

What it means to

Do you have 'feel'? Many people would answer yes to this question but do you really know what your horse is doing underneath?

By Cie'Jai Leggett.

Feel' is a word you hear a lot when you first start riding and then becomes one of the basics usually mentioned in clinics.

Contrary to belief 'feel' is more important than most people might think. 'feel' is the ability to know when to give and take with your horse to get optimum results. 'feel' provides you with the ability to know what you're looking for in a perfect ride. But 'feel' is not easily taught.

It's been said that 'feel' is something your born with or your not. The question is can it be learnt? Expert trainer David Norbury says it's one of the most difficult skills to learn when teaching people to ride.

"'feel' is not easily taught, it is acquired through practice and is a vital key to learning and developing your skills. You could ride for years and still not have 'feel'. Developing 'feel' can be related to driving a car. To start with we 'feel' uncoordinated and as time passes we 'feel' how to release the clutch and change gears and so on," said David.

In my own experience I have been fortunate enough to have natural 'feel' after years of getting lessons and hard work; but even experienced riders know that 'feel' is something that cannot be achieved over night.

"The only way to learn 'feel' is to spend time in the saddle however that is not enough if the rider isn't going to concentrate on the little things that are going right or wrong and correct them at the appropriate time," said David.

"Timing is related to 'feel'. If for example your horse speeds up and you correct him after he has gained three fast strides then your timing is out by three strides. Your timing is not out by seconds or minutes but is always measured by strides.

"By correcting your horse the moment his stride lengthens to gain speed is the first step to teaching yourself 'feel'. You cannot rely on your instructor to always be telling the rider when their horse is too fast or even to slow because then they never rely on what they 'feel' they instead rely on what they see which is a delayed response.

"The best advice to learn how to develop 'feel' is to learn by your mistakes. Unfortunately some riders aren't as receptive as others when these mistakes are made and therefore it takes a lot longer

to train themselves and their horses.

"It may help to get experience as many horses as you can so you can learn what it 'feel's like to create that perfect pivot, have that hind leg driving up from behind or create that perfect side pass. However it really depends on how receptive you are to the 'feel'," said Norbury.

These days I realise how lucky I am to have natural 'feel' especially when I see others who work for years on their 'feel' without success. But I do still remember what it was like to learn 'feel' and the slower you learn the more it sinks in and becomes a natural part of your riding.

So how do you learn it? You can have as many lessons as physically possible to try and speed up the process but all this time won't mean anything to you until you experience 'feel' for yourself.

"The benefit of having "'feel'" is that you KNOW when something is wrong - you don't have to see it," said David.

"I always say to my riders that when you are riding you can see from the withers forward so they know if the head is too high or low, also if the neck is bent or if the horse is bobbing its neck. When it comes to the hind end they then have no choice but to rely on 'feel'. If the rider goes to lope off and the hip is not rotated then they will miss that lead.

"You can learn to 'feel' what the back end is doing by asking the horse to rotate the hip and then check to see if you are correct by looking over your shoulder and seeing the placement of the hind quarters.

"The person that looks over their shoulder while rotating the hip will never develop 'feel' because they are using their eyes to try and develop it when in fact 'feel' is invisible," said David.

It's best to remember that 'feel' is exactly that - the 'feel'ing you get when you ride not what you see. To get started you might want to practise lowering your horse's head at a standstill.

At first as you squeeze with your legs and raise your hands you'll wait for the visual cue that your horse has responded and lowered his head. As the 'feel' starts to kick in you'll 'feel' his give on the bit long before he drops his head and you will learn to give back the pressure accordingly. It just takes time, patience and practise.

When you lack having the ability to respond or give as soon as the horse gives you risk confusing your animal. If for every time he gives to your pressure you don't give the right amount of release he will eventually learn that this contact or pressure on the reins is in deed acceptable to you and is in fact what you are looking for.

In the long term you'll have to ride this horse with a tight rein in order to have control. He'll start to raise his head in an effort to evade the bit and remain resistant rather than willing in every manoeuvre.

Every time you practise this exercise you are learning what it 'feel's like to put pressure on the reins, the horse then responds by giving to the pressure and it's important how and when you time the release. The rule is slow and steady.

It's always best to try this exercise on a seasoned horse that has good schooling rather than trying to teach it to a young horse. This way you learn the 'feel' and what you are looking for long before the young horse develops any bad habits.

It's best to focus on leaning slowly with this exercise. As I said earlier 'feel' is one of the most difficult skills to learn when riding but also the most beneficial.

The trick is the instant you 'feel' your horse yield to the pressure of the bit you need to immediately release the pressure, this is his reward. Once you have got this exercise right in the walk try the jog and then finally the lope.

One other tip is to keep your hands relaxed. If you're soft with your hands you'll work towards achieving a soft horse in your hands, which ultimately means a willing participant.

Good 'feel' is more than just the hands, it also involves the full body experience. You may 'feel' with your hands and your seat mostly but also with your calf muscles, your feet and your arms as well. It truly is a full body experience. It heightens the senses and your awareness of your seat at all times.

At the same time 'feel' needs to be recognised by both the horse and rider. ... David explains.

"All of us riders continually give our horses subtle cues to help their performance. The cue may be as subtle as the rider rolling their pelvis in the saddle to urge the horse to go forward or outside leg pressure to

'feel'...

change leads. Both of these cues rely on the horse developing the "feel" to respond to their rider as the rider must "feel" when their horse may have slowed too much or needs to be changed to a new lead.

"It's a two way street. The horse needs to 'feel' the rider and the rider needs to 'feel' their horse. Both are achieved through repetition and if one team member isn't listening then it could produce a unwanted response," said David.

The journey to finding your 'feel' is not going to be easy, nor will it happen over night but it will be most rewarding. The more receptive you are on every ride, the more 'feel' you will develop and eventually you'll learn to use that 'feel' on every horse you ride.

Each horse you ride will have his or her own unique 'feel' and it is your job as the rider to identify it and ride your horse accordingly. This skill will provide you with a way of communicating with your horse. You will understand what he is giving you and how to reward him accordingly.

When you finally realise what its like to have that 'feel' you'll never loose it. It will make diagnosing your horse's problem areas much easier and will ultimately create a relationship of mutual understanding.

