

10230 Tabeau Road  
Jackson, CA 95642  
(209) 223-4421  
(209) 223-4539 fax



Experience Horsemanship From the Heart!

website: [MiracleMountain.com](http://MiracleMountain.com)  
e-mail: [MMRI@MiracleMountain.com](mailto:MMRI@MiracleMountain.com)

Owner/Trainer/Educator:  
Julie Carpenter

# Lightness vs. Softness: why one is just not enough



*Julie Carpenter shows how light and soft a horse can be. A year ago, her mare Mook (left) was tight, uncooperative, and a menace to her owner. Julie bought her because she saw the potential in this sensitive performer. Mook is now a different horse.*

(This article was written by Miracle Mountain Ranch (MMR) newsletter editor Susan Hartje. The italicized sections indicate my experience with my horse and Julie Carpenter, MMR Owner/Instructor. The non-italicized text is Julie's explanation of why softness may be **the** most important ingredient in riding.)

## Confessions of a Student

*Most other riders say my mare Autumn is beautiful, well mannered, and really responsive under saddle. She moves with her head down, turns on a dime, and is so smooth that I don't have to post the trot.*

*She's a joy to ride ... as long as I am not asking her to go faster than a soft trot or to go somewhere she doesn't want to go. At that point, she is gets very tight, and I have a hard time getting her to follow my requests.*

*How did this happen? I have done most of Autumn's training myself. We have been learning everything together as we progress. It took a long time for me to admit that I was the cause of that tightness. That meant it was time for another visit with Julie.*

*Julie can easily teach a horse softness. But their rider is the one who must have the skills and awareness to ask for it every time they ride. Otherwise the horse will revert to the routines it knows work with that rider.*

## Julie's Insights on Softness

Even the best riders often have trouble with softness. It's an advanced skill that has to be developed over time. Horses are so smart that they figure out what we want and then go through the routines we set up for them. They willingly turn when we ask, and look very light to our touch.

It is easy to be happy with that kind of progress. But when you ask for something that isn't a routine yet, the lightness breaks down. That's when accidents happen. That's one reason why it is important to get softness as well as lightness.

## Softness Starts on the Ground

Julie explains, "every time I lead a horse I am looking for softness. If he is late coming with me and hits the end of the lead rope when I walk off, that is tightness and uncertainty in my horse. I want my horse mentally ready on the ground and yielding softly to the lead rope in all maneuvers before I get on."

To get that, a horse has to feel there is NO confusion from the person they are with. Teaching riders to see and ask for softness is a process. Julie has to help a rider build their timing and handling skills on the ground before they begin to understand softness. Their horse must be mentally present with them and waiting for their cues on what to do next. They must yield to the rein softly from their nose all the way through their back to their hind-quarters.

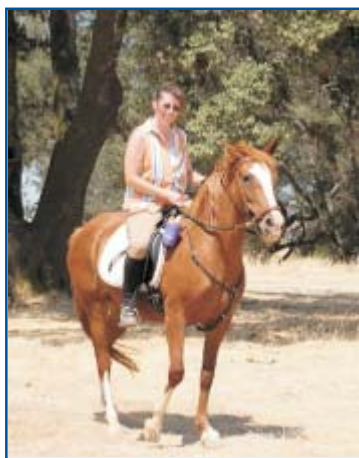
(Continued )

The Miracle Mountain Ranch newsletter is produced and distributed quarterly. Its mission is to share MMR news & happenings and to supply continuing knowledge to help everyone improve their equine partnership skills using *Horsemanship From the Heart*.

Please let us know what you think of our content and what else you would like to see. You can contact Newsletter Editor Susan Hartje at [SaddlesThatFit@earthlink.net](mailto:SaddlesThatFit@earthlink.net) or 209-245-3789 or contact the ranch at [MMRI@MiracleMountain.com](mailto:MMRI@MiracleMountain.com) or 209-223-4421.



# Lightness vs. Softness (continued)



*Autumn and Susan on a trail ride. In a moment of softness she has her foot poised, ready for me to tell her where to put it. Some days are better than others, but we are always aiming at Softness!*

Softness achieved from the ground is not 100% transferrable to the saddle, Julie cautions. But if you have it on the ground first, you have a great foundation of trust, confidence and leadership. So the horse will have an idea of what to expect when the rider is on board.

## Looking for the Feel of a Soft Horse

Many horses are very light and quick. But their thought, and consequently their body, is never fully with the rider. "When I pick up the rein to ask for more on a horse like this, I really see that resistance," explains Julie. "The nose pokes out, the back tightens, they lean on their shoulder to turn instead of softly curving from nose to neck to feet to tail as they make a change."

