

The Passenger Lesson Part 1

By Dolores Arste, 2004

For those who asked, this started as a challenge from Alex to drop my hand to Cadbury's neck total float in the rein and ride. I proceeded to ride about 1/3 around the arena and then Cadbury took off bucking down the diagonal. I stayed on; Alex remarked that I was not to fall off on her watch. She left me that day with a hole to be filled. I spent a winter developing the clicker version of the passenger lesson.

It originates from a Parelli exercise explained in a Savvy article. It is also used in a training step by Clinton Anderson. Both of them refer to it as "the passenger lesson". In the Parelli work, it is meant to teach the student to get in tune with the horse. The idea is to go with the horse wherever he chooses to go.

In the Anderson work, it is designed as an emotional control exercise. It's used to build a throttle and brake. It was Anderson who coined the term "no unrequested forward". However, it was I who put tons of importance on this little in passing comment of Clinton's.

At the time, I still had a lot of fear when I rode Cadbury. That's because Cadbury could go from zero to 100 and then buck in a flash.

I had worked with Alex on the good; better; best; yield the hip exercise. So the pre-requisite for this is to be able to ask the jaw to soften and get a "yes" answer most of the time.

When we teach head-down, we slide down the rein and pick up contact and release and click when the head begins to drop. It's important to note that this is "not a forward moving exercise".

For the passenger lesson, we must now teach the horse to soften the jaw, and neck and stop the feet. I started teaching this on the ground. Place your closest to the horse hand on the whither and slide the other hand down the rein and ask for a give. This time though, you are not asking for head down. You are asking for the jaw to yield. If the jaw is already soft, you can bring the sliding hand to meet the hand on the whither. You are looking for the whole jaw, and at least the neck to soften to you AND for the feet to stop

moving. You may put in baby releases for softening, but you will withhold the click until the feet stop. This becomes your brake.

When you can do this on both sides, and get the feet stopped almost at the same time as you begin to slide down the rein you are ready to try it at the mounting block. Before mounting, we'll ask for head-down and for the "neck bend to a stop". In the early stages, it is simply a neck bend to a stop. If the feet move, go back to the groundwork of following the horse until the feet stop. Repeat on both sides. When the horse can stand still at the mounting block while you ask for head-down AND the neck bend, you are ready to get on.

Here is where "no unrequested forward" comes in. When you get on, it's common for the horse to move off. Why shouldn't he? That's what we usually want. But, in this exercise, we want the horse to Wait. It's this waiting for instructions that becomes key. So, when you get on, if he goes forward, you will slide down the rein to a point where you can bring the rein to your hip and lock it there and the horse must yield his nose and stop his feet. Once stopped, immediately drop the rein as if it were on fire and click treat. Then I repeat the exercise on the other side.

Not until you can slide down the rein on both sides as many times as you want and the feet remain still are you ready to ask for forward. This is key. These brakes must be solid. I like to explain that anyone can drive a high performance car with great brakes even if that car has no steering wheel. All you have to do is press the gas, go a few inches and stop. And, no one can be afraid of riding a horse whose feet are stopped. It must become an automatic response for you whenever you feel nervous or threatened or you even think he might spook or leave to bend to a stop.

Now you'll ask for forward. Forward in passenger lesson is simply that "go forward". Where you go is the horse's decision. Start at the walk. Walk only as far as you are comfortable. Then bend him to a stop. Once stopped, bend on the other side.

Be sure to do this in a safe fenced area because you will not be directing him. Your hand is on his wither; your reins are completely loose. If he walks toward a wall, it's his responsibility to find out how to keep walking. Do not direct him in anyway. You can walk as far or as few steps as you are

comfortable with. At any time, you may bend him to a stop. Until you bend him to a stop, he must continue in the gait you asked for. If he is walking and he begins to trot. Bend him to a stop “no unrequested forward” If he walks to a rail of wall and stops. Oops, continue to ask for forward. But, resist the urge to direct him out of the spot he’s gotten himself into. He’ll figure it out. Just ride where he takes you and try to relax. Do not nag him while walking. As long as he is walking and not walking so fast as to make you nervous, leave him alone. Only ask again for walk if he comes to a complete stop. If he walks to a fence or wall and hesitates, give him time before asking him to walk on. The braver of us will tend to ask too soon again for the walk. The less brave will be afraid to push through the wall or fence. The exercise will help to balance both types.

As you are riding along, you may feel tension in your body. Try to relax each and every part of your body. Take note of how he responds. If he offers you something pretty or something you like, feel free to click which should also bring him to a stop and treat.

Several things will happen as you ride this. You will begin to “feel” where he’s going to go next. That’s because you have turn over all the responsibility on where to go to him. You are the follower in the dance. And, while he may initially hang at the gate, he’ll begin to venture off further into areas he may have been afraid to go. Trust him. And, remember that at any time you wish you can bend to a stop.

Then you will do this same exercise at trot and canter if you feel up to it. When you ask for trot, he must trot and trot now. If he speeds up, bend to a stop. Do the same with the canter. There is no rush to get to trot or canter while teaching this lesson. Do it only when you feel completely relaxed and comfortable. If you don’t feel comfortable, you haven’t spent enough time at the walk. For you and him, this must be automatic.

While trotting resist the urge to nag him while trotting. If he is trotting and slows to a walk, that’s great. Simply ask again for the trot. Never make him feel wrong for slowing down.

Remember, you can bend to a stop or click to a stop any time you want. But, be sure you only click if you like what he’s doing. Bend, if you feel you or the horse is at all nervous.

If you have a foot mover, you will most likely get the hips when you bend to a stop. That is to say that the hips will step over as he is softening and bending. If you have a quieter horse or a physically challenged horse, you may not get the hips. If you have the *Step by Step* book this is what occurred during the Spook on Lance. I got the stop but not the hips. It was OK then because we were both OK.

But, getting the hips is important. So, when you bend be sure to wait for the hips to step over even if the feet have stopped when you begin to refine this lesson.

As you have surmised, this is your emergency stop as well. By building all of this in, you will learn to ride your horse's spook and be able to diffuse it without thinking.

Riding the passenger lesson is great when your horse is excited. You will find that you don't need to micro manage him. He'll be responsible for his emotions. Once you have this there are other steps to put in to make this pretty. I'll try to address how this expands to pretty in another post.