



Driving Forces

by Regina Käsmayr

Driving is a lot more than nagging with your legs. Many a rider should first visit a gym in order to correctly place the lower leg against the horse. How to feel for the correct moment to drive and why stirrups should not be too long under any circumstance.



To harangue a horse with leg aids, spurs and crop is out. And even though riders of Icelandic horses do not use spurs for driving, their knees and lower legs do put on the pressure.

“Drive, drive, drive!” the riding instructor yells and is still not satisfied when his students dig their heels forcefully into the horse. Rumour has it that ‘English riding’ means to continuously nudge the horse, and therefore the rider cheerfully bangs with his legs, pokes around with spurs and crop and in the end burrows into the horse’s barrel. This behavior is just as wrong as the assumption that a good rider constantly nags his horse with leg aids. Driving correctly is an art, and mostly because it is not done with the calf.

“The seat is also used in a driving function”, says Christoph Hess, FN’s (German Equestrian Federation) educational chair “Of course this does not mean that the rider should pump with his upper body. Such behavior only puts the horse off its natural rhythm. The driving seat should be more passive and not active, and should be taught on the longe, no matter whether we are talking about beginners or more advanced riders.” If the rider does not learn this correctly, he will tense up in his core and ends up either in front of or behind the horse’s movements. The legs bang away but have no effect. Once the seat is solid, there is the next obstacle: what part of the leg is involved in the leg aid? The calf, the heel or even the knee? The answer: the posterior thigh muscle. It is the only part of the leg that will allow bringing the calf against the horse without tensing any other group of muscles. “Using these muscles causes more bend in the knee, and

the calf moves against the horse automatically”, states Eckart Meyners, sports educator and kinesiologist. “This whole process has to happen rhythmically. This means that the posterior

The crop:

According to Christoph Hess the use of the crop should be ‘short but crisp’. One should never use the crop or spurs constantly, which could almost be considered cruelty to animals. ‘Horses get completely dull if they are nagged all the time’, Hess says. He adds though that it is completely justified in certain rare cases to use the crop to punish.

Generally the rider should follow the rule: leg first, then spurs, then crop. The horse always again has the opportunity to react to the leg aid alone.

The crop can be used in certain specific areas. A short jumping crop with a leather catch can be used as a driving aid on the shoulder. A dressage crop of a length of 1.10 m (about 43 in) may be used primarily adjacent to the leg, and – if necessary – touching the hind end. Christoph Hess recommends switching hands when it comes to holding the crop; don’t just carry the crop on the inside but often move it around. Also, once in a while the rider should forego crop and spurs altogether. Each crop should have a knob at the end so it cannot slip through the hand. Loops are not recommended since safety could be compromised if the crop got caught on something. Loops might be helpful on trails to prevent losing the crop.

thigh musculature alternately tenses and relaxes while driving, thus continuously activating the horse’s hind legs.”

Easier said than done. These muscles are underdeveloped in most riders. The only solution is to use strengthening and stretching exercises, best learned from an experienced fitness trainer. The rider who cannot be bothered with this process will probably have to cope with legs that bang away.

Eventually, when the calf lies against the horse, softly and ‘breathing’, it will take on a driving function by itself. When the horse moves, its barrel alternately swings left and right, in turn bumping the rider’s legs, and thus receives the leg driving aids more or less automatically. The result in walk is that – shortly before a hind leg lifts off – the horse’s barrel touches the rider’s calf on that side. An experienced rider can use that moment to increase the effect by adding a bit of pressure.

‘In the end the leg is not as active as many people think’, says Christoph Hess. The rider does not learn overnight to feel which hind leg lifts off when in any gait. Hess suggests approaching this topic playfully with kids, and

to give adults a theoretical introduction first about beat and phases of the three basic gaits. They will learn to understand how the horse’s body moves beneath them. Here it can be helpful to ride bareback.

Now the rider is ready to drive the horse forward with both legs. But leg aids can have completely different effects: when moving laterally they can drive forward/sideways or support behind the girth. Christoph Hess comments that many riders have this supporting leg too far back and think that it is more active when moved further towards the croup. During canter departs many a mare starts bucking crazily because her rider tried to be overly zealous with the outside aids and tickled her sensitive hind end. When the supporting leg functions correctly, it lies about a hand's width behind the girth and activates those muscles that affect the horse's haunches.

The supporting leg does a lot more than just assist the driving leg. On curves it prevents the hind end from falling out. Without it the horse would step past the curved line with its hind legs since that is easier than bending its whole body along a large or small circle. The supporting leg prevents that from happening and maintains the bend. Hess explains, "Sometimes it is active and sometimes it is passive. It depends on what the horse's hind end does. And of course it also depends on how sensitive the horse is."



On this Icelandic horse the saddle puts the rider relatively far back. Even though the upper body is erect the lower leg travels to a position that is far behind the girth; but not to drive the horse sideways. The upper leg is forward but a bit removed from the saddle. When the hips do not allow the knees to remain soft, the lower legs begins to 'swim'. The longer the leg the more readily this happens.



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Here lines and position work out: the lower leg lies softly against the horse and 'breathes' with the motion. Knee and hips do not block anything.

A hot topic of discussion is always the question whether a rider steers his horse with his knees and whether closing one's knees is desirable in dressage. Christoph Hess and Eckart Meyners agree in both cases, "No." Sport pedagogue Eckart Meyners knows that the rider loses the ability to swing with the horse's movements when the rider's leg and knee loses its softness and looseness. "If the knee is pressed against the saddle, the adductor muscles at the inner thigh become active and the rider's pelvis locks up. This is the reason why the hip joint is tight in 90% of all riders". Christoph Hess follows suit, "There is too much pressure with the upper thigh muscles and the lower legs lift off the horse. Locked knees are only required for jumping and in dangerous situations'.

You go and tell your coach this when he wants to put a dollar between the saddle and your knee, and check after two rounds of trot whether the money is still there. You may also breathe a sigh of relief if you are one of those people who just cannot turn their toes in towards the horse, no matter how much they try to force the issue. You don't have to! "It is important that the rider takes on a natural position", says Christoph Hess. "The physical characteristics every person has from birth have to be accepted and then turned into the best possible configuration. In any case the loosely soft seat should come before the formally correct one." Eckart Meyners also does not want to see the forced picture book dressage seat. He especially speaks against the fashion to just barely touch the stirrups with the tip of one's toes, and to lengthen the stirrup leathers by another hole every day. He explains, "If you just barely catch the stirrups with your toes, you cannot any longer feather through with the foot." Instead the widest part of the stirrups should be held with the ball of each foot. "The stirrup

The forward driving leg rests directly behind the girth, with the heel in a straight line to the rider's hip. In this position the rider can best drive effectively.

The supporting leg lies in the same position as the forward/sideways driving leg, about a hand's width behind the girth. This is the only way in which the rider can affect the hind end without disturbing or tickling the horse.

leathers are way too long and the knee cannot work and the rider cannot sit.”

The correct length for the leathers can still be estimated with the old guideline: the length is the same as the distance from one's finger tips to the armpit. Hess does suggest varying the length every so often – from extremely short to long. Or to go without; but no longer than one or two rounds, please!

For further reading: [“The Seat in Tölt” by Tina Pantel.](#)

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