

getting the correct response
from your horse by

being balanced



In the first two articles of this series, we've talked about becoming aware and developing feel. Awareness is being in the present with your horse and knowing where he is at mentally and physically, so you know where his feet are as well. It's also about being aware of how you think and act, what your body language is saying and where your focus is.

Awareness, combined with knowledge, translates into feel. Feel is what gives you the ability to understand, focus and recognise things before they happen, as well as to know when your horse has understood and responded to what you have asked of him. That's called good timing—being able to release the pressure of the request the moment your horse gives you a 'try'. It's what helps you keep your horse soft and responsive.

When you have good awareness, feel and timing, you're well on your way to becoming balanced. We'll look at some of the basics of balance in this article.

So how do you know if you're balanced?

Balance is when you feel your horse working straight and nicely forward (among other things), you are aware of how your body affects his movement, and you have the ability not to interfere with that movement. In short, you'll be getting the correct response from your horse.

Horses have developed good balance for everything they have to do—just watch them cantering in a field, changing leads or directions quickly, taking corners. To do this, a horse uses all of his body...his feet, shoulders, hindquarters as well as his head and neck. So it's easy to see all the places where we might interfere with our horse's balance.

Let's look at how this applies in an upwards transition from a trot to a canter. Say that you give a canter cue and your horse's action unbalances you, causing you to jerk on the reins. The pressure on his mouth (if you're using a bit), on his head (if you're using a bitless bridle) or on his nose (if

This young Morgan stallion, Nimrod and I are working in balance together. You can see by my seat that I am "sitting on my pockets", which means my weight is evenly balanced on my seat bones, and my shoulders mirror the horse's shoulder.

you're using a halter) will cause him to break back down to a trot.

When this happens, it's easy to blame the horse for ignoring the request and refusing to canter. The truth is that interfering with his movement has upset his balance. Think about it...not only does your horse have to concentrate on his own balance, he must constantly rebalance himself to compensate for an unbalanced rider. To do this, he has to drop back to a walk or trot to get his feet securely under himself again.

If, instead, the horse speeds up, he can become what I call an unbalanced runaway. The horse becomes unbalanced and in order to retain his balance, speeds up to try and get his feet securely under himself. If the rider panics and stiffens or grips more tightly, the horse will also panic and likely bolt.

That's why, in the eyes of the horse, an unbalanced rider is not only uncomfortable, but dangerous. Why? Because for the horse, falling, or being on the ground means certain death. He becomes easy prey for a predator. This is where your relationship with your horse is crucial. If he sees you as

RUBY

This series of three photos was taken during only the second light working session with this eight year old Thoroughbred mare in nearly two years due to her ill health and back problems. Prior to that she had not yet started her training in working in a collected frame because we had not fully developed the foundations of straightness and balance.

In the first photo, you can see that I am actually holding firm contact (not pulling) to encourage her to bring her hindquarters underneath herself and carry more weight there instead of being on the forehand. You can see that she is trying to hollow her back and not stepping fully underneath. If I were to lean back and pull on the reins, unbalancing her further, she would stick her nose up and hollow her back even more. This is particularly bad for horses with back problems. In fact, you risk creating back problems in your horse, because working in this way doesn't encourage develop of the top line, including the ligaments, muscles and tendons, that bear our weight.

In the second photo, you can see that my contact remains consistent and she has started to show a more uphill carriage. This is because she has lowered her hindquarters and is bringing them underneath, rather than kicking her legs out behind, as in picture 1. I'm also opening the inside rein more, as this mare has a tendency to turn her nose to the outside on a turn. If I let her do this, she would drop her inside shoulder and become unbalanced on the corner.

The last photo shows you how the mare has achieved real collection on the landing phase of the canter stride in a downward transition to the trot. Look at the definition in the Rhomboid muscle, which is one of the deep neck muscles, along with her head carriage and soft round frame. She is carrying herself, as you can see by the loose rein. You can do this without artificial aids like whips and spurs...oh, and bitless...of course!

SHI

This seven year old Paint mare is another with existing back problems who has a tendency to want to work in a hollow frame. See her soft, rounded frame and how well she is beginning to bring her hind leg underneath. By working her in this way, I am helping her to develop the appropriate ligaments, muscles, and tendons that will keep her more consistently sound.

someone who can get him out of trouble, he can cope with the situation and not panic.

Having good balance is also an important part of being able to ride softly and to have the horse carry himself, without being heavy on the forehand. It's the start of real collection—where the horse and rider are in balance, the rider is not interfering with the horse's movement, and the horse is able to work from behind and carry himself. (See pics of Ruby above).

