



the

# Lespejo

## project

### It's So Simple . . .



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**T**om Dorrance described attaining unity with horses as being “so simple it’s complicated.” This statement certainly applies to yielding to the bit. The seemingly simple act of getting that beautiful arch in the neck that our horses do all by themselves when they are showing off, has been parlayed into a mega-dollar industry in the form of gadgets, reins, tie downs, bits and the like. This fixation with gear whose primary function is to affect the position of the head and neck of the horse indicates where most riders believe the source of the problem is located.

The first complicating realization for me was that the goal involves far more than a head and neck function. We need the horse striding up under his body with his hind legs as he’s doing the neck telescoping gesture in front to get dorsiflexion through the entire length of his body. OK, excellent, I could get on board with that concept — but how do we get it done? Ray Hunt would say, “ride their feet, not the saddle. Horses love it when you ride their feet.” Ray would have us call out when the horse was pushing off the ground with his feet. After all, if we want to affect what the horse is going to do with his feet in the most effortless way possible, the request must occur when the hoof is leaving the ground.

I’ve heard riders say the weight of the horse’s mouth in their hand should be five pounds at the walk and 15 pounds at the trot. Looking at the constant tension on the reins it is easy to see that it “weighs” something. But it is hard to weigh that tension between the rider’s hand and the horse’s mouth. Ray would say, “it shouldn’t weigh anything.” He meant that when the horse and rider were “right on,” the horse shouldn’t weigh anything in the rider’s hand or against the rider’s leg. Long after I was in time with my horse’s feet and the horse would tuck his head until the front of his face was vertical and simultaneously swivel his head on its long axis so that the jawbone was tucked into his neck (see photo), it still weighed something. Combining these two gestures of the poll joint was what Ray

would illustrate to us as a yield to the bit. But it still weighed something in my hand.

So I’d be riding along fussing over the fact that it still weighed something. After all, my judgment of the horse’s mouth weighing five pounds or 15 pounds vs. another rider’s judgment is one thing. It shouldn’t weigh anything is another matter entirely — either it weighs something or it doesn’t. My frustration eventually led to the “aha” moment when I realized that the “heaviness” was not caused by the horse’s pushing forward on the bit but by his pushing downward on the bit. It occurred to me that a horse that is arching his neck can still be dropping the root of the neck toward the ground, and that is heavy.

The next breakthrough was that the horse does not lift the root of the neck with his neck. The way to lift the root of the neck is to lift the torso. In order for the horse to lift the root of the neck he must be functionally straight, not “leaning” on either shoulder. Leaning requires that the torso drop toward the ground — because the horse has no collarbone. In the absence of a collarbone, the front of his torso is resting in a sling of muscles suspended between the left and right scapula. If



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[www.arabianhorseworld.com](http://www.arabianhorseworld.com).



the horse is not actively picking his torso up in a way where the swing of the sternum to the left equals the swing of the sternum to the right then it is leaning to one side or the other and therefore the torso, and the root of the neck along with it, is dropping. And this is heavy.

Looking deeper than the superficial aspects of the arched neck I learned the importance of asking the horse to specifically pick up his torso, separate from bending or stepping. He can do all of these moves with or without picking up his torso, but only when he is "picked up" is he "weightless" in response to his rider. He is weightless because I have made it his idea to do what he already knows how to do on his own. This cannot be forced. It must set up to be the horse's idea to give the rider a true yield to the bit, which is both mental and physical. A full understanding of communicating this simple request for a complex biomechanical response is vital to achieving unity while riding.



**(1)** Espejo and I are demonstrating the desired yield: an important piece is where the horse tucks his jaw into his neck. It is interesting to try this with your horse. Just asking for the head nod does not require a release in the topline. But asking the horse to both head nod and head twirl does (you want the horse to twirl his head on his long axis while keeping his ears level), and you can feel the release.

Photos 2 through 4 are a sequence showing Espejo mentally and physically yielding in a fashion that doesn't "weigh" anything.

**(2)** The "float" (slack) in the reins illustrates that there is no "weight" in my hands (other than the weight of the reins). Espejo is in a true trot, in which the cannon bone of the hind leg is parallel to the forearm of the diagonal front leg. Additionally, the inverted V between the hind legs and the front legs is equal, another indicator of a true trot of a horse in the pasture. All too often the V between the hind legs is smaller.

**(3)** With the greater flexion of the sacrolumbar joint shown here, Espejo is elevating his back and rounding it into my seat, which creates the lifting of the root of the neck and the neck telescoping gesture. My leg has more to do with this lifting than my hands.

**(4)** Here, there is more elevation to the root of the neck. These photos are an illustration that true "on the bit" is something the horse does to the bit, not something the bit does to the horse.

