and asked for trot. Here, a moment later, I've risen into two-point (the up phase of my posting). Alyance, who would prefer to keep cantering, has fallen slightly onto his forehead. Rather than pull on him, I've braced my back a bit and used my core to encourage him to shift his balance rearward. I could be deeper in my heels to accomplish that better.



The result: a trot transition in which he is balanced and forward. I continue trotting until Alyance feels steady and relaxed in this gait, then ...



I ask for—and get—a wonderful, balanced canter departure, once again looking in the direction I plan to go. With a horse who tends to rush after jumps, I'm willing to repeat this sequence as many times as I need to until he automatically slows and waits for instructions after the fence because I know that it will work.

better and more consistently if you do not feel pressed for time. If you have only 15 minutes to spend with your horse, you can get a lot done in that time (for instance, valuable ground work)—but before you put on his halter, you need to decide exactly what it is you want to do.

All of the tools I've explained will work if you're willing to repeat them until your horse realizes what you want. The basics of good horsemanship and good riding are

not a magic formula that top riders keep to themselves. Those basics are the same as they've been. Building your confidence is a matter of being willing to find out the basics and to repeat them many times.

When you become your horse's leader, repetition is also the key for coping with normal anxiety about challenges like riding a cross-country course. Let's face it, eventing is a fear-inducing sport and part of its lure is overcoming that fear. After you've

done it over and over, your fear is more about performance anxiety ("I hope I don't mess up at Fence 6") than actual terror. As part of this process, you need to not be in a hurry about moving up the levels. A good leader takes care of those she is leading. Before you move up, your current level of competition should feel easy for you and your horse. If your horse is confident and you've done all the basics I've talked about, you're probably ready. 🐾

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# Roadwork: Is it good or bad?

**Q** This is my first season eventing at Preliminary level and I'm learning some new techniques for getting my horse fitter. I've heard of several trainers who trot their horses on hard-packed dirt roads to strengthen their legs. I was always told that the concussion of trotting on roads is bad for horses' legs. Was that an old wives' tale?

**LAURA WERNER, DVM**

**A** Walking and trotting horses on firm footing is a common practice that racing, foxhunting and eventing trainers have used for years, particularly in Europe. Their reasoning is that the physical stress caused by controlled amounts of concussion stimulates the tendons and ligaments to grow stronger during a young horse's development. Scientific studies have shown that early exercise, though not specifically on roads, is critical to tendon development in young horses. Careful, controlled roadwork can be an acceptable component in a training program aimed to promote such healthy development.

For mature and aging horses, however, roadwork offers a mixed bag of pros and cons. In the wintertime and early spring, it can be a good alternative for fitness work when other outdoor riding areas are too muddy or icy. It also provides a nice change of scenery. For eventing specifically, roadwork helps to expand horses' and riders' familiarity with different types of footing. When galloping across country, eventers need to be ready to handle a variety of surfaces and uneven terrain.

Horses recovering from soft-tissue injuries can benefit more from walking and trotting on firm footing, such as packed dirt roads, than from working on deep, soft footing. The latter can add more strain to tendons and ligaments and thus slow the rehabilitation process or, worse, risk re-injury.

Unfortunately, roadwork also has its downsides. It can cause excessive stress and strain on joints, particularly in older

horses. It can also aggravate hoof problems. Many horses do not have strong enough feet to withstand the pounding on hard roads. It's very important, therefore, to consult your veterinarian about your horse's individual needs before carefully weighing the benefits and drawbacks of roadwork.

If your veterinarian gives you the OK to ride your horse on roads, select safe, quiet ones with limited, slow-moving traffic, good surfaces, wide shoulders and, if possible, no loose neighborhood dogs. An ideal road surface is hard-packed dirt that still has a little give. If you're lucky enough to be near a beach, the firm sand along the waterline is also a good surface to work on. If your choices are limited to paved roads, inspect their surfaces carefully. Some asphalt is covered with a slick coating, which may cause dangerous slips or even falls. Ask your veterinarian and farrier if they recommend additional traction for working on your local roads. Putting a little borium—a granular metal treatment—on your horse's shoes may help to prevent accidents and injuries.

