

*The Horse Listening*

# #1 Rider Problems Collection

HOW TO RECOGNIZE AND IMPROVE  
ESSENTIAL RIDING SKILLS



*Kathy Farrokhzad*

## Introduction

One over-arching common problem that seemed to be the theme of the year.

One significant aspect of riding that all of us work to develop, regardless of riding discipline.

One skill that could be learned then learned again and then some more. No matter how advanced one becomes, there is still more to be learned.

The concept of the #1 Rider Problems began the first year of the blog. Each article, published during the last week of each year (2011, 2012, 2013, 2014), represented the wrap-up topic of that year. The articles focus on basics that everyone could relate and respond to.

Now, for the first time, the very popular #1 Rider Problem articles are collated here into one ebook collection.

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## The #1 Rider Problem: The Outside Rein

Among all of our riding challenges, this problem is the one that should be on the top of the list.

The outside rein is the most underused and poorly understood of all the aids, and here's why. Human beings, as bi-peds, are hand-fixated. That is, we do EVERYTHING with our hands. Being vertically inclined, we lean forward and almost in all interactions, reach toward something with our hands. It stands to reason that we should use this same mechanism when it comes to riding. For example, steering a horse is as simple as steering a bike - just grab the rein on the turn side and pull! The horse's head turns in that direction, and the legs must follow.



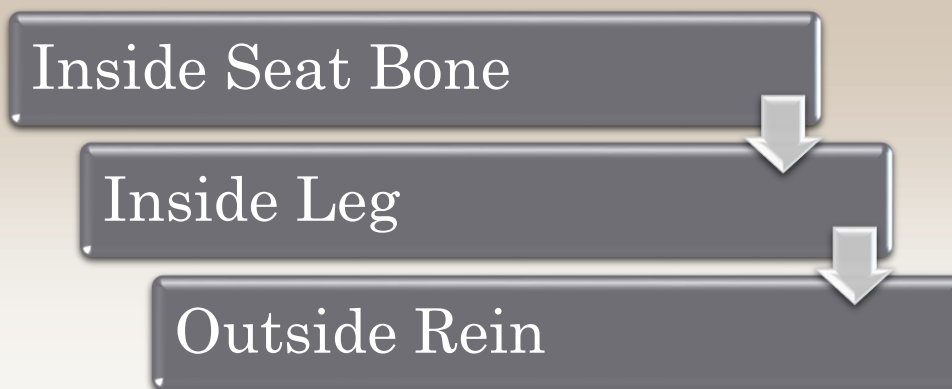
Right?

**WRONG!!**

One of the most incomprehensible things that we humans have to deal with when we decide to ride horses, is to [reprogram](#) our natural tendency to lean forward and pull on the rein. It is a most unfortunate undertaking, as this natural inclination is so hardwired in us that it feels wrong to stay balanced on top of a moving horse and use our leg and seat aids before our hands. And so we start on a [long journey](#) of “re-wiring”...

... and one of the most difficult concepts in riding happens to be the use of the outside rein. We become experts at riding with a tight inside rein and a loopy outside rein. We teach the horse to stiffen on the inside jaw and “pop” the outside shoulder. We ride up the rail with the shoulder “out” and the haunches “in” - almost moving diagonally without knowing it. If we only knew how simple it would be to allow the horse to move straight - using a straightening outside rein!

What to do?



The mystery to the outside rein lies in the inside seat bone and leg. Your inside seat bone encourages the weight shift. It accepts the thrust of the inside hind leg and then shifts the energy forward and even more to the outside.

You've heard it time and again: "inside leg to outside rein". Well, it's not *really* about your leg - it's about the horse's balance. The horse needs to "step away" from your leg in order to take his weight more to the outside. This will help him bend toward the inside and "fill" your outside rein.

In this way, you help your horse balance himself and you as you go around the ring. And somehow miraculously, you discover you have an outside rein!

