

COUNTING THE BEAT - PART 2

by Kellie Stewart and Karen McDonald



The ability to feel the exact whereabouts of a horse's feet and to give the aids in time with it's movement ultimately leads to lightness and grace.

For devotees of Ray Hunt's methods, it has been a long wait for this, the continuation of how to 'tune into' a horse's footfalls in order to achieve a smooth, resistance-free performance (Part One of Counting The Beat appeared in the April/May 2005 issue - Vol 26 No 6). On the positive side, however, as emphasised in Part One, mastering a more advanced skill such as this takes time, so the twelve month period that has passed in the interim has hopefully seen many readers making the effort to practise identifying the exact whereabouts of their horse's feet at the walk, as recommended!

If not, and just to act as a 'refresher' of what was previously covered, refer to the boxed section on this page for a brief explanation and diagrams of the four aspects of movement that are central to being able to 'count the beat' effectively - the thrust, swing, strike and support phases. Also, spend some time revising what the sequence of footfalls are at the walk - this being inside hind, inside fore, offside hind and, finally, the offside fore. To ensure the correct sequence is firmly fixed in your mind, it can help to watch someone else riding, choosing one of their horse's legs to focus on (for example, the inside hind) then saying to yourself 'now' each time that hoof leaves the ground.

FEELING THE WALK

Knowing what the footfall sequence is at the walk, however, is only a very small part of learning to staying in time with the feet. Allowing yourself to FEEL what's happening underneath you, once you're in the saddle, is the priority - the idea being to concentrate on 'going with' the horse's natural movement above all else. Forget about whether the nose is tucked in and anything else you usually focus on when riding and only pay attention to feeling what your body does as the horse walks.

When a horse moves, its ribcage 'swings' from side to side - something that's very important in 'counting the beat'. Think of this ribcage motion as being like a pendulum rhythmically ticking one way then the other and try to feel this at the walk. What you should be aware of is a feeling of your legs automatically following the swinging of the ribcage - for example, when the ribcage swings to the right, it seems like your right leg is 'carried' in the same direction. When the ribcage then swings to the left, your right leg 'drops' slightly and your left leg lifts. If you're having trouble feeling this 'rise and fall' sensation, try closing your eyes as this sometimes helps to block out other distractions.

Continued

Photo 1 -

FEELING THE THRUST PHASE:

At the walk, ride a circle to the left and concentrate on feeling your horse's ribcage move between your legs. As the horse's inside hind foot is in the thrust phase (still in contact with the ground but preparing to push upwards and forwards), your inside leg follows the swing of the ribcage by being carried to the left. If you were to apply your leg aid now to try to influence the inside hind leg, it would be too early.

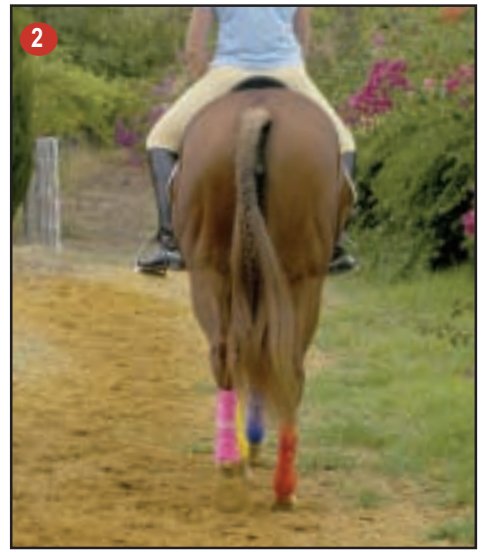


Photo 2 and 2a - FEELING THE START OF THE SWING PHASE:

Remembering that the ideal moment of the stride to apply an aid is when the foot in question is just leaving the ground and entering the swing phase, now is the time to really concentrate on feeling when the horse's ribcage reaches the limit of its movement to the left. A split second after this happens, just as the ribcage starts to swing back in the opposite direction (from left to right) is the correct time to give an aid to encourage the inside hind to take a bigger step. A feeling of your left hip dropping slightly downwards is a good indication of the exact moment when the inside hind foot comes off the ground.



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Photo 3 and 3a
FEELING THE SWING STAGE:



Photo 4 and 4a
FEELING THE STRIKE STAGE:

As the ribcage swings over to the right, you should feel your left leg 'falling away' and your right leg being 'carried' upwards and slightly forwards. Remembering back to the 'belly dancing' exercise, this is when the inside hind is already off the ground and coming through so, if you were to apply an aid to influence it now, it would be too late to have much effect. In addition, if you feel your left foot 'bump' the horse's side as the ribcage reaches the end of its movement to the right, this means the inside hind is about to touch down. This 'bump' is actually caused by the inside front foot starting its thrust phase so it will be out of the way when the inside hind strikes the ground.