If you decide to do roadwork, think of it as part of his routine fitness program, limiting its frequency in the same way you limit his speed work. When preparing for a competition, upper-level horses may do it every five days while most lower-level horses generally do it no more than once a week. As with all of your other fitness work, start slowly and gradually increase the duration of your workouts. Check your horse for any signs of problems after each session. Contact your veterinarian if you notice swelling in his legs or lameness.

If you and your veterinarian decide that the concussion from trotting on



AMY K. DRAGOO/AMEDIA

**If you plan to do roadwork with your horse on paved surfaces, inspect them carefully before hitting the road. Some asphalt is covered with a slick coating, which may cause dangerous slips or even falls.**

roads is inadvisable for your particular horse, consider walking on them instead. This produces far less concussion but still provides great benefits. Walking exercise, no matter what type of footing you're on, for 30 minutes before or after a dressage school, for example, will help to increase your horse's cardiovascular and muscular fitness. And it's safe to do it as often as several times a week. 🐾

**Laura Werner, DVM, MS, Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Surgeons**, is a veterinary surgeon specializing in lameness and equine emergency services. After veterinary school, she completed her surgical internship at Hagyard Equine Medical Institute in Lexington, Kentucky, followed by a residency and master's degree program at The Ohio State University. She then taught at Ohio State for over a year before joining a private practice in central California, where she performed surgery for six years. In 2011, she joined the Hagyard Equine Medical Institute's Davidson Surgery Center as a surgery associate. In addition to her surgical duties, she is continuing research on septic arthritis and osteomyelitis.

An event rider with experience at the Preliminary level, Dr. Werner enjoys "living vicariously through others" by treating mounts of her fellow competitors, including Young Riders and Olympians. She also serves as an FEI (International Equestrian Federation) veterinary delegate at some of the top U.S. events.

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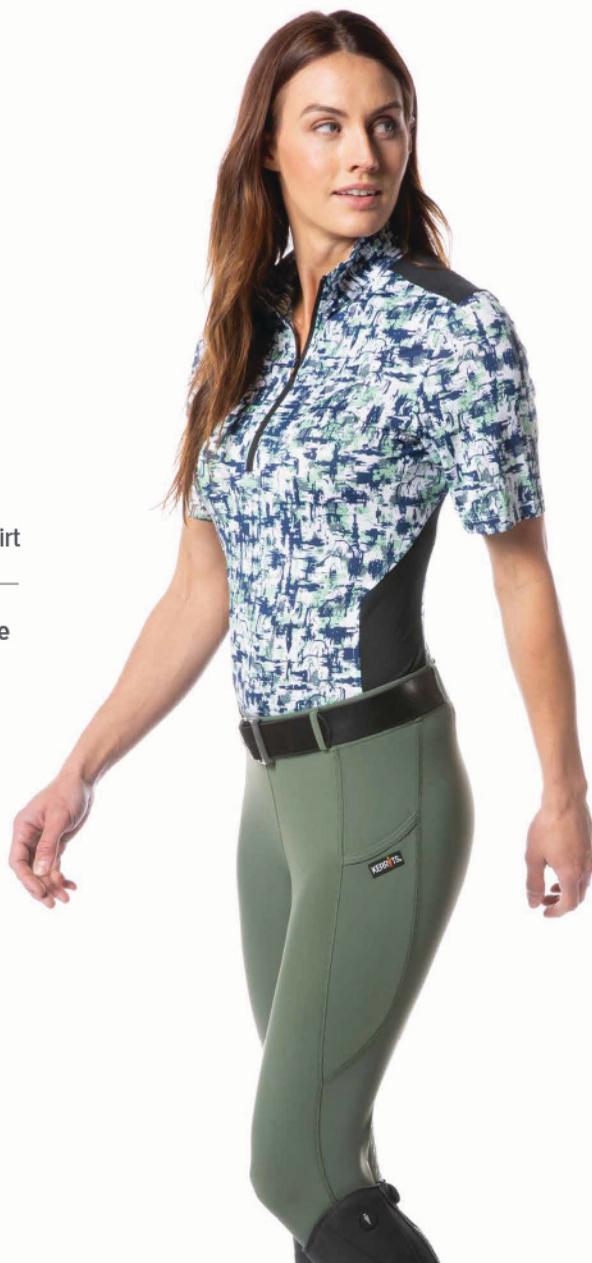
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