Now, it is your responsibility to keep the outside rein straight. That is, use the "contact" - don't abuse it by throwing it away! Give when needed, take when needed, resist when necessary (or preferably, do all three in a split second!). But by all means, *keep a direct contact!* If you can keep the rein straight, you will also keep your horse straight - through the shoulders and neck (your legs are responsible for the horse's hips).

So on your next ride, remember the outside rein. But remember even more, that it's not just about grabbing the rein - it's about setting the horse up through its body so that he "fills" the outside rein. Then, *when you have one, do something with it!*

Of course, this is just the tip of the iceberg. This is just the "irritating" thought - the one that sparks you on to delving deeper into the subject. We all know that finding that outside rein (correctly) is no easy feat. The best path to this solution is to find a competent instructor who can give you consistent, accurate feedback.

Good luck and happy riding.



# The #1 Rider Problem of the Year: The Leg Aid

“Kick harrrdddeeeerrr!”

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How often have you heard that before?

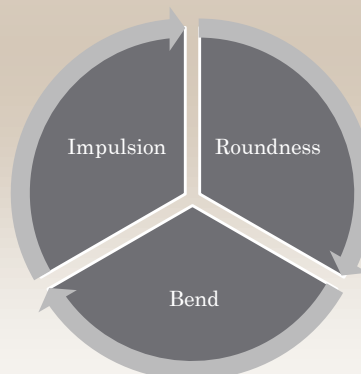
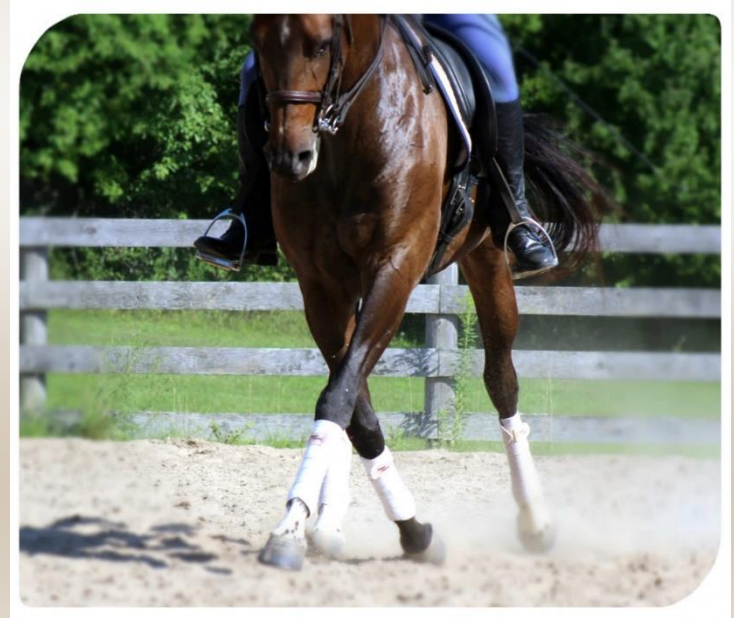
It might come from a well-meaning friend. It might be what you feel is necessary at the moment. It might even be the determined coach who sees the need for impulsion and translates it to being a lack of leg aids.

But you probably know from experience - kicking the horse along often does not get the response you really want. Your horse might:

- continue along in his meandering way, oblivious that you were “talking” to him
- pin his ears, swish his tail... and continue along in his meandering way
- hollow his back, become heavier in the bridle, and go faster, faster, faster
- pin his ears, look at you from the corner of his eye and STOP!

Of course, there are many other variations of responses clearly explaining to you - [if only you listened](#) - that kicking him in the sides simply will not achieve the purpose you had in mind.

And you wonder: what else can I do?



**EACH ASPECT SUPPORTS THE OTHER AND THERE IS NO BEGINNING OR END!**

Strong, harsh leg aids are about as helpful as screaming louder to a person who doesn't understand your language. So what are leg aids for?

