

# Underlying Relationships: Kyra Kyrklund's ABCs

BILL WOODS

**W**ith each horse that Kyra Kyrklund rides or instructs from the ground, she has a set of expectations the horse ought to fulfill—reactions she expects from him in response to individual basic aids. Without these proper responses, it is unreasonable to think that more complicated combinations of aids will work the way they are designed to. Kyra calls the test of these basic aids her “ABCs.”

Understand that whether the horse's obedience to these aids needs to be reinforced is immediately evident to a rider like Kyra as soon as she mounts. If you are less experienced, you may need to go through the whole routine more often, as much to ask your horse the questions and observe his reactions, not just to reinforce his responses.

## Getting started

Kyra begins by asking the horse to stand relaxed and on a slack rein contact. Initially he does not need to be on the bit, but he must be willing to stand immobile and confident without the restraint of the rider's hand.

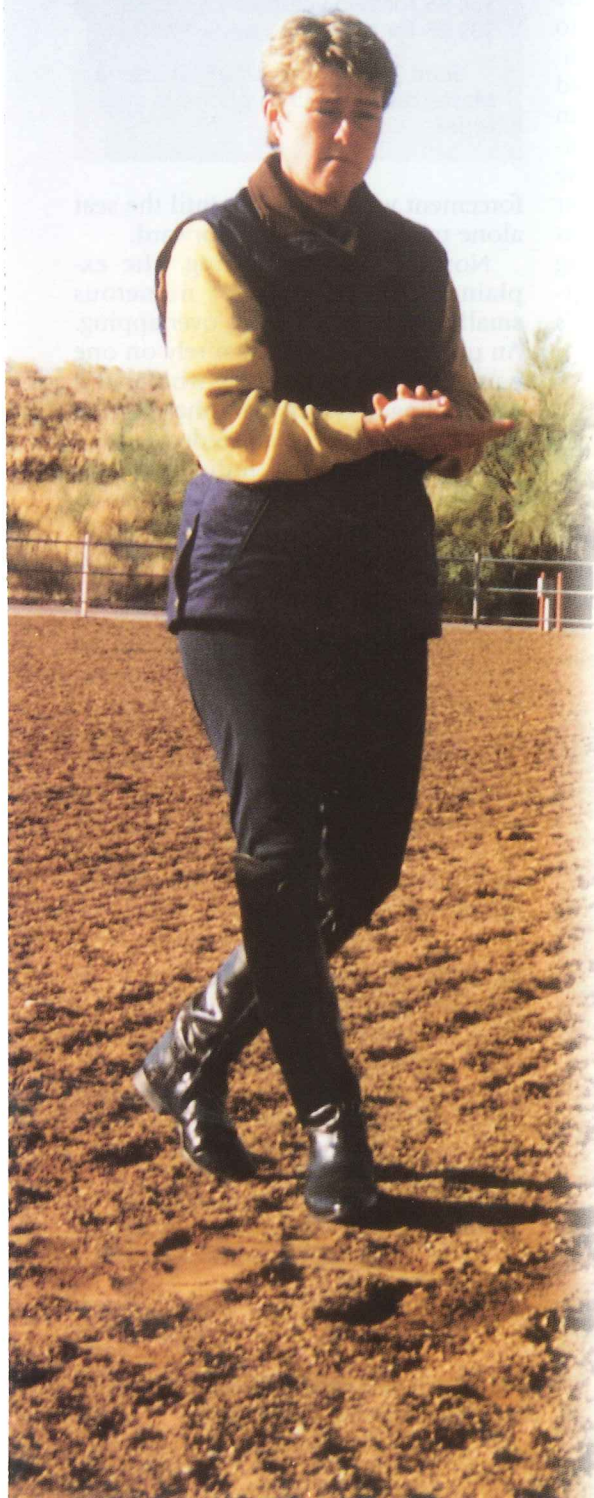
First, using a small leg aid (and an allowing hand) Kyra urges the horse forward into walk. If he is too slow or “cold” to the leg she reinforces her request with a more demanding kick with her lower legs. As he answers the leg correctly, she allows him to go forward freely for a few strides before bringing him back to the walk with hands and voice. If the horse over-reacts by trotting or cantering forward, she does not punish, but rewards his response and then goes about refining it. It may take some practice for you to read your horse's reactions and know how much strength on your part is appropriate and how much response from him is desirable. Clearly, it will vary from one horse to the next and according to the situation in which you are working. The point is to avoid having your schooling session become a long-winded monologue with your “student” if his attention is elsewhere and he has no interest in what you are trying to tell him.

