

Balance: The Horse's Perspective

By Lynn Acton

You probably notice when you carry a child piggyback that you feel every wiggle of your little passenger. A lean encourages you to step under the load. Kicking, arm waving, and grabbing at your clothing is irritating, if not downright painful. A larger child who is quietly balanced can be easier to carry than a lighter but more active one.

Looking at this from the horse's perspective, they normally carry anywhere from one-tenth to one quarter of their own weight, the maximum commonly recommended by veterinarians. This is significant. Personally, I couldn't go anywhere fast toting even 10% of my own weight! Yes, our horses have the advantage of a leg at each corner, but they still feel every move we make. Just watch a well trained horse perform while the rider appears to do nothing at all. When we get on a horse, we interfere with the natural balance that made him the graceful creature we admired in the first place. It's our responsibility to minimize that interference.

A horse carries a rider's weight most easily when his saddle fits comfortably, and his rider's center of gravity matches his. This "centered" balance is not a matter of opinion; it's gravity. We should sit on a horse the same way we stand: with feet, hips, shoulders, and head in vertical alignment. Even when our upper body adjusts for hills or jumping, our feet should remain under our hips. This is the foundation of a good seat that lets us move our body along with the horse, and keeps us on his back through unexpected maneuvers. Our hands can be steady and gentle on the reins, our legs symmetrically relaxed against the horse's sides, ready to give soft cues. This relaxed posture helps us read the horse's responses to our cues. We feel the first shift of weight that says he's going to respond, so we can release the cue. When he fails to respond, we feel the subtle changes in his tension and balance that distinguish confusion, discomfort, or stubbornness. We can feel when the horse is off-balance, and ultimately learn to help him carry himself better under our weight.

We learned to balance ourselves on bicycles because they tipped over when we didn't. Many people assume they are balanced on a horse as long as they aren't falling off, yet few people truly are balanced on a horse. Horses, however, feel the rider's slightest deviation from their center of gravity, front to back or side to side. Riders who use this to their advantage help the horse to be sensitive and responsive to cues, and to move with ease and grace. When the rider's weight is at odds with the horse's balance, the horse is often confused or uncomfortable. Riders who lean back tend to steady themselves with the reins, bumping the horse's mouth. Those who

lean forward often cling with their legs, cueing the horse to speed up. An off-center rider prompts the horse to drift sideways. Many horses are doing just what their riders accidentally tell them to do, while their frustrated riders accuse them of misbehaving. “Behavior” problems such as head-tossing, bucking, refusing to go forward, refusing to stop, prancing, or spooking are often the horse’s response to faulty balance and conflicting cues. Even when the horse manages to adapt, the tension required to compensate can make horse or rider sore.

These are some strategies used by riders of all levels to improve their balance. Minute changes in your riding can produce big changes in your horse’s response, and correct balance might feel “wrong” if you are unaccustomed to it, so stay tuned in to your horse. Always place the highest priority on your horse’s comfort and your safety.

1. Study photos or videos of your riding. Side views should show that if the horse magically vanished, you’d land on your feet, not your face or rump.
2. Ride without stirrups or ride bareback.
3. Ride without reins while someone lunges you.
4. Get a friend to observe and give you feedback.
5. Notice tension in your body, especially in your shoulders, arms, legs, and hips. Tension in these places is common when a rider’s balance is insecure.
6. Play with your balance; lean a little forward, a little backward; shift your seat slightly left or right. Notice what your horse does with each change.
7. Check the balance of your saddle. Many saddles place the rider’s seat behind her feet, so balance is an on-going struggle. Try another (wider) saddle, or lift the back of your saddle with a pad or folded towel.
8. Audit or ride in a Centered Riding clinic. Centered Riding focuses on balance and communication, making it useful for riders of all disciplines.
9. Take lessons from a Centered Riding instructor, or one with a similar philosophy.

Instruction focused on how the rider *looks* makes people stiff, too worried about “correct posture” to move their bodies with the horse. Balance, the foundation of all good riding, is a dynamic interaction between horse and rider which the rider must learn to *feel*. Combined with clear, gentle cues, it creates an effortlessly elegant appearance. Even better, it makes the rider an easy partner to carry. The ultimate test is to imagine yourself in your horse’s place, and ride as you would want to be ridden.

Resources: www.centeredriding.org

Any book or video on Centered Riding by Sally Swift

Dancing with Horses by Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling

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