



Gaited Horsemanship



with

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Why Teach Balance?

By: Larry Whitesell

We will discuss what balance is and why it is important to teach the horse. Horses don't naturally move in a balance to carry a rider. Some horses easily learn to handle this balance problem, but many fall into a habit of moving in poor balance because they have not been taught how to cope with carrying a rider. If a rider, rides the horse with a "dead" body (seat), the horse is going to learn to take care of itself in different situations. The rider must listen to the horse with a sensitive seat and have a constant conversation with the horse.

The ability of the rider, makes a difference. Riders who are in control of their own balance do not



interfere with the horse's balance as opposed to an unbalanced rider who handicaps the horse. It is unfortunate that when riders have problems with horses, they spend their time trying to change the horse and seldom work on themselves. It is common for someone to spend a great deal of time on the ground, for example, trying to teach a horse not to spook. But when they get on and ride the horse out of balance, they cause the spooking.

Balance has a direct influence on the horse's mind. A horse that is not in balance is unsure of itself and becomes nervous. The unbalanced horse is not fully in control of its body. These horses will spook, be buddy sour and other resistance problems. A horse can actually tolerate pain but it cannot deal with fear. When a flight animal's balance is jeopardized he feels he cannot defend himself so he becomes defensive. Many people do things such as one rein stop the horse over and over. Some horses become more reactive, as this takes them out of balance, and other horses just shut down. Don't mistake dullness for relaxation. These horses can become explosive with no warning.

Once we start to take balance seriously, we begin to be able to deal with many of the problems that we thought were beyond our control. There are bits and all kinds of gimmicks out there that claim to solve problems, but these are no substitute for understanding the subject of

balance. A horse taught balance turns easier, stops better, and is guided by the rider with more lightness and relaxation. That makes riding more enjoyable for horse and rider.

Just like a human athlete, a horse is in balance when his feet are under his body. For his feet to stay under him, he must learn to rotate his pelvis forward and flex in the stifle and hock joints. He shifts more weight on to the hindquarters and rounds his back. He can now move in any direction with ease and with less force from the rider. If the horse moves with stiff hind legs he may step forward to overstride, but he will also swing the hind legs equally as far out behind himself. His back will not articulate and he will be rigid through his body.

You must understand the horse moves as a whole being. When you do something to one part, it affects another moving part. If all parts cannot move freely together, there will be resistance in the horse. Horses taught the footwork to carry a rider in balance can remain relaxed in their muscles and carry out the rider's requests with ease. A horse that has not been taught to balance, lacks rhythm and impulsion, does not work through its back and cannot move with ease and lightness.

Too often riders try to shift weight to the hind legs by driving with their seat and pulling the horse's head and neck back. This causes the horse to drop his back, which stiffens the stifle and hocks. To use spurs to move a stiff horse forward will work, but teaching the horse how to balance will relax muscles and release tension allowing the horse to go forward with enthusiasm and lighter control.

Balance has to be taught with lateral exercises. They teach the horse to put each hind leg under his center of gravity. This means he puts the inside hind foot down forward and between the two front legs. It is as if his inside hind leg steps forward toward the outside front leg and under his center line. He needs to learn this in order to do circles or turn right and left in balance. Pulling on a horse's face to turn will take him out of balance because the chain reaction of events doesn't allow him to put the inside hind under his center of gravity. This is something we spend a lot of time on in our clinics.

Your training exercises, on the ground and under saddle, should always work toward teaching the horse balance. This builds his confidence and strength and never destroys the relaxation. Any exercise that puts the horse on a shoulder would work against balance and set back the horse physically and emotionally. For example, the practice of disengaging is such an exercise. It puts the horse on the forehand and the inside hind leg steps across and out from under the body of the horse. This overweights the hip joint in an unnatural position, which can damage this joint if done too often. If done mounted, the hip, stifle and hock joints are stressed. This is an exercise of domination but is something to know in case the rider needs to save his own life. It will give the rider more control quickly but is very hard on the horse's body and confidence, and ultimately trust. Understand, the horse is running away because it is afraid, it is not afraid of running away.

When considering gait, balance is what creates impulsion, which makes horses gait. Gait can also be obtained in an unbalanced horse but with little range of speeds in gait and the horse breaks gait when turning.

Horses in balance turn from the energy of the hind legs and don't drop their shoulders. A horse that is stiff in the hind legs has one hind leg out behind and will fall on his shoulder when turning. Balance just makes a horse safer as well as gait smoother and softer. Balance encompasses the carriage of the head and neck, the back and the engagement and length of stride of the hind legs.

Sometimes, putting the horse in a frame has led to abuse in the training world. Each horse is an individual and forcing a frame will sacrifice movement. Good training methods or exercises, not only supple, strengthen, and improve range of motion, but are diagnostic. When I do shoulder-in on the ground, it not only prepares the horse for the rider, but I can see which leg is weak. I know which muscles are not as elastic and which joints don't flex properly. If I just do random exercises, the horse will just adjust his body to compensate for weaknesses making him more crooked. Then when I sit on him and ride, he will not be in balance. For my horse to have confidence in me and trust me, he has to know that the exercises I do with him, satisfy his needs. I don't do exercises that do little more than dominate him and make him safe for me. That is not really a relationship that I want with my friend. If I can ride my horse in good balance so he doesn't worry, and my exercises strengthen the muscles that he needs for that balance, my friend will enjoy being with me.

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