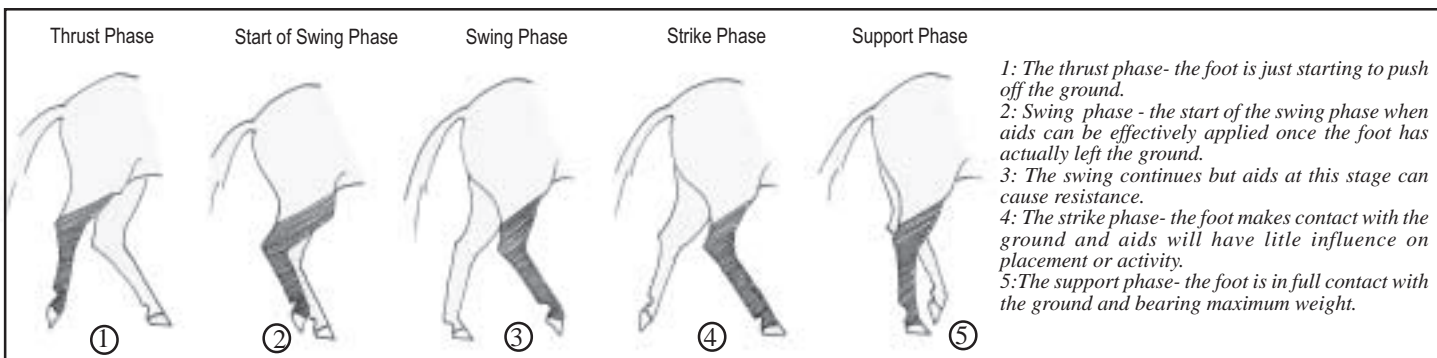


Photo 5
FEELING THE SUPPORT PHASE:

As the inside hind begins to support weight, the ribcage swings from right to left and you should have the feeling of your right hip 'falling in a hole'. By this time, it's definitely too late to give an aid for the inside hind foot - just remember how hard it was when you tried to step with the supporting foot during the belly dancing exercise and it's easy to appreciate why the horse might resist!

CHECKING THE RESPONSE

Now double-check that you're feeling the movement of the horse's feet correctly by consciously giving a leg aid at the right moment - when the hoof you want to influence is just leaving the ground and entering the swing phase.



'BELLY DANCING'

The movement of a horse's ribcage is directly connected to what its feet are doing, so if you can feel the 'rise and fall' of your own legs at the walk, you've taken a big step towards being able to give the aids at the right time. Now, dismount and try the following. Clasp your hands in front of you and pretend they are surrounding a large belly. Bend forward from the waist so your 'belly' becomes like a horse's ribcage. Swing your 'belly' left and right, walking forward at the same time. Yes, you might feel silly doing this but rest assured - it's a great help in understanding why the ribcage movement has such a large influence on the whereabouts of the feet.

You should notice that, in order for your feet to move easily, your 'belly' must 'get out of the way' each time you take a step. Taking your left foot as an example, you can really only bring it through comfortably and take a big stride as your 'belly' is swinging from left to right. Try to do it the other way around - that is, stepping with the left foot when 'belly swinging' from right to left - and you'll probably fall over!

Back to the original example where you'll also find that the more swing you allow your 'belly' to have to the right, the larger the step you're able to take with your left foot. In contrast, if the 'belly swing' is only a short distance, this foot can only take a little step.

Now imagine your feet are a horse's hind feet, your 'belly' is the ribcage rising and falling underneath you and you're on a circle to the left. It should be clearer now that when the ribcage is on its path from left to right (inside to outside of the circle), the inside hind has left the ground and is coming through on its swing phase. You will know this is the case when you feel your right leg being 'carried' to the right - just remember the pendulum and think in terms of the ribcage 'getting out of the way' so a foot can move. This same feeling also tells you that the outside hind must still be on the ground, this being to support the transfer of weight to the right as the ribcage moves in that direction.

Once remounted and confident in feeling the general swinging motion of the ribcage, you can then learn to identify when each of the four phases of movement - thrust, swing, strike and support - are taking place.



Above: Correct. The 'belly' swings to the left allowing the right leg to move forward comfortably.

Below: Incorrect. The belly impedes the movement of the left leg.



AN ONGOING PROCESS

So far, the focus has been on the inside hind but now it should be possible to apply the same principles to the other three feet - all the time remembering that the movement of the ribcage will tell you when the best time is to apply an effective aid.



Photo 6 - INFLUENCING THE INSIDE FORE TO STEP SIDeways

(turn around the hindquarters): To give the cue for stepping into the circle with the inside fore, concentrate on feeling when your left leg 'bumps' the horse's side - this being just after the horse's ribcage has finished its movement to the right and starts to sway back to the left. This 'bump' indicates that the inside fore is just starting to come off the ground, enabling the horse to comply with an aid for it to step to the left with ease

When working on counting the beat and applying the aids at the right time, it's also important to remember that the reins too are a critical influence on what a horse's feet are being asked to do - especially in the case of sideways motion. While this is a huge subject in itself, just being conscious of not having a blocking influence on the swinging of the ribcage by using conflicting rein aids goes a long way towards making sure your newly learnt and now correctly timed leg aids are as effective as they should be.

It would be possible to continue for many more parts of this series, in order to explain what the rider's body is doing and what they should be feeling as each and every one of the horse's legs goes through its four phases of movement in each of the paces. However, in all of Ray Hunt's teachings, the fact of 'knowing what should be happening' from seeing it on paper, comes a very poor second to actually spending the time to put theory into practice and to expending the effort it takes to really FEEL what's happening with the feet.

With this in mind, the recommendation for riders who are interested in the concept of 'counting the beat' as a means to improve their performance and relationship with their horse is for them to now progress to studying the footfalls at the trot and canter - so they can come up with their own body indicators of when to apply the aids at the right time. This involves a considerable amount of dedication and individual thought but true 'feeling' is not something that can be taught from simply reading about a subject and understanding its basic principles.

SEQUENCE OF FOOTFALLS



As they leave the ground at the walk. Inside hind, inside fore, off hind and then off fore.



As they leave the ground at the trot. Inside fore and offside hind, moment of suspension, inside hind and off side fore, moment of suspension.



Outside hind, offside fore and nearside hind, nearside fore and then moment of suspension.