



WHY TEACH *Balance?*

By Larry Whitesell

Horses don't naturally move in balance to carry a rider. Some horses easily learn, but many move with poor balance because they have not been taught how to cope with a rider. If the rider has 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 a horse, 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 if the horse is ridden out of balance, this can cause the spooking.

Balance has a direct influence on the horse's mind. A horse that is not in balance is not confident and will become nervous. The unbalanced horse is not fully in control of its body. These horses will spook, be buddy sour, and have other resistance problems. A horse can tolerate pain, but it cannot deal with fear. When a flight animal's balance is jeopardized he cannot defend himself, so he becomes defensive. Some horses become more reactive, and others just shut down. Don't mistake dullness for relaxation. Dull 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 lightness and relaxation. This makes riding more enjoyable for both 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 over-stride when he steps forward, 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 that 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 the 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. Using 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. These exercises teach the horse to put each hind leg under his center of gravity. This means he puts the inside hind foot down 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 it 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 confidence and strength and never destroys relaxation. Any exercise that puts the horse on a shoulder would work against balance and set back the horse physically and emotionally. 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 puts too much weight on the hip joint in an unnatural position, which can damage this joint if done too often. If done while 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, confidence, and ultimately, the trust he has for his rider. Understand—the horse is running away because he is afraid; he is not afraid of running away.

When considering gait, balance is what creates the impulsion, which makes the horse gait. Gait can also be obtained in an unbalanced horse, but the horse will have little range of speed and will break 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 makes a horse safer and gait smoother and softer. Balance encompasses the carriage of the head and neck, the

back, and the engagement and length of stride in 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 exercises not only increase suppleness, strength, and improve range of motion, but are diagnostic. When I do shoulder-in exercises 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 adjust his body to compensate for weaknesses making him more crooked. Then when I ride, he will not be in balance. For my horse to have confidence in me, he has to know that the exercises I do with him satisfy his needs. I don't do exercises that only 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.



Renowned gaited horseman since 1980, Larry Whitesell was very successful in the show ring, winning Regional, National, and Grand National Championships. In 2002, he was voted the PFHA Trainer of the Year. He has held judges cards in several gaited breeds.

Initially, he trained using the traditional gaited horse methods, thinking these were the only way to yield gait. As his training progressed, he wanted to train gaited horses to a higher level so they would gait for any level rider and the riders could count on them to be safe and dependable.

Larry's goals are to help people understand what makes gaited horses gait. In doing so, he can help spare horses from the gaited training myths that are not in the horse's best interest. By making things better for the horse, the horse will be smoother, safer, and more dependable.

