

An Intriguing Piece of Equipment

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On January 29th, 2012, Deb Moynihan hosted a Centered Riding Instructor Development Day at her Irish Acres Farm in Bolton, CT. Gincy Bucklin was invited to attend and present some of her gems of wisdom to the group assembled. Our group, including Deb and Gincy, was comprised of nine Centered Riding Instructors, representing all CR Instructor Levels. We enjoyed lively discussions covering many topics with everyone participating and sharing. We also enjoyed sharing mounted lessons (taking turns teaching and riding); riding mostly on the wonderful horses available at Irish Acres Farm. (One instructor trailed in with her own horse.)

It is always a learning experience participating in these types of activities, and I became absolutely fascinated with one piece of equipment in particular that Gincy brought to show us. This is an item that Gincy invented herself and has used with much success.

Many of us utilize bareback lessons to assist the novice (or not-so-novice) rider in understanding better how the horse moves underneath them. (“The Following Seat”) The issue of how to make a novice rider feel as secure and as safe as possible while conducting this exploration is one we all face. Secure bareback pads and/or the use of surcingles (either training surcingles or vaulting surcingles) are often used.

I personally have used vaulting surcingles for years. The rider has the opportunity to use the handlebars for security, the rider’s pelvis is free to move, there is nothing rigid between the rider’s seat and the horse’s moving back, thus the rider can sense the horse’s natural movement and allow her seat to follow it. That is all great. The problem is the rigidity that is encouraged by holding onto immovable handlebars. The arms need to follow also!

Another common tactic is to use training surcingles or bareback pads with traditional “hand holds” (as used in therapeutic riding) or “bucking straps” (as they are often called in equine catalogs) attached to the front. These only give the illusion of security when they actually encourage the rider to either curl over and collapse while holding them or to lean back with the feet either pushed out in front or vice-gripped against the horse’s sides. Meanwhile the hands still bounce around. Not the actions or positions that we really want to encourage.

One other option is the use of “neck straps.” We all have probably used the stirrup leather around the horse’s neck at one point or another. It is a pretty standard aid in teaching half seat and/or posting. But to teach the following seat we want the rider to be in full seat and it is nicer for the horse not to have the underside of his neck pulled against as can happen when using a neck strap.

Enter Gincy Bucklin and her western breast plate neck strap. This wonderful invention offers the rider a sense of security and balance (by having something to hold on to) as well as enabling the rider to develop a sense of following with the hands and staying supple through the arms all at the same time. This is the combination we have been looking for.

The type of breast plate used for this purpose should have heavily padded shoulder and brisket straps to keep the horse comfortable while the rider is learning balance. The shoulder and brisket straps usually have to be altered and lengthened to use with most English saddles, which generally have higher breastplate rings than western saddles.

First a short adjustable strap is added across the top, attaching to each of the side rings. This strap holds the shoulder pieces up in place, like a hunting breastplate.

Then an adjustable longer strap is also attached to each of the side rings. This longer piece, the neck strap, is what the rider holds on to. It is this strap that offers the wonderful combination of security (physical and psychological support), balance, grounding, following and suppleness.

The rider should hold the neck strap as though holding the reins: hands out in front of the body, softly floating up to create contact, with the elbows falling quietly down. Gincy suggests holding it with just the first two fingers of each hand, because eventually you will add the reins which you hold in three fingers, so that you can feel the rein separately from the neck strap. If you need to hold a stick as well, you hold the stick in four fingers so you can easily remove it from the strap and the reins to apply it (gently!) to your horse.

Because the neck strap is directly attached to the straps which follow the line of the horse's shoulders, the movement of the horse's shoulders is directly transmitted to the rider's hands. The rider passively receives the rhythmical, alternating swing of the horse's shoulders, encouraging a suppleness that ripples up the rider's entire arm. Stability or a grounding connection will also be sensed if the rider maintains a classically soft and correct hand position. (Pulling or grasping hard on the neck strap will not be rewarded in a positive way. The rider's seat and thighs will tense and the rider's arms will stiffen. Remember the wonderful baby bird image from Sally Swift's "Centered Riding" book? This would be a good time to practice it!)

Needless to say, when the rider is using the neck strap only, this is done with someone leading the horse for the rider.

So now with the use of the western breast plate neck strap we have security and following of both the seat and the hands. This is absolutely wonderful! The following hands are alternating just as they would when following the natural movement of the human walk. Remember the hands are following the movement of the horse's shoulders (not just the gesture of the horse's neck). All you therapeutic riding instructors or therapists: please think of the profound implications of this. We have always talked about the movement of the human pelvis while mounted on the walking horse as encouraging and promoting correct walking movement patterns for the human. We have traditionally been working on the hips down. How fantastic to also get the alternating, reciprocal pattern of the arms swinging (right arm with left leg; left arm with right leg) as in the more complete, true pattern of a human walking gait!

For those of you wanting the full details of how to transition from using this type of neck strap to using regular reins, I encourage you to go to the source: books written by Gincy Bucklin. (whatyourhorsewants.com) That exploration is beyond the scope of this article. However, from my brief exploration of the western breast plate neck strap, I feel confident to say: that by itself, it is an incredible teaching tool.

As I suspect Sally Swift would say, what a "dandy" little device! Thank you, Gincy for sharing! I have already modified the western breast plate we have at Green Chimneys so that my students may benefit from your fabulous idea.

I would also like to thank my fellow participants in the CR Instructor Development Day for putting up with my total preoccupation with the western breast plate neck strap. For leading me around endlessly while I played with different variations (English reining, western reining) and asked far too many questions! It was a pleasure to share the day with you all.

(*Please note that there is talk about having these special neck straps made and they may be available for purchase sometime soon. See the website www.whatyourhorsewants.com)