

THUMBS UP OR THUMBS DOWN?

We all know that the position of our hands can make a lot of difference on how our horses receive and respond to our reining cues, yet I see very little difference in most riders when it comes to changing the position of their hands if their horse is having trouble. When a person is riding with a rein in each hand, if we notice, their arms may move higher or lower changing the elevation of the hand but the hand itself is in the same position most of the time.

When most people ask for the horse to respond to the reins they may start out with a light pressure, their hands may even be below their hips, their elbows somewhat straight. But if they do not get the response they are looking for they usually pull harder until something changes.

This is like the scenario of one person trying to give instructions to another who speaks a different language. One person talks to the other and because there isn't the expected response, the person gets louder and louder. It doesn't translate any different, the problem isn't that they don't acknowledge you; it's that they don't understand you.

When we can see that our horse is acknowledging our request by trying to do something, then the problem is that they don't understand what we are asking and it's not going to help to ask louder, only cause confusion, anxiety or fear. If we continue to ride this way, eventually most horses will

become calloused.

If our horse is acknowledging us and if they don't respond correctly in a reasonable amount of time, we need to change our message in some way so that it makes sense to them. This doesn't just mean bring our hands to our hips so we have more leverage.

The direction our thumbs are pointing, especially when it comes to lateral movement, but also when we are stopping, backing or steering them straight forward, can make a huge difference.

For example, when our thumbs are pointed out, our elbows are in next to our side and we are using our biceps. This means we are more likely to lock our arms and be very firm with our hands. When the horse feels this they will usually react by pulling against us because their only choices are to either put their chin on their chest where they can't go any farther or pull an equal amount of pressure in order to maintain their head position and their balance.

When the thumbs are pointed up we can offer a slightly different feel, a little softer, but we are still using our biceps mostly so the affect is going to be similar to our thumbs pointed out. Our elbows are still next to our side where it is easy for us to lock up and we will likely resort to using strength rather than finesse, causing the horse to react by going against the pressure.

When our thumbs are pointed in with our palms down, we are using more triceps and less bicep, making it less likely to lock our arms. This as a result, makes our hands softer which is going to help maintain softness in our horses.

If we point our thumbs down and straighten our arms on a less experienced horse or one that has trouble getting enough forward motion, it can be very helpful. This means that we are either lifting our arm and or pushing it out, in either case we will not be using any bicep and we cannot put as much pressure on the reins. We can't teach the horse to resist as much pressure if we are not putting the pressure there for him to experience. Instead, we are offering a softer feel and giving the horse more time to move into our hands because our hands are in a leading position instead of a blocking position.

Whether you are using one rein at a time or both to point the horses' nose, try riding with your thumbs pointed in and see if it doesn't soften your horses. If you are having trouble getting forward motion, point your thumbs down and your palm out to the side and see if your horse will get to moving forward better for you.

There still may be times you need to point your thumbs up or out, but save that for when all else fails instead of your first response.