

Go with the Flow

In both dancing and dressage, harmony requires feel and timing

By Sue Eoff

After 40 years of riding (25 of them dressage) and seventeen years of ballroom dancing, I have distilled the key components of partnering into two concepts: feel and timing.

In an ideal partnership, the pair connects physically, mentally, and emotionally. Without feel and timing, these connections cannot happen, and the dance will not be one of harmony in motion.

Timing, the other major ingredient in a successful partnership, is what makes or breaks harmony. Whenever a dancing couple's feet get out of synchrony or a horse cross-canthers, the harmony is disrupted. In my experience, timing has three components: physical, mental, and sensing.

The physical aspect of timing is the easiest to grasp. A trot has two beats; a waltz has three. To remain in synchrony with the movement being executed, both partners must move in time with the beat.

The mental side of timing is more difficult to master. Both partners must understand who is leading and who is following, and they must be keenly attuned to each other's body language. The leader (the rider) must know when and how to ask, when and how to allow, and when and how

to follow. The leader also needs to be able get the dance back on track should the follower do something unexpected. Likewise, the follower (the horse) needs to understand how and when to follow and how to stay in the moment without anticipating.

Leading may seem the more difficult of the two roles, but following has its own challenges. It's not easy to let someone else be in charge. Being a good follower requires patience, calmness, and confidence. I had to

convert from the role of leader in riding to that of follower on the dance floor, and it took me two years to give in and truly enjoy the experience of receiving. It is an amazing experience to trust, let go, and invite someone to express the beauty of movement through your body. When we ride dressage, we ask our horses to trust and let go in a similar way, and some horses naturally have difficulty dropping their defenses. Remaining sensitive to this will help you to ride with more empathy.

Sensing, the third aspect of timing, is the most abstract but also the most exalted. Sensing derives from trusting the training of the partnership, living in that trust, and allowing the experience to unfold. It feels like becoming the action instead of just doing the action. It occurs when you are riding down the long side and, without conscious thought, you instinctively close your inside leg at the exact moment that your horse notices the flowers swaying in the planter box at B. The ultimate experience of sensing is difficult to describe in words, but we recognize this "peak flow state" immediately on the rare and memorable occasions that it occurs.

I once got a taste of this sensing state on a competitive trail ride. My very seasoned trail horse, Rudy, and I were trotting briskly along a narrow trail on California's Mount Diablo. There were sheer drop-offs on both sides, but I trusted Rudy completely. Surrounded by great natural beauty, I felt as if I had become the horse, the earth, and the air.

I wonder if I will reach a point in dressage where I can turn off my mind long enough to have such an experience while dancing with a horse. ▲

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DANCE PARTNERS: *The writer aboard Ultimo, an eight-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding*

Improving feel takes fitness, flexibility, awareness, and practice. Both partners need sufficient core strength, aerobic capacity, and muscle tone. They must be supple enough to move together in symmetry. The third key element, awareness, comes from self-observation and a good set of eyes on the ground to spot misalignments. Last, lots of organized, systematic practice is essential in developing feel and the accompanying muscle memory.