

BALANCE AND EQUILIBRIUM

The horse's ability to stay in balance in all situations is extremely important. It is our responsibility as riders to help the horse balance and organize his body so that horse and rider are in harmony. The rider's ability to maintain this harmony can also be called 'riding in the correct frame.'

'Balance' and 'equilibrium' are words that we all know and understand, but how do they relate to riding? What does it mean to say the horse should work in balance? Naturally, we apply the qualities of balance and equilibrium to almost everything that surrounds us in life, so it's easy to overlook this topic and fail to take the time to understand its importance.

It is very difficult to describe what is needed in order for a horse to maintain balance while carrying a rider on his back. To really understand what this requires, we must take into consideration the rider's position, the frame of the horse, straightness, tempo, energy, collection, and self-carriage, all of which are addressed in the chapters that follow.

Some skillful riders have a natural feeling for how to sit and how to influence the horse, and as a consequence these riders can create harmony and balance. In order to learn these skills, we need to study some theory and acquire the necessary knowledge. If we are to help the horse to maintain balance while carrying us, we must know something about the subject. Otherwise the horse will find a solution to the problem himself – a solution that is not necessarily appropriate for his education and long-term soundness.

When the horse is started under saddle, he has naturally spent his life up to that point carrying only his own weight. He has found a way to shape and use his body so that he is always in balance. And from the time he has been able to stand up on his own legs (about an hour after his birth), he has become really good at balancing himself. But now comes a big change, a rider on his back, and this understandably creates a disharmony in his body and balancing system.

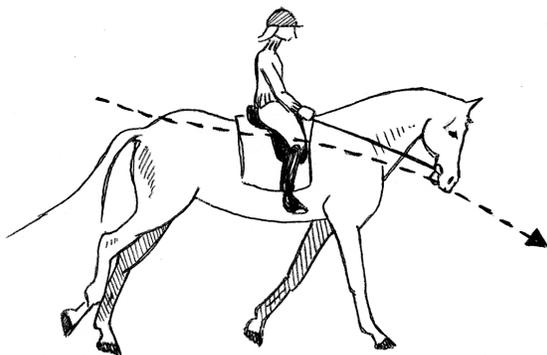
How does the horse react to this challenge? He reacts exactly as we would if we were to try to carry a load that was not placed correctly. We would tense some of the muscle groups in order to compensate for the disharmony and maintain our balance. But when the horse does the same thing, the tension in his muscles then limits his freedom of movement, which in turn leads to further mistakes. If we do not help the horse to use his body without the need for tension, this tension can quickly become a bad habit. He will no longer take the chance to let go of the tension for fear of losing his balance.

It can be said that the horse is always in balance, even with a rider on his back. But the question is how does the horse go about keeping his balance? After all, horses seldom fall. Perhaps the horse feels it is necessary to carry his poll and neck high in order to carry himself, as well as the rider around safely. This is one way the horse can compensate for the extra weight that is placed on the forehead. But to do this, he uses the muscles on the underside of his neck, which then develop in an incorrect manner. We would then say that the horse is working above the bit and with a low, tense back.

Many riders, in an attempt to correct this problem, try to get the horse to give in the poll and neck through incorrect use of various types of equipment, such as draw reins. This only works against the horse. Helping the horse find his balance by using draw reins is the wrong approach and will teach the horse to use his body in a totally incorrect manner, forcing the horse to find his balance by putting more weight on the forehead. Think of the horse's head and neck as his balance pole. Do not try to gain control of the horse by interfering with his balance pole.

In order for the horse to be able to maintain balance, the rider must help him shift some of the weight he is carrying on his forehead back in his body. This has to take place before the rider can expect the horse to naturally feel a need to reach forward and down with his head and neck. Try to picture what happens when the rider, with all his resources, tries to get the horse to give in the poll and lower his neck without the horse first moving his center of gravity further back. The horse would fall more onto his forehead. How you approach this issue correctly, depends on the horse's level of education, age, and ability. See the chapter in this section called The Frame.

