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MINDSET - PRACTICAL RIDING LESSONS - RIDER POSITION

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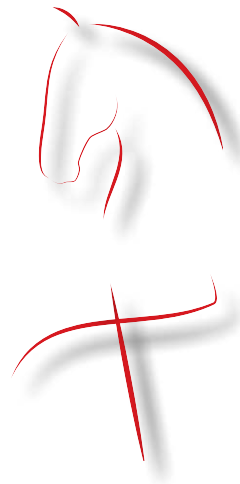
**e. tanja@tanjamitton.com
m. +61 (0)419 891319
tanjamitton.com**





TANJA MITTON

How important is relaxation?



The answer is simple: very!

Relaxation is number one in the horse and rider training scale and the reason is very simple: without relaxation we experience tension and so do our horses.

What does tension mean for the horse?

Remembering that horses are flight animals, whenever a horse feels insecure, frightened and scared their natural instinct is to run away.

This creates tension in the horse's body and their reaction is generally one of the following:

- * Shortening and quickening of the stride
- * Lifting of the head and hollowing of the back
- * Holding the breath and tensing the body
- * Snorting
- * Pricking of the ears and focusing into the distance

When a horse is tense it automatically resists the rider's aids and, while stiffening through the body, becomes more of a leg mover rather than a body mover. The horse is not able to produce the best work when ridden.

What does tension mean for the rider?

Riders often feed off the energy of their horses. That means that when the horse is tense the rider usually tenses as a result.

People's natural protection response is the fetal position and that develops the following posture:

- * Short shallow breathing
- * Collapsing the sternum and rolling the shoulders
- * Tensing the arm and pulling on the reins
- * Tightening in the groin and squeezing the thighs
- * Drawing the legs up

When the rider is tense their seat is automatically blocking the horse and this often creates more tension in the horse.

When it comes to the training scale, relaxation is where the foundation of training begins; unfortunately, too many riders don't take this step seriously enough and focus more on the 'real training' like rhythm, suppleness, contact, impulsion and collection. What many riders forget is that whenever their horse becomes tense i.e. is not relaxed, all the other components of the training suffer considerably.

We see this often, for example at competitions where a horse becomes tense and up tight due to the changed environment (with the often nervous rider as an additional stress). The horse's performance is often not the same as at home because the very first step

on the foundation in training, relaxation, has deteriorated. Often riders are unable to reestablish relaxation in an environment because they never really had it to begin with.

It is important to remember the 20% reduction rule; if we have 100% at home we might have 80% away from home, if we have 80% at home we might have 60% away from home, if we have 60% at home we might have 40% away from home and so on....!

Most riders have 40%-60% of relaxation at home so you can do the sums.

How do we measure relaxation in the horse?

* Breathing out at the beginning, during and at the end of a ride. Most horses tend to breath out at the end of a ride (thank god it's over) and maybe the beginning but not often in the middle of a training session.

* Soft through the back and allowing the rider to sit; relaxation is a prerequisite of suppleness

* Lowering the poll and stretching by lengthening the stride

* Floppy ears and a soft jaw

* Staying in the same tempo or even slowing down when the rider gives with the rein.

From now on make training relaxation your number one priority when schooling your



Most riders think that if their horse is quiet it is relaxed but nothing could be further from the truth: you can have an outwardly quiet horse that is still internally worried and stressed. So many horses these days have ulcers and for me, that is a clear indication of internal stress.

Here are some signs that show you if your horse is relaxed:

horse; simply becoming aware of your horse's breathing (or lack of) is a good start. If your horse feels tense, respond to it rather than ignore it and just keep on schooling; walking and establishing breathing in between your schooling sessions is very important. Take a short break occasionally until you feel your horse is relaxed and then continue your session.

**Happy riding
Cheers Tanja**

