

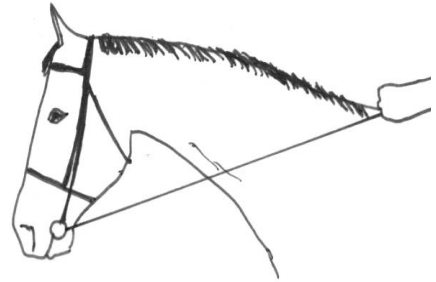
Contact

What?

Contact is the connection between the horse's mouth and the rider's hand. Contact refers to the tension on the rein that the rider uses to control the horse.

Why?

A good contact is essential for dressage. Compare it to a telephone line. Contact is the line of communication between horse and rider.



Contact

There are 2 different types of contact:

- ❖ **The contact the rider takes and maintains.**
- ❖ **The contact the horse takes and maintains.**

The contact the rider takes and maintains is the initial contact every rider has to establish. This contact allows the rider to 'feel' and control the horse. This contact can vary from light to quite heavy depending on the rider and the horse. The horse is expected to accept this pressure and be obedient to the rider's signals. The horse is not usually on the bit with this contact.

The rider must be careful not to use the reins to maintain their own balance.

How?

The rider must try to keep this contact elastic and moderate. The horse needs to learn to accept this moderate contact and the rider needs to be aware that an unpleasant or painful connection will discourage contact. The rider must try to keep the hands as still as possible. Keep in mind that in the walk and canter the horse needs to move his head in order to maintain his own balance. Since this is a natural part of the movement, a 'still' hand in walk and canter actually moves with the motion of the horse's head. A still hand in the trot actually means still, as the horse does not need to move his head in the trot to maintain balance. Imagine the rider's elbows, hands and reins as one big elastic string. Some riders may find it helpful to imagine carrying two cups of coffee, (or perhaps two glasses of wine) in order to help keep their hands still.

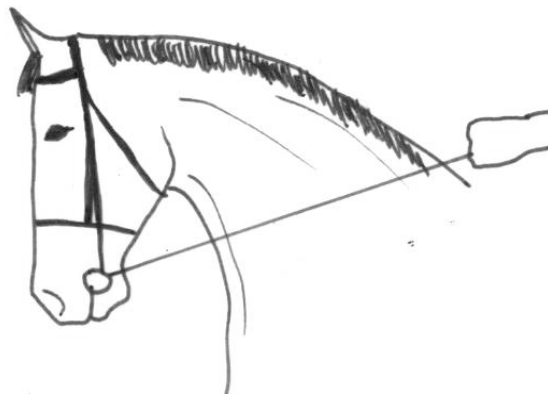
Until the rider has learned to keep his hands 'still' and is able to keep a pleasant, elastic, steady contact, it will be hard to move on to the next type of contact.

✿ ***The contact that the horse takes and maintains has a special name in the Dutch and German language. In Dutch it is called Aanleuning and in German it's Anlehnung. The English language does not have a word for this so I'll refer to it as 'special contact'.***

The special contact requires the horse to be on the bit. It is a contact where the horse wants to maintain a connection with the rider and is literally giving himself to the rider. When the horse gives the rider this contact, he is relaxed and loose within himself and willingly responds to the rider's aids. If the rider moves the hands forward, the horse should politely reach for the contact. This contact can be of variable weight but should never feel rude, leaning or pushy. It often feels polite and steady and the rider can, in time, feel the energy, willingness, balance, engagement and connection of the horse through the contact. The rider can give subtle directions to the horse and check on conditions to see if the horse is ready and listening. The horse needs to be able to trust the rider's hands. It is important that the rider does not upset this trust. A good coach should be able to help the rider achieve this and should help the rider recognise the differences in contact. (More about this contact in the On the Bit section)

This special contact is extremely important. We cannot progress beyond the basics if this contact has not been well established. Many riders have tried to short cut this important step but always find they have to properly establish this contact first, as lack of it affects every exercise and all future collection work.

Correct outline



'Special contact' becomes possible when the horse comes into the correct outline.

Problems

- ❖ **The horse avoids the contact.**
- ❖ **The horse is unsteady on the contact.**
- ❖ **The horse is very heavy on the contact.**

Solutions.

When **the horse avoids the rein or is unsteady on the contact** he often does this because the rider's hands are not steady, or too harsh. The wrong bit can also cause this to happen as the horse will try to avoid a connection if it is uncomfortable or painful. Some horses have learned, that by avoiding the contact, they can avoid the riders aids.

The rider must try to establish and maintain at least a light contact, whilst keeping the horse forward with the leg aids. The rider's hands must be still and relaxed. Often a softer bit will encourage the horse to take a better contact.

When **the horse is very heavy on the rein**, it may be because the horse is out of balance or “strung out” and tries to look for support. The horse may also be disrespectful of the rider and / or the bit. The horse may also be heavy because the rider is heavy with the reins. If the rider is not balanced and uses the reins for support, some horses will push on the rein in response. The rider must try to keep the contact light and ride the horse actively forward. Riding many transitions will help and it is important that the rider is balanced himself. Occasionally a different bit may help.