

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A STUPID QUESTION!

Often we come across terms or words that we don't understand. But we feel like we will make a fool of ourselves if we ask what they mean, because everyone else seems to know the answer.

But guess what? At some stage, everyone around you has probably felt exactly the same!



Photo by Andrew Hennell

michelle o'neill

Years ago, a friend told me "the only stupid question is the one you don't ask". And he was right. So in this issue of HW, I am going to explain some basic 'horse training' terms that can often become 'lost in translation' or misunderstood by riders of all ages.

Softness – This is when a horse willingly does what you ask of him, with no resistance. When a horse feels soft in your hands there is no pressure or pulling or 'leaning' on the bit; the horse travels in the frame he has been trained to carry himself in, with both lightness and elasticity.

Lightness – This is the feeling that your horse is floating on air; that he or she is carrying both you and themselves effortlessly across the ground. When a horse is "light" they are also "soft". A horse must learn to "carry themselves" in a soft and light frame to be able to perform at the highest level of horsemanship – which in turns means that they must be able to perform their required movements or skills, in perfect harmony with their rider. In western events, an example of this would be a reining horse that is able to canter a perfect circle on a loose rein, while the rider's hand remains still and soft on their neck.

Feel – Is your ability to know what your horse is doing underneath you. When we ride we communicate with our horse's bodies through our legs, hands and seat. (Our voice is also a communication tool, but it is does not help us feel what our horses are doing.) As we develop feel for what our horse's bodies are doing, this enables us to react and to correct - either by encouraging or discouraging the behaviour as needed. The ability to make these changes at

the appropriate moment is called "timing". When a horse and rider are working together with perfect timing, it is a pleasure to watch.

Timing – Is your ability to react to your horse's actions quickly enough that you can reward the slightest positive behaviour or stop a negative one. The better and more

consistent your timing, the quicker your horse will learn, as he will be able to understand exactly what it is you want him to do.

Consistency – Is all about giving the exact same aids or reacting to a behaviour (good or bad) in exactly the same way every time, so that your horse knows what is right and what is wrong and understands 'the rules' which you are both working by. How you ask your horse to do things and how you react to what they do should not alter. If you lack consistency, your horse is likely to become confused in his training.

Balance – When your horse is able to carry itself in whatever frame he is trained to be in, and he is comfortable and travels with equal weight, bend and impulsion in both directions, he is described as being balanced. You can feel that your horse is square underneath you and that is not falling or leaning in either direction and at all gaits.

On the Bit – This is something that can only happen if your horse's energy is coming from behind; so his back end must be driving the front end along and he must be 'using' his back and hindquarters. When this happens, your horse will then have a relaxed neck, poll and jaw and his mouth will be closed and feel elastic in your hands. When a horse is truly 'on the bit', he does not pull on your hands and nor does he avoid contact with the bit. Your hands will be soft and yielding. Some riders mistake having their horse's heads 'pulled or set in frame' as being 'on the bit' (see 'overbent') – but unless a horse is soft and relaxed on the bit and working in a balanced working frame, it will never be able to achieve it's full potential.

Accepting the Bit – Franz Mairinger explains this process perfectly. "If the horse accepts the bit when you push him forward under your weight, it feels as if you have a rubber-band in your hand and it is slightly taut".

Overbent – When a horse has an excessive amount of bend through his neck, poll and face, often causing discomfort and causing the horse to lose rhythm and impulsion. The horse is unable to travel in a light, soft frame and both horse and rider will end up working well below their potential...and quite possibly in pain as well!

Impulsion – when a horse has elasticity and spring in his forward movement. This is caused by the hindquarters driving the horse forward. It is as if you can feel the horses engine (his hindquarters) pushing him along.

Vertical Flexion – roundness in the horse's topline. The horse must be relaxed with a flexible neck and back. The roundness and softness must come from behind. The rider's hands will guide the horse, but without the riders legs pushing the horse, vertical flexion is not truly achieved.



Softness, lightness, feel, timing, consistency and balance are just some of the terms we often hear while learning to ride. Image courtesy of Rhys Carlton

Lateral Flexion – lateral flexion is the key to vertical flexion. The softer your horse is side to side (laterally) the softer he will be vertically and the easier he will be able to travel in a “collected” frame. To achieve great vertical flexion, your horse should willingly bend and soften in either direction as soon as you reach for your rein.

Learning is something we should never stop doing. Take every opportunity you have to learn from everyone around you. Sometimes even the people who you think know very little can teach you a lot!



ASK MICHELLE

Dear Michelle,

Our horses are locked in the yards at night and they are fed “good quality” hay and let out during the day and feed on Kikuyu based pasture. I have heard that Kikuyu grass does not give enough vitamins and minerals required and I was wondering whether I should be giving our horses supplementary fodder on top of the kikuyu feed.

Thankyou so much for your help! Jessica Shepherd

Hi Jessica

Kikuyu grass is very common in much of Australia, so the question you have asked is a very important one!

I asked my friends at Mitavite for some more information on what they thought you should be doing (remember anyone can request the team at Mitavite to do your up a balanced ration for your horse or pony) and they came back with some interesting answers.

As you don’t mention what type of hay you are feeding, these recommendations are general, but they will help point you in the right direction.

If your horses were only feed Kikuyu pasture they would be deficient in some vitamins and minerals as Kikuyu is not what we consider a “balanced” feed source. This can lead to various health problems.

But the biggest problem with Kikuyu is that it contains a chemical called oxalate. This chemical binds calcium in

the horses gut, forming a compound, which cannot be absorbed by the horse. Then what happens is that if your horses can not get enough calcium in their diet, they start to break down their bones so that they can keep their heart and muscles functioning. Big Head or Nutritional Secondary Hyperparathyroidism are terms given to this disorder.

If a horse grazes on an oxalate containing pasture (such as Kikuyu) for a long period of time, the bones can become weakened. The extent of the damage will depend on the age of the horse and the degree and duration of the deficiency. It can take up to 12 months for bone density to return to normal with the correct ration, but in some cases the horses do not recover from Big Head, depending on the severity of the disease.

To ensure that your horses are getting a balanced diet Jessica, you can either add in a calcium supplement or lucerne hay to their ration to increase the calcium level of the ration. Feeding a nutrient balancer (such as Mitavite Munga) will also balance out any other deficiencies in the ration.



*Kangaroos love it, but the NSW Department of Industries warns that pastures dominated by Kikuyu (*Pennisetum clandestinum*) are unsuitable for horses & supplementary feeding is important*



MITAVITE GIVEAWAY! Thanks to the team at Mitavite, every HW reader who has their letter featured in HW’s Help Line column will receive a gift voucher for a bag of **Mitavite Xtra-Cool horse feed**; it doesn’t get any cooler than this! Check out **www.mitavite.com.au** to find your nearest Mitavite stockist! You can e-mail your horsey questions to Michelle at **mail@horseywyse.com.au** or post your letters to ‘Ask Michelle’ c/o HorseWyse Magazine, PO Box 260, Pambula, NSW 2549, Australia. And remember, no problem (or pony) is too small to Ask Michelle!



UPCOMING EVENTS:

April 26 - Trail Ride - Greenhills

May 2 - Barrel Racing Clinic - Cooma

May 9 - Horsemanship Clinic - Cooma

May 23 - Groundwork Clinic - Cooma

June 13 - Horsemanship Clinic - Freshford

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