### 1) Impulsion

The legs in fact are the primary “natural” aids we have to encourage the horse to move forward with more energy. Ideally, using pressure *in the rhythm* of the horse's movement should be the way we communicate that the horse should reach further underneath the body and engage the hind legs.

### 2) Bend

The legs help to initiate a bend in the horse's body - the bend that should follow the arc of the circle or turn that the horse is moving through.

### 3) Roundness

The legs can even encourage the horse to lift his back so that the hind end can reach under further and the topline can become rounder.

*In horseback riding, the problem with the leg aid is that it's not just about the legs!*

Unfortunately, the legs are not able to do all this alone. Life would be so easy if that were the case!

In each above scenario, [all the other aids](#) must accompany the leg aids in order to fully support the horse in the desired movement.

[The seat](#) must be another main actor - whether for impulsion, bend or roundness. The seat acts as an initiator as well as assistant in the horse's ability to “swing” his back - the final result of impulsion, bend and roundness. If the seat interferes at the wrong moment, or fails to enhance the horse's offering, all the leg in the world will be ineffective.

The hands are also as necessary and responsible as the other aids. What they do may alternately restrict or encourage the hind legs in their action.



**ALL THE AIDS MUST WORK IN UNISON TO GIVE ONE COHERENT MESSAGE TO THE HORSE.**

So really, in the end, the leg aid is only part of the whole! Of course, this is all just the beginning of developing better coordination and timing in your aids. Without a [good instructor](#), and consistent practice, the [muscle memory](#) that is essential will be out of reach and difficult to achieve on your own.

The next time you find yourself with flailing legs and resistant horse, stop and reconsider: are you using all your aids in unison?



## The #1 Rider Problem of the Year: Pulling to “Frame” A Horse



Admit it! You’ve probably tried it yourself.

Pull.

Any direction will do, really. Up, down, open rein, closed rein, back to your thigh... we can get creative about it. The main goal is to get that horse to finally give, usually through the jaw, poll and maybe neck area, so that there can be less tension, or pull, or tightness through the head, neck and back. The horse also might level out into a frame that is desirable in your riding discipline.

Most horses do “let go” at some point and emulate softness. The only problem is that while the front end can contort enough to

find the release from you, the middle and hind end cannot lie. The back drops or sags, the hind legs shorten stride, the hind end maybe even “camps out” - essentially, the horse travels with a longer back than he might otherwise, precisely because through the act of pulling, we have blocked the energy that is travelling to the front of the horse.

But we do it anyway. (Trust me - I have the T-shirt.)

\*\*\*\*

“Framing” a horse is one of those essential things we tend to obsess over once we can keep our balance well enough to be able to work on other things. By then, we can “feel” well enough to know that the horse is moving stiffly and with uneven steps. We can feel the tension radiate through the horse from the jaw to the back and into our very core.

Once in a while, the horse loosens up and we discover this tension-free, bouncy-floaty feeling that we know is right, but then, as soon as we turn to look the other way, the horse falls out of that riding heaven. We are left forever after wanting to emulate that feeling in every ride.

So we pull.

But there is another way.

## 1. [Half-Halt](#)

In order to truly “round” a horse - versus “frame” a horse - you want the energy to come over the topline. You want to feel the forward thrust of the energy that seems to energize rather than stifle. You want to let that energy come “through” rather than stop it.

But you can’t exactly let it all go either.

Aye, there’s the eternal rub.

Regardless of your rein length, and your riding discipline, you can’t “drop the connection” if you want to contain energy. Well, unless both you and your horse are at a level of self-carriage that allows you to control your balance with nothing but seat, leg and weight aids.

Let’s assume most of us are not at that level.

So... after you half-halt, give just a little. Think of it as if you would like to keep that bit from moving in the horse’s mouth. If you completely let go, you might actually throw the horse’s energy forward enough to help him lose balance and fall to the forehand.

Create the space but don’t completely drop the horse.

## 2. Then Go

This is the critical part.

Instead of pulling back and reducing energy, you need to build up controlled energy. You need to bolster, encourage, *engage*.

