

BALANCING Horse and Rider

When horse or rider have less than perfect posture one tries to compensate for the other's imperfections.

by Sophie Love

Jane Wilson photograph

Most of us take our bodies for granted, operating under the assumption that we are perfect physical specimens yet, in reality, there are very few perfectly aligned people - most having some form of pelvic imbalance, muscle tightness and/or spinal misalignment, which in turn influences them to walk, sit and move in a less than ideal way. These problems aren't always readily noticable but if one pays closer attention when watching the world go by (try this when sitting and having coffee at a sidewalk cafe), the many stooped postures, dropped or hunched shoulders, pigeon toes, flat feet, poked forward heads and thrust-forward pelvises that exist in the general population are soon revealed.

Similarly, horses do not always have perfect posture, conformation or movement. Accidents, falls, difficult births and incorrect shoeing/trimming can all impact on spinal and pelvic alignment, muscle mass and the ability to move fluidly, correctly and harmoniously. Again, sitting and paying close attention to horses 'going about their business' can be an interesting exercise, as it highlights just how much equines differ on an individual basis.

The challenge for every rider is learning to know and place their centre of gravity.

Put the two together (horse with human on top) and what happens? Potentially, disaster, with one trying to compensate for the other's imperfections, thus creating new and different problems for both in the process!

In order to explore this issue further, we asked five experts with varying equestrian training and treatment backgrounds to give their perspective of how the potential misalignment and imbalance between horse and rider can best be addressed.

Align The Rider First - MARIGOLD SMITH

An Alexander Technique and Yoga teacher who runs courses for riders at her property in Victoria, Marigold has over thirty years of riding experience and twenty as a riding teacher, as well as a lifelong involvement in many different aspects of the equestrian industry. A Three Day Eventer for a considerable time, she now concentrates on dressage - incorporating everything she has learned about both human and horse fluidity of movement into this discipline. (For info: www.studioevolving.com.au)

Marigold cites rider crookedness, unevenness, tension, lack of balance, co-ordination, unease and lack of suppleness as often being the cause of horse lameness or movement restrictions. So, rather than focussing on the horse's 'problems', she usually starts by asking questions of her pupils like "Do you always carry your handbag on the same shoulder, your child on the same hip or your briefcase the same arm? How tense were you after the argument last night, the unresolved issues at work and the traffic jam on the way home?". Awarenesses such as these, Marigold explains, are important as, even though they seem to not be related directly to what's happening when riding, they ultimately do affect the communication and co-ordination between horse and rider.

Much of Marigold's teaching philosophy focusses on training riders to feel every movement of their horse and to give body instructions with such clear effortlessness that the horse willingly embraces every direction without restriction and confusion. The challenge for every rider, she feels, is learning to know and place their centre of gravity, as this acts as a subtle instruction to a horse to change its centre of gravity to coincide and move with the weight of its rider. Marigold admits that this can not be achieved overnight, as it often involves re-education or 'unlearning' of riding techniques that have become entrenched over the years. The correction and suppling process her pupils learn often feels quite bizarre to them, in that a new alignment may even feel like crookedness during the process of change.

Continued

GROUNDWORK FOR THE RIDER

by Marigold Smith

To find balance in motion the rider needs the balancing skills of a board rider (snow or surf). Balance means allowing the re-organisation of your body from head to feet in constantly changing conditions. When balanced the rider finds the meaning of independent seat, arms and legs. They learn to know and use their centre of gravity - this allows the horse to move freely and find his balance with a rider.

To develop awareness of body patterns and balancing skills Marigold teaches human ground work that will accelerate the awareness of balance when on the horse.

Groundwork for the rider to explore includes:-

- Are you straight at all paces? (like the horse)
- Is your halt square?
- Do you fall in or out in corners and turns?
- Which is your better side? Do you have a favourite leg?

Help will be needed to work with these things on the ground. From the ground, this new learning is developed with exercises on the lunge at all paces, (walk, trot and canter) then on uneven terrain, hills, cavelletti etc.



An Alexander Technique trainee finding balance in motion while standing in the stirrups.

Under The Surface

JEAN KOEK

Veterinary Infrared Digital Imaging (VIDI)

Jean has spent seven years studying both human and horse, and their impact on each other. She is also planning to do a formal study under controlled conditions towards the end of 2007 on the subject of imbalance in either horse or rider, and the union of both. (www.vidi.com.au)

Thermal imaging takes a picture of the body that graphically demonstrates the temperature in all its different parts (For more information, refer to the article on *Thermal Imaging in the June/July issue - Vol 29 No 1*). In 400BC Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, wrote "in whatever part of the body excess heat or cold is felt, a disease is there to be discovered." So not only can this amazing technology indicate the potential for problems, but it is also capable of isolating where those imbalances - whether muscular, skeletal or circulatory - have occurred.

