

Intention

What I am finding as I peel the onion of riding is that intention has a huge impact on how my horse works - that I really can "think" him better as we ride. Or maybe I think myself better. So what is "intention" in the context of riding? I think it's a mix of observing, feeling, knowing your horse and yourself and having a notion about what you want to do next.

My horse, Shadow, is an 11 year old Quarter Horse. We mostly "do" dressage although we trail ride a bit and do some other stuff to keep life fun. I was riding in a clinic and wanted to work on his lengthenings. I found that he tipped on his forehead and got really heavy. I described in great detail what was happening with the front end of the horse. Finally the clinician asked me what was happening with the back end of the horse. I stopped and gave him a blank stare (and maybe said "Doh"), then grinned at him.

Still with a smile on my face, I rode Shad off on the circle and started paying attention to how he used his hind legs in addition to what was happening in front of the horse. Just paying attention to his hind legs brought about an increase in activity and he began to offer bigger steps.

So I think the first lesson of Intention is to simply pay attention. Instead of focusing your attention on the negatives, try to step back and pay attention to what is happening throughout the horse-human connection.

Along with the bigger steps was a kind of pick 'em up and put 'em down pounding on the arena footing. Shad is 17 hands and 1500 lbs, so he can surely make the earth shake. The clinician mentioned "That sounds a little heavy. I wonder if you can get a lighter feeling over the ground"

I didn't consciously make my horse light I just listened to the noise of his footfalls and thought about them becoming lighter. I didn't kick him forward or change my legs or pull the reins - I just thought about lighter footfalls. In one circuit of the arena, the sounds of his hoofbeats had hushed. His trot had also become more rhythmic. Later several of the auditors said they couldn't believe such a large horse was covering the ground so quietly and that it had happened so quickly. "What did you do?" they asked me. I couldn't answer them very well. I hadn't really *done* anything. I paid attention and then thought about what I wanted to have happen.

This thinking about what you want is a little odd. For me, I need to think about it in a sort of detached way and not be too focused on the goal. If I think about MAKING light footfalls happen, they don't happen. If I just think about the sound of the footfalls now and then think about them BEING lighter, that's when things start to happen. I find that if I get too attached to the outcome, I get in my own way. So intention also seems to have an element of detachment. This isn't the right word - I don't know if we have a word for keeping the outcome in mind without trying to force it, but that's what I need to do.

One of the other things that the clinician said was that I didn't need any more technique - I had plenty, but now that I needed to come to a different place in my riding that goes beyond technique - those are not his words, but my take away of them. So for an experienced rider, technique and skill can be your friends when trying to ride with intention, but they can also be your master. Technique can come between you and intention. For me, I wanted to ride my horse more forward and drive him to a lengthening of stride. I used my legs, I used my seat, I used the skills I have collected over the years. It wasn't until I let the skills go to the background that I was able to get to a better place with my horse. My legs and seat told Shad to move on, but it wasn't until I got quieter and more focused in my mind that he was able to understand better what I wanted and to move on with power from behind and lightness in his stride.

For a less experienced rider, intention isn't going to fully replace technique - or maybe if intent is strong enough, it can. I don't know how to be that focused yet I have a student who rides Shadow and does a very nice job with him. Teaching without getting stuck on the technique road is a tough task, so I try to intermingle the two. I will often ask my student to fix his position and then ask him to look for a feeling.

When I ask him to find a feeling, I am keying into intent. For him to find the feeling or influence the horse when his position isn't correct is very difficult. But once he gets the position and can put it in the background a bit, he then can focus his intent. Say we are asking the horse to come round. First the rider needs to come to a neutral enough place that the horse can lift his back, so before we can get there, I have to be able to help the rider get to a good physical place. However, once there, I can ask him to feel the hind legs and then ask him to feel them take a larger step. And at the point, this less experienced rider with focused intent comes together with the horse like a centaur and they just float over the ground.

So I think intention is riding is simple (but not always easy). Pay attention. Figure out what feeling or change you want to have happen. Think about it without letting it own you. Pay attention.