Then, you need to ask your horse to do the same.

You might use just a seat aid. Or you might combine both the seat and the leg. Whatever you decide to do, the result should be that your horse steps deeper with the hind legs and responds with a surge of energy that might even give you a small whip-lash effect. Be ready for it and go with the horse.

## 3. How to Round

This is the tricky part. Because if you just let everything go, and the horse did in fact energize, then he will either just run faster-faster in the gait, or fall to the forehand or both. Think of a tube of toothpaste as the toothpaste squirts out of the front end.

So to control that energy, and to transfer it over the topline of the horse and encourage the horse to round, you have to do something that will “catch” that energy and recycle it to stay within the horse. This is where an effective [half-halt](#) becomes critical.

At the [right moment](#), you have to say “[no](#)” to the go. But it must occur after the initial give and go part.

If your timing is right, you might feel your horse grow underneath you. You might feel him lift up like you imagine an airplane lifts - front end high, hind end low.

You will certainly feel the energy surge and a power you might not be used to.

If you're lucky, you might get a snort from your horse. Then you know you are on the right track for sure!

Finally, you might be surprised to discover that your horse naturally rounds when all the requirements are brought together. Suddenly, and apparently from nowhere, he might soften the jaw, thicken through the neck, round his back (and you will feel like you're floating along on a trampoline-like movement) and step deeper underneath with his hind legs.

And this will happen all at once!

#### **4. Maintain**

This last part is something we don't often think about. Once we get "it", we assume that the horse will just stay that way because he loves us so much! 😊

But alas, we discover quickly that if we can't maintain the status quo, the horse's level of ability will quickly diminish to the base level of our riding skills.

To keep the roundness, you have to keep riding forward - with the half-halt, the go and then the no - in a cycle, round and round, over and over.

Then, and only then, will you have true "roundness" and a horse that moves happily, with strength, in a way that will help to keep him sound for years and years.

# The #1 Rider Problem of the Year: Confusing Aids

We often talk about harmonizing with the horse. In fact, one of the most desired goals of riding is for the horse and rider to “be one” in movement, rider and horse traveling as if with one mind and body. The communication is so seamless that it appears that the horse is a mind reader and the rider simply sits there and [does nothing](#).

What we rarely discuss is *how* we get to that level of connection. And one of the most overlooked aspects of harmonization comes not from the horse becoming one with the rider, but within the rider herself.

## A Physical Language

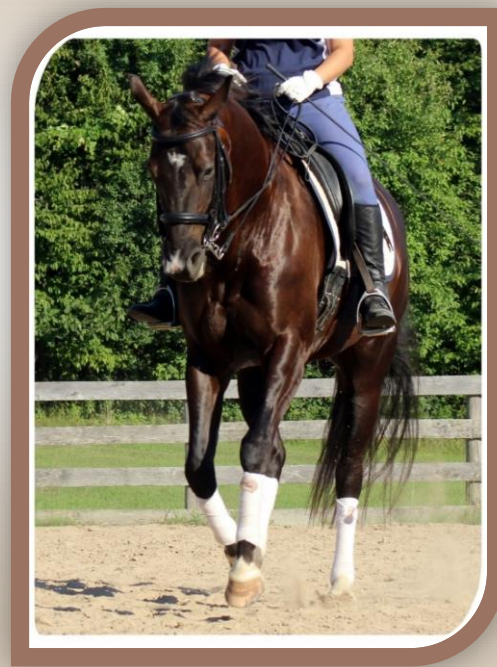
Horses communicate almost entirely through physical means. Watch a herd for a little while and you will see herd members send signals through their body language. One horse steps into a horse’s physical space to tell him to move over. Another horse swings his head in a rotating movement to indicate his excitement. The horse that lowers his head in the proximity of another demonstrates his trust. The “keeper of the herd” (the one who watches out for everyone) lifts his tail, raises his head straight in the air with flared nostrils and lets out an electrifying snort that warns the others of impending danger.