In the last article, we talked about feeling where the horse's feet are at the walk and canter. In the context of balance, at the walk, the concept of a balanced or 'independent seat' becomes really important.

Most riders weigh between ten and twenty per cent of a horse's body weight. So how you use your weight will have a significant impact on your horse's frame and movement. It's not just how you use the reins. A balanced seat aligns the rider's centre of gravity with that of the horse. It allows

the horse to carry the rider more easily and maintain the speed of a gait. Like I said earlier, it is often an unbalanced seat that creates issues with the horse's gaits.

You generally have your seat as close as possible behind the horse's centre of gravity which, regardless of conformation, lies a little forward of the horse's centre line and where your heels hang on a well centered saddle. (Different saddles may give you a different leg position).

When you're sitting tall, not stiffly, you'll feel your weight balanced equally on your seat bones. I call it 'sitting on your pockets'. If your weight is evenly balanced, you'll be able to look where you want to go and your horse will immediately know what you want, without the use of stronger cues such as your legs or reins.



The most common mistakes I see are riders having their seats either behind or in front of the horse's centre of gravity. If they're behind the movement, they'll prevent the horse from engaging his hindquarters and working from back to front. If they're in front of the movement, they'll burden the horse's forehand and make him heavy, choppy to ride and the contact may feel heavy on your hands due to poor engagement and weak hind quarters as a result.

Try this....at the walk, concentrate on feeling each of your seat bones and how they move with the horse as each hind foot lifts and moves forward. Not jerking, just moving in rhythm as the horse steps forward. Your aim is to relax and move in harmony, not push forward. It's easy to push and jerk forward with your upper body, which is uncomfortable for your horse—and you! At the walk, it's easier to keep your balance and seat. If you lose your balance, you'll feel stiff and tight through your upper body and have a tendency to grip with your legs.

Regardless of discipline, I prefer to rise at the trot, only sitting it to give my horse the message that I am about to ask for an upwards or downwards transition. It helps to ensure the long-term soundness of my horse by putting as little pressure as possible on his back. But you can still feel what I am talking about, because at the trot, the horse's feet are moving in diagonal pairs, just as they do when he is backing up. The sitting trot can be practiced, but cautiously, especially with the young horse that is not fully developed.

While it's important that the horse gets used to carrying the rider's weight in the sitting trot, I personally do not like



LANI

See how this Quarter horse mare is backing using her hindquarters. My posture is breaking slightly forward to help lighten the load on the hindquarters. Look at the slack on the rein and the position of my feet as I give the cue. You can also see the movement of the diagonal pairs.

to do too much of it, unless I am working with a fully developed horse.

So to get a feel of the horse's movement at the trot we'll start by going backwards. It's important that your horse learn to back with his hindquarters, not his teeth, which is the collection I referred to earlier. So start by holding your hands steady and asking your horse to drop his nose by squeezing each rein alternately, in a light 'on-off' manner, stopping and releasing the minute your horse gives you the slightest 'try'. At first, your horse may think you're asking him to back up, so make sure that your heels aren't touching him. But don't worry, at this stage, he'll be backing with his head and neck, not his hindquarters. Be patient and keep trying until he understands.

Once your horse is able to drop the nose, hold the neck and shoulders steady and lightly touch him with both heels together behind the girth, rhythmically, and also in a light on-off manner. Your horse may think you're asking him to go forward but by holding your hands steady, you're 'closing' the front door. Your horse will look for the open door, which in this case is the 'back' door. As he begins to move backward, he will lift both diagonal legs simultaneously and place them on the ground at the same time as well. Break slightly forward on the rein-back, so you lift your seat a little off the horse's back, letting him move a bit more freely.

See how your seat feels, as the horse's back lifts and falls more evenly. That's basically how it will feel at the trot. But you've got an added bonus. Because your horse is backing with his hindquarters, not his head and neck (or teeth, if you're using a bit), you've also got the beginning of collection.

But that's another article (or several) in itself...maybe in the next article! Until then—happy and successful training!

Give it a go – understanding how you feel to your horse

To get a better idea of how you feel to your horse when he's trying to rebalance with you on his back, put on a heavy back pack and shift it around. Feel how awkward it is and how it affects your balance.

Consider where your centre of gravity is—over your two feet. That's a huge advantage over the horse, whose centre is roughly where you sit.

Try running...speeding up and slowing down, turning corners ...without hanging on to the backpack to steady it.

Now you're getting an idea of what your horse is dealing with!

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