Sometimes it happens that the horse throws one shoulder out, hangs on one rein, does not want to go honestly forward, is difficult to bend in one direction, and so on. The reason for this is not always that the horse is disobedient or stiff. It can be the result of the horse's attempt to keep his balance. The horse may also give up at his attempt to find balance, self-carriage and equilibrium and just hang on the forehead and take a little extra support on the bit. The horse uses the rider's arms as a fifth leg, so that he can pull himself forward with his front legs instead of pushing himself forward from behind.



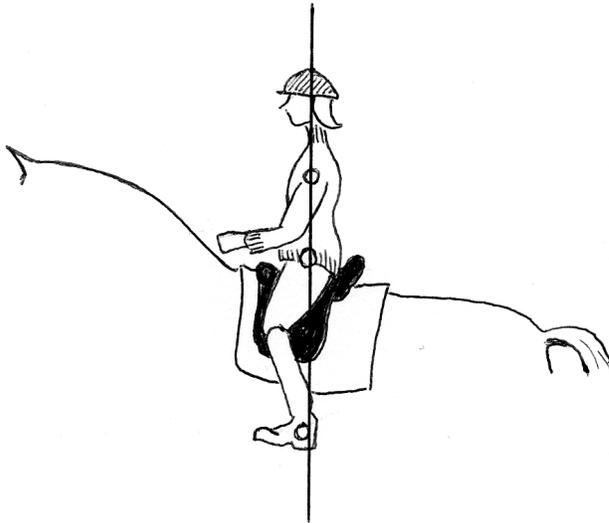
Many horses find this an easy solution to feeling out of balance, but it leads to many problems. Not only will the horse lose his freedom of movement, but in the long run, it will cause wear and tear on his muscles, tendons and ligaments. As a result, the horse will become limited in every way. The only positive outcome is that the veterinarian never needs to worry about having enough work.

Lack of balance is consequently the reason for most problems and mistakes. When a horse feels out of balance he may:

- lose the elasticity and lightness of his gaits
- tense his muscles
- hurry forward in order to catch up with his weight, which is being placed too far forward
- lean on the bit
- find transitions difficult
- not answer half-halts
- resist moving honestly forward
- wobble or drift rather than moving straight forward
- tense during movements and exercises
- become unsound
- develop a sore back
- become tired and lose condition
- lose his confidence

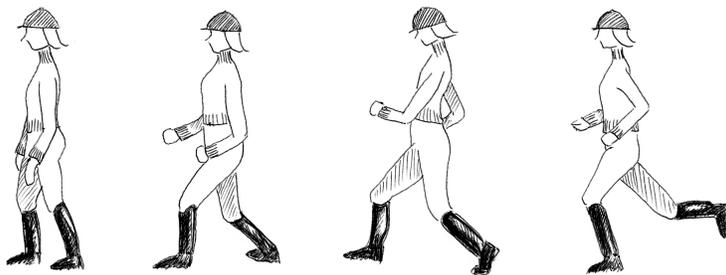
When we want to have total control of the horse using small, fine aids, and make the best use of his natural abilities, we must be able to control that which the horse always follows, namely his center of gravity. We can do this by riding the horse in a way that helps him shape his body so that his center of gravity is always under the rider's. The centers of gravity of the horse and the rider will then unite. As a result, the horse will feel the rider as part of his own weight. You can

read more about this in the chapter in this section (The Basics) called Harmony.

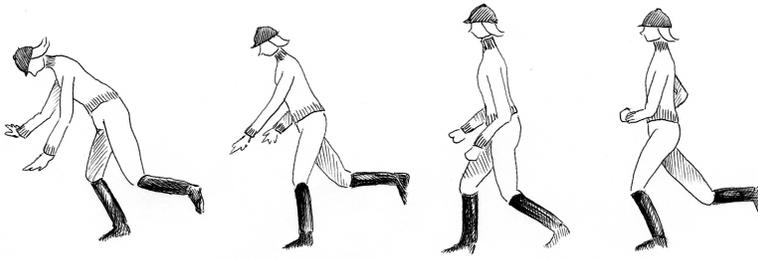


The horse maintains his balance similarly to how we would. The only difference is that we have two legs, and the horse has four. Try this yourself. Stand up with your legs placed directly under your body. You will find that you can keep your balance without any difficulty, and that without tensing any muscles you can stay relaxed and move around.