Many people think that a horse who can bend his neck and touch his nose to the saddle is soft. But unless that bend continues through

**To get softness, a horse has to feel there is NO confusion from the person they are with.**

## Getting Out of The Horse's Way

Often the rider can unintentionally create tightness in their horse. You can have everything working softly on the ground, Julie notes. But if your body is out of balance or your seat is getting in the way of communicating your intent, you will be sending mixed messages and getting in the way of your horse following your requests.

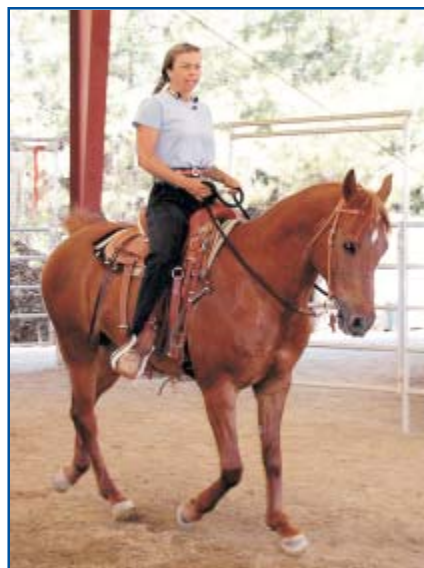
A rider's seat affects the horse's mechanical movement. Riders often don't realize they take every imbalance they have on the ground into the saddle too. Many people collapse and lean to one side, slouch, or sit out of balance on their horse. Sometimes their equipment encourages these imbalances. These issues must be addressed before a horse can stay both soft and light.

to the hindquarters, there is no softness. It's not the same. Likewise, lots of horses will back lightly and quickly, but their noses poke out, their backs hollow and drop away from the rider. "When a horse moves with that much tightness, it tells me that's how he is feeling inside," Julie says.

"I want a horse to be light but soft too. Each move should effortlessly flow from my thought to my body, through the rein and my seat, into my horse's thought. When a horse is soft, I feel the whole horse move effortlessly through my rein," Julie describes the *feel* of being 'one with' the horse. "When he tightens, I lose that *feel of the horse*."

**lots of horses will back lightly and quickly, but their nose pokes out, their back hollows and drops away from your seat. When a horse moves with that much tightness, it tells me that's how he is feeling inside.**

*Julie works with Regal to help him maintain softness and collection at faster gaits.*



"It is very hard for a horse to follow a rider's thought if it is getting a walk message from your hands and a trot message from your seat," explains Julie. "The resulting confusion creates tightness and frustration for both you and your horse."

**How do you develop the softness, and make sure you are not causing tightness in your horse? Get help if you need it from someone you trust who understands softness. Then, Practice, Learn, and Practice -- always with one goal in mind; Softness.**



*Pattie rides Gershwin bareback at the trot and canter to develop her seat and communication aids.*

# Aiming for Softness (continued)

## An Evolving Skill

Having worked with Julie and Autumn for several years, I knew my horse needed to be soft. But I let myself believe that light and responsive was the same thing. Now I see that I didn't have the skills or experience before to ask for softness correctly.

One of the biggest skills I have advanced to pursue softness, is my seat. I now have a balanced saddle and have retrained my body to ride centered so that my entire body is sending the same signals as my hands.

With some coaching and a lot of practice, I am more clearly asking for Autumn's thought all the way through our actions. Plus, I am waiting to feel her calmly and softly flow into each new request. I am being more consistent; more patient. And she is getting softer and even more 'with me' as well as happier.

On the increasing occasions when we get softness, Autumn moves like butter at my lightest request. It's like we both think the same thing at the same time. **Nothing feels better -- to either of us!**



**Left:** This young filly is being asked to soften to the bit for the first time. At first, she overbends her neck rather than disengaging her hindquarters. Disengaging is the first step necessary for softness as it allows the topline to relax from tail to poll.



In the first two photos above, this horse has all of her weight on her front end. **Center:** Her front end anchors her body as she tries out different stationary responses to Harry's requests to back.

## The Ultimate Reward

"It is so rewarding to watch riders progress to the point being able to think about softness. That's when things really begin to take off in their partnership."

"It is exciting that so many of my clients are reaching this point, and so many more want to get there," Julie smiles. "Because once they do, the sky is the limit!"



**Right:** After requests on the ground and in the saddle, the mare has figured it out and now consistently shifts her weight back onto her hindquarters, where her 'engine power' originates. This frees up her front end so she can easily go in any direction upon request. **With a soft topline and her rear end engaged she can softly follow her rider's lead.**