

Connection:

How to be quiet, calm and smooth

By Alexander Grayton

At any given horse show, onlookers can normally tell from watching the warm-up or show ring which riders are the professionals and which riders are more green or less experienced. How can we tell?

It's not the tack or equipment, or sometimes even the horse that is the clear marker. Professional riders carry themselves differently; they appear quieter in the saddle and smoother with their hands; they appear calmer.

So how does a rider learn to be this way and elevate their skills not just in moments, but all of the time, on all horses? Should the rider 'be quiet' in the saddle and hold their hands down low and still? That would give the appearance of quiet, calm and smooth but only for a moment... until the horse moves, lifts his head, speeds up, slows down, or nearly anything else.

It is not enough to say the method to appearing quiet, calm and smooth is to just 'be' quiet, calm and smooth. Rather, the goal is to

be 'connected' with the appearance of being quiet, calm and smooth.

A great example of a universally recognized quiet rider in the world is Germany's Marcus Ehning. People come from far and wide just to watch the 'Master' in the warm-up ring. He always looks so still and so quiet. He is connected to his horse, following his horse, and has a sense of stillness.

He always keeps his leg underneath him supporting his weight; his hands are always creating a straight line from elbow to mouth; his upper body is always slightly forward, varying with the horse's motion, speed and balance; he sits deep in the saddle on the way to the first jump on course, then uses a light or half seat the rest of the course including a full gallop position in the jump-off.

This method or system of riding allows for the variations inherent in show jumping from careful verticals to scopey oxers-even tight turns.



Marcus Ehning at the World Cup finals 2017



A good training system will inform riders what to do in a vast array of situations, without having to know countless specific reactions for specific situations. This means rather than saying the rider should lift their hands when the horse lifts his head, the correct phrasing should be ‘the rider’s hands must follow the horse’s mouth’ – this automatically affirms the previous statement, but also allows the rider’s hands to be low when the horse’s head is low, and all points in between in just one sentence.

This ties in with connection. If the rider’s position is directly related to the horse, even in its description, then the rider must pay more attention to their horse



Marcus Ehning at Aachen 2016

in order to monitor the position. This is the ‘connection’ we see with the professionals: they are in balance with their horse’s movement and posture from the weight in their foot up through their hands.


If the answer is to be quiet and smooth in the saddle, then the equation must encompass all possible scenarios and a solution in your position to react while keeping this balanced look and feel. Rethink the approach to training. It isn’t sufficient to say ‘be quiet’, ‘be calm’, or ‘be smooth’, when that nothingness could actually be the very reason your connection to your horse is broken and you no longer look quiet, calm and smooth. 

Photo Credit: Mara Coote Freeman



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