Jean echoed the thoughts of the other practitioners interviewed in that there is very little point in correcting the horse if the rider's issues of imbalance, tension and misalignment are not also addressed. For example, having just returned from studying horses' legs before and after correct trimming, she says "there is no word truer spoken than 'no hoof, no horse' - VIDI imaging technology is showing her how a good trim can restore circulation, blood flow and balance to the horse's body. But, on the other hand, although every little healing like this unquestionably helps the horse initially, any problems it may have with movement and suppleness won't be completely overcome if its rider - who, say, has pelvic misalignment that hasn't been corrected - then hops back on and proceeds to upset the balance equation.

Synchronicity

MEL FLEMING

An Australia representative in vaulting, Mel was an accredited EFA and Riding for the Disabled Instructor, and trainer of both dressage and showjumping horses and riders. She now teaches Holistic Horsemanship and Riding in Synchronicity. (www.melfleming.com.au)

A firm believer that "riding in harmony with a horse is a fluid union of two bodies and minds" and if one, the other or both are stiff, tense or in pain, she explains, the whole relationship will be forced 'out of kilter'.

The basis of Mel's teaching philosophy is that, in order for a horse to be sound, healthy, happy and achieve peak performance, it must be ridden in a biomechanically balanced way. Firstly, this means it is crucial for the rider to be sitting in alignment - that is, on the correct part of the pelvis and seat bones - and to be experiencing 'independent suspension' by allowing either side of the pelvis, hips and ribcage to move independently of the other - just as the horse does. Mel calls this position 'neutral' because, from it, a rider is equally ready to move in any direction. She suggests riders think of their position as being like a pendulum swinging: the pendulum never sticking in one spot but moving through the centre point on its path in either direction, and always returning home to it.

Being in neutral, and therefore alignment, means not sitting on the front of the pelvis (most women sit right on their crotch, placing pressure on the horse's front end) or lounging back on the tail bone (which is 'behind the action'), as both these positions immobilise a rider's joints and legs and interfere with the horse's natural gait and movement. A good exercise to find a neutral pelvic position, Mel explains, is to - in a standing position - tip your pelvis as far

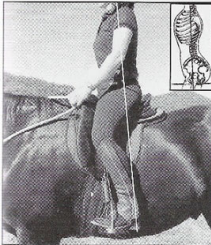
forward as possible then lift one heel off the ground at a time. Now roll your pelvis into the opposite direction and try again. Finally, find your neutral pelvic position by identifying where lifting the heels feels effortless and there is no strain anywhere in the body - that's the balance or neutral point. Just like everything in life, in order to find balance, it seems we have to experience the two opposing extremes!

Other aspects Mel commonly addresses with her pupils relate to the need for a horse to be able to 'lift' and round its back in order to engage the hindquarters. Most people, she says, are only aware of their arms and legs when riding, so tend to lock their hips and pelvis in the saddle, brace their legs in the stirrups and not allow their torso to be mobile enough. Another fault is riding with closed/holding toes, knees and thighs and a tight/immobile pelvis, as resulting constriction means that the horse is then forced to 'hollow its back away. Both these rider imbalances interrupt the flow of energy over the horse's back from the push of the hindlegs, which then comes up into the rider's pelvis, through the elbows and down the forearm and rein to the horse's mouth. As a consequence, the back is unable to round and movement is restricted.

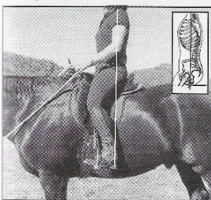
To fully understand the impact on a horse of riding in the above ways, Mel suggests the following. Firstly, while standing, hollow your back as much as you can, then see how high you can lift your knee up in front of you. Now allow your back to round and repeat the lift of your knee - you should be able to lift it considerably higher when your back is round and the whole spine is lengthened. Now, try getting down on your hands and knees and asking someone else to sit on your hips. Experiment with having them clamp their knee and thigh on you versus having a lightly outward rotated hip and knee. Feel how the latter riding technique allows you (the horse) to more easily lift your back and expand your ribcage, while the other is very restricting.

Moving down from the seat, Mel then also spoke about the role that a rider's contact with the top and back of the calf plays in encouraging a horse to lift the belly, which in turn lifts the back. This contact with the lower leg stabilises and supports the rider's upper body (especially important for the rising trot), while also helping to distribute their weight over a larger surface area - so it is not solely directed as a downward force on the horse's back. This enables the rider to have a relatively light seat.

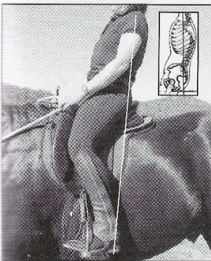
Finally, Mel says that she likes riders to imagine that the soles of their boots are velcroed to the stirrups so there is no downward pressure, especially in the rising trot. Downward pressure on the stirrup causes the saddle tree and stirrup bars to press into a horse's back, which is again going to cause hollowing, therefore the ankle should be soft



Balance forward



Balance 'neutral'



Balance - too far back.

and the heel should 'hang' - not be forced down or forward.

