



YOUR PLATFORM FOR PERFORMANCE

by Leon Harrel

Something that's been real successful for me in my own horsemanship as well as in my teaching program with students is something that I refer to as the "Platform". By "Platform", I'm referring to the proper and effective use of your feet. By adjusting your stirrups to the correct length – which can vary from saddle to saddle and horse to horse by a hole or two, you give yourself a gift of security beyond your wildest imagination.

Let me begin by saying, horses want to please, if for absolutely no other reason than it vastly improves the quality of their life. Horses *hate* being yanked and spurred. I have learned over the years just how clever and big hearted these animals really are. As a horseman and trainer, I realized how important it was for me to do everything I could to help my horses perform their jobs correctly.

Golden Rule #1: For them to be right, first and foremost, we have to be right.

In order to improve your horses' performance, you can start by being a conductor and a partner rather than a distraction and a burden. If you will focus on doing this you will achieve positive results immediately. Eliminating things that you're doing to distract your horse from its job is the first thing you as a rider, need to work on. Let's take a look at one way we can start to make your horses' job easier for them.

WHY THIS WILL HELP YOUR HORSE

One of the key components to effective cutting horsemanship is maintaining your balance over your horse's center of gravity. In order for your horses to perform to the level you desire of them, it is very helpful if you can avoid causing them to have to compensate for your excess

weight being out of sync with their movements. The average person adds approximately 20-30+% of their horses' weight to their job. If that amount of weight is unbalanced and out of balance, it makes their job considerably more difficult, not to mention adding stress to their backs, shoulders, hocks and stifles.

WHY THIS WILL HELP YOU

The correct platform will make it possible for you to keep your toes from pointing down. When your toes are pointing down, your knees automatically grip and your center of gravity shifts forward making it impossible to relax and keep up with your horse's movements. Everyone's familiar with the unpleasant moment when you are tipped forward over your saddle horn, inevitably looking down and seeing only dirt no horse. If you're lucky, your horse will jump back under you before you begin your descent. It's a terrible feeling no matter who you are, and it's never a good idea to put your life in the hands of a cow.

One of the most effective ways to take control of the action and help you stabilize your position in the saddle is with your platform. By developing your platform and utilizing it effectively, you can keep your balance much more easily no matter what your horse is doing.

Toes up are important because when your feet are in the correct position, the rest of your body lines up. When your toes point down, knees grip tighter tipping you forward. Now your horse has your weight completely packed on the very same front end you want them to make a 180 degree move with.

Stirrups length is critical; you don't want to be reach-

ing for your stirrups. You want to be able to comfortably keep your heels below your toes all the time and be able to stand up with an inch or two between you and the seat of your saddle.

Then take them up a hole, maybe two. It will be uncomfortable at first, but you'll know when the length is correct because it will make cutting much easier for you instantly.

These photos of students illustrate the ability of both horse and rider to focus on the cow undistracted because the rider's center of gravity is perfectly balanced and synchronized with that of the horse.

In photo #1 this gray mare can be very front-endy and is about to make a fast, hard move to the right. This rider's platform gives her the security to maintain her position in the saddle and ride smoothly through a move that would otherwise be quite difficult. Had her toes been down, she would have been tipped forward and flung around like a rag doll. The result would have caused a distraction to both horse and rider that would have disrupted the continuity of the run. This way, they synchronize with the cow and maintain their focus, a much better alternative.

In photo #2 you can see how easily this student keeps

his toes up and feet stabilized while unblocking the left side of his horse. He is now perfectly prepared to help his mare through that move with his right leg (boot top, not spur). By keeping his body relaxed and fluid, this secures his position and balance in the saddle during a very fast move. Notice the flexion in his legs, the position of his feet, the easiness of his seat and relaxed upper body.

Again in photo#3 you can see the correct balance between horse and rider resulting in their ability to focus on the task at hand rather than on each other. This is the secret to experiencing those exhilarating, high speed movements everyone loves when things get busy. It's much more fun when you can stay relaxed and enjoy the ride!

THIS IS THE DEFINITION OF BALANCED RIDING.

NOTE: Your platform will make an enormous difference in your ability to use your seat and legs correctly when sitting for your stops on the ends. It will also eliminate the tendency to wear a hole in the palm of your hand! If you're hanging on that tight, you lack balance, plain and simple.

POISE AND CONFIDENCE ARE THE NAME OF THIS GAME

Here are some more examples of how the proper platform can assist you in maintaining your center of gravity with your horse no matter what they're doing.

