

# HOW'S YOUR HEARING WORKING FOR YOU?

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How is your hearing working for you? Have you learned how to use the sounds of your riding to improve your performance? Or have you largely ignored this remarkably useful sense?

As a test, if you stand in a riding ring blindfolded, can you tell what diagonal a rider is on just by the sound of her horse's hoof beats? Can you tell whether or not the horse is counter-cantering? Can you tell how collected or extended it is at various gaits?

This was the subject of an adult-rider clinic I ran recently. And what came out of it surprised even me.

## **Turning a Riding Ring Into a Sound Studio**

My whole purpose with this clinic was to help my riders understand just how valuable the sounds of their riding can be in helping them improve their performance. So I essentially turned my riding ring into a sound studio.

The first thing I did when everyone stepped into the ring was hand them blindfolds. These were the kind of blindfolds people wear to sleep better at night, so there was no chance that any of them could see a thing once they put them on.

Then, as they stood in the center of the ring blindfolded, I had an assistant ride a horse around the ring with little cat-collar bells on its feet. These bells were small enough that they didn't affect the horse's gaits in any way. Yet they did make it easier to tell when each foot hit the ground and how hard.

Once I got my students comfortable with listening to the horse's hoof beats and sensing its rhythm as it circled the ring, I started to make things a little more complicated. First, I had my assistant trot on the correct diagonal and got everyone comfortable with that. Then I silently called for her to switch to the wrong diagonal and, by show of hands, asked if anyone had noticed a change.

At first, everyone had some difficulty-picking up that something had changed. But after explaining the exercise and repeating it several times, everyone gradually got better at recognizing the wrong diagonal just through what they heard. I then went through this whole process again to help them learn how to distinguish between a canter and a counter-canter in each direction of the ring.

Then we moved on to learning how to "hear" the degree of a horse's collection and extension at each gait before finally wrapping up with learning how to hear when the horse was trotting through a series of low cavalettis.

## **Why Learning to Hear Your Riding Better is So Important**

It was actually remarkable to see how much each rider improved her ability to hear how a horse was moving, just by paying more attention to the sounds of hoof beats. I could see the transformation before my own eyes (and ears).

This is important, too, because our ears have a lot to offer us as riders. I sometimes feel like it's the lost sense for a rider. That's because we naturally want to use vision first and foremost, but ultimately have to learn how to use tactile (feeling) and kinesthetic (body motion) cues primarily.

The thing is, our hearing is usually our second most dominant sense, second only to our sense of sight. And for 30% of people, it's the most dominant sense of all. It's also an amazingly useful sense for detecting the rhythm of a horse, which should come as no surprise given the role music plays in our lives.

So it only makes sense to learn how to use it better, especially as you go through all the training needed to get your tactile and kinesthetic senses up to speed (this takes time, because we're just not used to using them very much to sense what's going on around us).

As is usually the case, the learning process starts by paying a lot of attention to what you're hearing in targeted lessons like this clinic. Then you practice them to the point that you don't have to even think about them anymore. You just get to a point where, once properly trained, your subconscious mind takes over and uses what you're hearing to help you do a better job of riding.

### **The Bottom Line**

The bottom line is that your hearing is a very valuable asset and deserves to be put to good use. That's why I consistently create and use exercises that help my riders do just that.

Sometimes these exercises focus on the natural sounds of their riding, such as hoof beats, the sounds of their horses' bodies and so on. Or I'll have a rider focus on the sound of her seat in the saddle so that she has a very clear signal as to how she's using it. Other times, I'll artificially create a sound to help a rider get a better sense of how she's riding.

For example, I sometimes put a bell in a rider's hair to make it easier for her to detect when she's riding with a quiet body and when she's not. And I quite often use a metronome to improve a rider's sense of rhythm or to show her how out of rhythm her horse is.

I try to help all my riders make their hearing work for them, because it can reveal many things they would otherwise miss entirely.