

Lessons Learned from The Rider's Seat ABCs Symposium with Suzanne Galdun

On the last weekend in August, Boulder Valley Dressage had the pleasure of hosting **Suzanne Galdun** at the Boulder County Fairgrounds Indoor Arena for *The Rider's Seat ABCs: Awareness, Breath and Connection Through the Levels*.

Over two days, 10 riders from Training Level through the upper levels worked with Suzanne, along with a lecture each day for riders and auditors. We also offered semi-private lessons for our Training and First Level riders.

Suzanne's approach focuses on **rider biomechanics—understanding what our bodies are doing and how those small changes can influence the horse**. Rather than simply telling riders what to change, she helped us become more aware of our own bodies so we could understand *why* a change was needed.

The result? Lots of light-bulb moments!

Each day's talk was a highlight and helped connect everything Suzanne was teaching the riders.

A is for Awareness – Saturday's Talk

Before we can change something, we have to be aware of what we are doing.



Seatbone Awareness

During Saturday's lecture, one of Suzanne's exercises had everyone sitting on the edge of the bleachers and focusing on their seatbones.

We were encouraged to really notice what was happening:

- Do I have more weight on one seatbone?
- What happens when I tighten my glutes?
- Is one glute stronger than the other?
- Can I feel the difference when I make a small adjustment?

It sounds simple, but spending time actually *feeling* what your body is doing can reveal a lot.



How Do You Walk?

Suzanne also had everyone line up and pay attention to how we move through our feet when we walk.

Do you land more on the outside of your foot? Do you land flat-footed? Do you pronate? Is one foot carrying more weight than the other?

Then came the really interesting part: **What happens when you change the way you walk?**

Our everyday movement patterns can give us clues about what we may be doing in the saddle.

B is for Breath – Part One of Sunday's Talk

One of Suzanne's key messages was:

Strength without breath is tension.

Strength with breath is engagement.

It is easy to think that being strong means holding ourselves together. But when we hold our breath or brace our muscles, that strength can quickly become tension.

Suzanne reminded us that **the antidote to tension is breathing.**

And, of course, she had some memorable ways to help us practice it.



First, she had us rest our hands on our chest and belly. Next, she had us take some big breaths to see how much our chest and belly expanded when we breathed. Then, she had us breathe out while making “shhhhhhh,” “psssst,” and growling noises and feel how each activated different parts of our core.



She handed out balloons to all of us and had us fill them up without using our hands between breaths to discover our internal pressure. We also did this while leaning sideways in both directions to see if one side was more difficult than the other.

C is for Connection – Part Two of Sunday’s Talk

Connection is about positive tension. Just like a suspension bridge relies on tension, too much or too little tension can cause the bridge to fail—and the same concept applies to riding horses. **Positive tension helps the horse stay connected to the rider without the rider having to pull.**

Suzanne explained the correct way to hold the rein. Your fingers should be closed around the rein, with your “fingerprints”—not your nails—touching your palms. Then, you make a “tent” with your thumb. When you half-halt, you simply press down with your thumb.

Your Armpits Are Connected to Your Thumb

Suzanne talked about the arm fascial lines and how your thumbs are connected to your armpits and are part of the connection to your horse’s bit.

To help us feel that connection, she had us put one arm and hand in riding position and then bring our opposite hand into our armpit. We then pressed down with the thumb of our riding hand to feel how it affected the muscles in our pecs and the back of our armpit.

While Suzanne was teaching the riders, she would often say:

The Opposite of Pull Is PUSH – Not Give

“Giving” the reins often causes the rider to drop the connection to the bit. Instead, the goal is to maintain a positive, elastic connection by pushing your hands forward into the contact.



To further help the auditors and riders understand this concept, she had us hold our neighbor’s hand the way we hold the reins. One at a time, we gave the “rein” like we normally do while riding. Then, we pushed our hand forward without dropping the connection with our neighbor.

A Few Takeaways from the Riders' Lessons



Stirrup Length Matters

We also looked at the importance of having the **correct stirrup length** for the individual rider.

Suzanne explained that when we have our stirrups too long, we end up with too much weight in our feet, when 80% of our weight should be in our thighs. When the stirrup is shortened to the correct length, it helps us maintain our balance and stay connected to the horse.

Sometimes what feels like a leg problem—or even a balance problem—can start with something as simple as adjusting your stirrup length.

Femurs In

Once the stirrup length is correct, it's easier for the rider to rotate their femurs internally.

Rotating internally the femurs inward can help the rider maintain better stability in their seat and allow the rider's thighs to keep contact without gripping.

Again, it was less about forcing a position and more about understanding how small changes in alignment can change the way the rest of the body works.



“Your thigh is your horse’s Thundershirt.”

The idea is that a stable, supportive thigh can provide the horse with a sense of security and confidence.

Connection isn’t about gripping with your knees. It is about creating supportive, consistent contact to give a nervous horse a sense of security.

Inside Leg vs. Outside Thigh

When riding movements such as shoulder-in, it can be easy to focus almost entirely on the inside leg.

Suzanne emphasized that **the inside leg is not more important than the outside thigh.**

The outside of the rider’s body plays a critical role in containing and guiding the horse through the movement.

Thinking About Half Pass Differently

Suzanne gave us another great visual for half pass.

Rather than thinking only about where the horse’s shoulders and haunches need to go, she had us think about the direction our **sternum is facing.**

She compared it to a skier skiing the fall line: the skier faces downhill while moving the hips and legs to make the turn.

That visual gave riders another way to think about directing the horse while keeping the rider's body organized, especially when riders have to ride the zigzag in the upper levels.

Growl Power

Yes, growling was involved.

The idea was to use a low growl to help encourage the rider's pelvic floor to stay down and relaxed. Definitely memorable—but it gave riders a way to engage their core and create positive tension in their diaphragm while breathing.

Resistance Bands

Resistance bands are a tool Suzanne used to help riders engage the correct muscles. Sometimes she put the band around the back of the rider's waist and into the rider's hands to help the rider push their hands toward the horse's bit.

It helped riders identify and engage specific muscles while riding.

Keep Your Armpits!

Suzanne found some creative ways to make riders aware of their upper bodies.

To help one rider engage her armpits, Suzanne placed tack sponges in her armpits to help her feel the muscles she needed to engage.

Tack Sponges aren't just for cleaning!

To help another rider have better rein contact with her hands, she placed sponges in her hands to help her keep her hands closed.



At the end of the weekend, the biggest takeaway was simple: **better riding starts with better awareness.** Suzanne showed us that understanding how our bodies move, breathe, and connect can change the way we communicate with our horses. Sometimes a small adjustment—a longer breath, a different stirrup length, a more connected hand, or a subtle change in how we use our seat—can make a remarkable difference.

A huge thank you to Suzanne Galdun for sharing her knowledge, creativity, and ability to make biomechanics understandable—and fun—with us!