Now try to walk ahead without first moving your center of gravity forward. Or try leaning back while walking ahead at the same time. You will find this to be quite difficult.



In order to walk or run forward in balance, you first have to move your center of gravity forward just the right amount in the direction that you are walking or running.

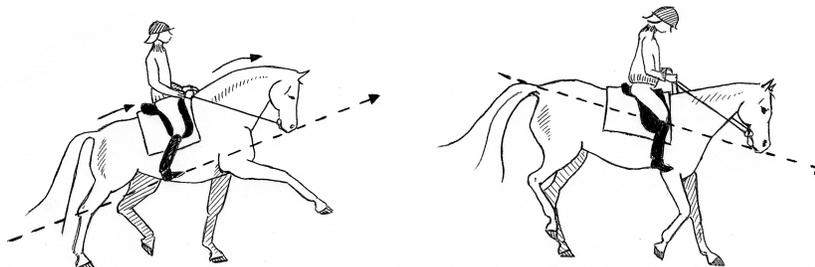


The same laws naturally apply to the horse. Just like us, the horse must first shift his weight forward and then move his legs in under the center of gravity in order to keep his balance. Try the opposite; run forward and then attempt to stop without shifting your weight back. You will discover that you must tense many muscles to be able to do it. In order to stop without tension, you must first shift your weight back.

When we sit on a horse at the halt, the horse will have about 3/5 of his weight on his front legs, partly because the rider sits directly behind the front legs. Our task is to help the horse move back some of the weight he carries on his forehead. This is accomplished by teaching the horse to carry more and more of this weight on his hind legs. See the chapters in this section (The Basics) called, Transitions, Half-halts, Collection, Self-carriage and The Frame.

As mentioned earlier, the rider should control the horse by gaining control of the horse's center of gravity. And this is accomplished when the horse's center of gravity is placed exactly under that of the rider. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that the rider becomes a part of this combined center of gravity.

When we ride, it is important for the sake of the horse's balance to have a feeling of riding uphill. We should feel the horse coming up in front of us, rather than a feeling of riding downhill.



We want to feel the front legs of the horse reaching out in front of him, stepping forward rather than moving in under his body. We also can say that, "the rider should have the horse in front of the legs," and consequently have a feeling that there is more horse in front of the rider than there

is behind.

It is while making turns and traveling on bent tracks that most horses fall on the forehand. If we understand how to prepare for, and ride through bent tracks correctly, we can help the horse maintain and even improve his balance and self-carriage. See the chapter in the section (The Basics) called Corners and Bent Tracks.

When we speak about balance in the horse, then energy and impulsion are the most important components. If these are lacking, it is impossible for the horse to go forward while maintaining his balance. Thrust from behind, and both the horse and rider thinking forward, are the most important factors.

Try balancing yourself on a board or a fence. First stand still and you will see how difficult it is. Then try walking or running forward along the edge and you will discover that this helps you to balance. Or try balancing on a bicycle that isn't moving. Even those acrobats that are the best in the world can't sit still on the bike. They have to sway from side to side or back and forth to keep the bike from falling over. Swaying the bike creates energy. When this energy is sent forward (riding the bicycle forward), it becomes possible to balance and to travel in a straight line, and consequently to relax.

To reiterate, many mistakes occur because the horse is not in balance while carrying a rider. The horse is not disobedient in this case. He depends on the rider to help him find his balance. To influence the horse properly, we must develop a good understanding of the subject and keep the following points in mind:

- Place the horse upright straight under you.
- Develop a feeling of equilibrium in the horse's top-line.
- Maintain a feeling of having more horse in front of you than behind you.
- Create sufficient energy.
- Position yourself correctly—first and foremost by sitting straight.
- Work the horse in a steady tempo.
- Always work the horse in a frame that makes it physically possible for him to do what you ask without negative tension.
- Stay out of the way of the horse. Let the horse move freely and naturally.