Mel is also a great advocate of bareback riding (with a pad), commenting that this is a great way to explore natural balance and riding posture of the body, once all the 'props' have been taken away. When doing this, she suggests that riders imagine their centre of gravity as a heavy weight down low inside the pelvis. This weight could potentially be restrictive to the horse, but the way to stop this is by the rider having

'self carriage'. Those who practice yoga will be familiar with the concept of lengthening the spine out of the pelvis, but for those who aren't, place your thumb on your bottom rib and rest your little finger on the point of the hip. Now lengthen this area - imagine lengthening down from the sacrum (tailbone) and up from the sacrum at the same time, whilst maintaining the natural hollow of the lower back. As soon as this area comes into alignment, the rest of the spine moves into balance and the shoulders are able to hang without tension.

Most importantly, Mel advises, the way to ride without restriction is to be in a mental and emotional state of lightness, ease, non-judgement and detachment to the outcome. Look for both you and your horse to have a feeling of lightness throughout your bodies - especially in the legs and feet, as though you could both walk on eggshells. Remember, too, that horses are intuitive and instinctive beings - if you are tense, hunched, fearful or angry - they will be too. If you are light, joyous, relaxed, happy and balanced - they will be too!

The Backpack Analogy

ROBYN COTTMAN

An experienced equestrian competitor Robyn has qualifications in Sports Science, Psychology and Counselling. In the course of her work and when competing, she sees many circumstances where horses are 'battling' to perform for riders who are acting as a hindrance due to their lack of flexibility, suppleness and overall fitness.

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Imagine, Robyn often asks her clients, what it would be like to try to perform ballet with a sack of potatoes strapped to your back or running a hurdles race with a lop sided backpack? To illustrate how this is akin to an unbalanced, inflexible rider sitting on a horse, she challenges people to actually put on an unevenly weighted backpack and run around their arena - throwing in a bit of cavalletti jumping or passage for good measure - and see how it feels!

From a personal perspective, Robyn knows that to admit it is your own physical limitations as a rider that are causing a horse's problems is difficult, having been through the long and frustrating experience of trying to 'unlock' her own dressage horse and improve his impulsion. For years, she tried different coaches, various techniques and everything anyone could suggest before finally starting to appreciate how sensitive a horse can be to a slight stiffness or less flexibility in one side of a rider's back, or how a slightly twisted pelvis could cause so many problems. We all spend so much money, she says ruefully, buying the right saddles and having them fitted to our horses, so as not to cause any undue stress or pressure, and do all manner of horse-

focused stretching and fitness training. When it comes to our own fitness and flexibility, however, that's another matter! Robyn suggests that, rather than thinking about a horse and rider as being two separate entities, we should consider the overall picture. In other words, don't expect things of your horse that you wouldn't expect of yourself. It's obvious that if your horse is too fat or unfit, it will affect its performance, and this applies equally in vice versa. Think of it as being like two dancers - if one is supple and graceful while the other is unfit and lacking flexibility, the whole performance will be affected.

INCREASING RIDING FLEXIBILITY

EXERCISE: 1

Firstly identify your own problem areas. Stand normally in front of a full length mirror, look at the angle of your head and the evenness of your shoulders. Most people when they look carefully will realise one shoulder sits higher and more forward of the other.

Next, correct your posture in the mirror and take note of where it feels uncomfortable - throughout the day try to recreate that same feeling then you know you are straight and even.

Also lie flat on the floor, face up with your feet together, ankles touching, knees in line and arms extended (on floor) above your head. Make sure your toes, knees and hands are in line. Take note of where you feel tightness - one side of your pelvis...does one hip feel like it is sitting higher off the floor than the other...tightness through the front of one shoulder...these are your limiting areas - the areas within your body which are restricting your (and your horse's) movement.

This is how you begin to change your muscle memory - by being consciously aware. Your posture on the ground will relate to that in the saddle, so be aware in both areas.

EXERCISE: 2

Fixing the problem - (make sure any stretches or exercises you do are even with your body in correct alignment).

Firstly get your body moving - start walking and really stride out allowing your hips to rotate and lift. Over a period of time see how much movement you can develop in this area...see how much your stride length will increase. By developing a relaxed, supple pelvic area you will 'allow' your horse to move underneath you and get fitter at the same time.

Next, stretch your hamstrings, then your quadriceps, inner thighs and finally, carefully stretch your hip flexors (take care if you have existing back problems).

EXERCISE: 3

Develop abdominal strength and coordination. By learning how to slightly maintain lower abdominal flexion, you can maintain a light seat contact while having enormous influence over your horse's impulsion and lift. Too many people 'sit' on a horse, heavy and restrictive rather than maintaining a light connection which subtly influences and guides your horse.