And so in order to be effective riders, we must learn to communicate to the horse through physical means.

In our initial riding education, we are taught how to use our various aids in isolation from each other. There is a good reason for that. During the first several years of riding, your body must learn to coordinate itself in a way that it has never had to otherwise. Just staying in movement with a horse requires so many micro-adjustments in the body that it takes quite a lot of energy and attention to learn to begin to follow the horse.

By teaching single aids, your instructor helps you break down the control that is required to get your body to communicate effectively with the horse. Move your inside hand this way. Shift your outside seatbone that way. Inside leg means this. Outside leg means that. Upper body can control the horse’s balance. And so it goes on and on.

## Separated Aids



The problem occurs when the rider continues using single aids long after her body has developed the enough coordination. At some point, we have to move away from separating our aids and becoming more “holistic” with our messages.

Single aids send single messages in a disjointed manner. One aid in and of itself can be compared to a word in a sentence. So if your hands are saying one thing, your leg another and your seat still something else, you can imagine the resulting communication that the horse feels: confusion!

A word can communicate one aspect of a thought, but a sentence puts it all together into a concept. And so it is with the aids.

*Once your body can coordinate all the aids, you convey a much more complete, unified idea to the horse. ([Click here to tweet that](#) if you agree.)*

### **Two Steps to Avoid Confusing Aids**

United. Attached. Together. Coherent.

These are all words that describe how it feels when your whole body is expressing one complete thought to the horse.

It seems like it takes years for you to become efficient enough to have those body parts move together rather than one at a time. But it does happen.

#### *1. Start With the Seat*

Everything starts with the seat. So if you want to turn right, sit on the inside seat bone and turn your entire torso in the direction of the turn. If you want to halt, start the half-halts at the seat. If you want to do a flying change, change seat bones from right to left.

You get the picture. Don't start with the hands, head or legs. Start with the seat!

#### *2. Position*

The rest of the aids follow the seat and must work in conjunction with it. ALL of them should be in alignment with what the seat has initiated. If you are turning right, [turn your whole body](#), from the seat, to the right. The head, hands and legs should point in the direction of the turn. The reins will automatically fall into place and the legs will position accurately on their own, simply because of the positioning of the body.

That's it, really! If you can begin everything at the seat, and support the seat with the rest of your aids, you will send one message.

### **When to Separate the Aids**

There are times when you need to pinpoint the use of one particular aid. Let's say that you notice that your horse is drifting to the outside of the circle, “bulging” through his outside shoulder. You can probably change just one aspect of your aids to bring him back into straightness. In this case, an effective half-halt on the outside rein might do the trick.

But the key is that this aid is a correction and is quickly applied and released as soon as possible. It simply redirects the horse.

The rest of your aids should continue to be positioned into the correct bend of the circle.

The moment you have the desired response, you should go right back to being “as one” in your aids - all asking for a bend toward the inside of the circle.

So, the next time you feel your aids giving separate signals to the horse, try to unify through your own body and see what your horse thinks of it. If he strides deeper, swings better through the back, snorts and/or softens through the body, you know you are on the right track.

If you feel somehow more cohesive yourself, you know that you are on your way to riding with better clarity.

### Thank You!

Thank you so much for downloading and reading this free ebook. I hope you find the information useful and informative. I appreciate your readership and feedback on my site. It is my mission to provide high-quality free content and daily thought-provoking information for any horseperson who is seeking self-improvement for the sake of the horse. If you haven't done so already, you can follow me on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#). I read each and every comment, share and retweet.

Thanks again, and wishing you years of happy Horse Listening!



*Bio: Kathy Farrokhzad is an EC riding coach and author of the books, [Horse Listening: Stepping Forward to Effective Riding](#) and [Horse Listening – Book 2: Forward and Round to Training Success](#). If you liked what you read here, check out her blog at [www.horcelistening.com](http://www.horcelistening.com) for more articles about horses, riding and life in general.*