During the Symposium, Kyra repeated the “go” and back to “standing quietly” commands until she was satisfied that the horse she was working with was motivated and understood her expectations. She also drilled the same basic relationship between walk and trot. She emphasized that at this stage her immediate goal is not to get the horse's nose in. Many riders, she explained, fall into the habit of trying to “trap” their horses on the bit rather than creating the preconditions that make the horse feel rewarded and comfortable in his acceptance (of the bit).

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*This is the first in a series of articles from the 1998 USDF National Dressage Symposium, featuring Kyra Kyrklund.*

*Photo: Kathleen Wattle,  
Captive Spirit*





## Walking the square

Kyra introduces her second expectation of the horse in the walk on a square or rectangle. At each corner she asks the horse to make a "box turn," which is really a primitive relation to a quarter turn on the haunches. The bend and rhythm, in this case, are of lesser importance. Her main interest is that the horse's shoulders will turn easily without her pulling him around with her inner rein. As in the first exercise, if his response is inadequate, she reinforces her aids, this time displacing the forehand with an aggressive outer leg, which may be moved forward to the girth or even towards the horse's elbow. When he will turn his shoulders smartly and without stickiness, she begins to work the same exercise in the trot. If the horse anticipates the turn and initiates the corner on his own, Kyra stops him on the original straight line, makes him wait for her aids, and then proceeds through the corner on her terms.

With these relationships proven and not just assumed, she then can ride the horse on a circle and begin to connect him from her pushing leg, which he now understands, into a receiving, shaping hand which he also respects and understands.

## Circle work

In the basic circle work, her first goal is be sure that the horse will

respect the boundaries imposed by her outside aids, even if she must temporarily position him to the outside of the figure to do this. It is not that she necessarily *wants* him counter-positioned. She knows, however, that if she has to *force* the bending with her inner rein, the horse is only likely to stiffen against it and want to pop his outer shoulder in the opposite direction. By making him turn-able with her weight and her outside aids, while at the same time making the horse push (stretch) from his outside hind leg forward to the outer rein, Kyra makes him susceptible to her inner rein's invitation to wrap around her active inside leg at the girth. In this way, the horse will *offer* to bend with less objection. On the demonstration circles she rode, Kyra called to mind a figure like a diamond or an octagon, momentarily using aids reminiscent of her walking work on the square, to unload the horse's outer shoulder and enhance his alignment and balance. As she said, "I'm teaching him to go, to stop, and to turn correctly. When he does these things, it's easy to put him on the bit."

## Isolated aids

In another exercise, Kyra asked the riders to school their horses to move forward from the seat without simultaneously using their driving legs. This is done with a momentary tilt of the pelvis, produced by the rider contracting his abdominal muscles. If the horse did not answer, Kyra called for a rein-

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forcement with the whip until the seat alone made the horse go forward.

Normal technical riding, she explained, is composed of numerous small inputs, many times overlapping. An unwary rider will often rely on one part of his aids to carry the whole message, failing to notice that other parts of his aids are going unheeded. Kyra's purpose in isolating individual aids and their results, in this case, was to make the riders aware of the inadvertent "crutches" they were allowing themselves to use.

Dealing with horses and riders in this way, Kyra intends not at all to deprive them of the use of the complementary interactions of the finished aids. Rather, her goal is to make riders always mindful that the complicated "words" and "sentences" that they expect their horses to react correctly to, all spring from an honest and complete understanding of their constituent elements, namely, her "ABCs." □



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Kyra explains her ABCs to Jennifer Turner.  
Photo: Kathleen Wattle, Captive Spirit