

## February 2016 - Fitness Tip: Balanced Rider = Balanced Horse

Written by Elizabeth Hanson, Equestrian Pilates®  
Tuesday, 02 February 2016 07:17

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One of the greatest skills that separates an upper level rider from a beginner is the ability to notice and anticipate the movement of the horse and then move his body exactly as needed.



Our ability to be aware of our movement is a major determining factor in how successful we are with clear and meaningful communication to the horse and maintaining our balance in the saddle.

Fortunately for us, our horse's movement gives us exact feedback if we are riding correctly or not. For example, when the rider is stiff in the back, so is the horse. When the rider leans too much to one side, so does the horse. The movements of the horse and rider mirror one another almost always perfectly and provide the rider with an opportunity to improve. Our horses give us exact feedback about what we need to do or change in our riding to get the results that we really want.

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So, how can we ensure our success? Awareness of our movement is the starting point that allows us to be proactive. For example, can we feel our body sliding to the right and correct it before it causes our horse to lean too far to the right? Can we notice this and other faults and correct them three, four or five strides before it all falls apart?

For example, I often hear from my new Equestrian Pilates® clients, “My horse picks up right lead canter changes more easily than left lead canter changes.”

The first place I assess them is their pelvic girdle or seat as it is the basis for their balance in the saddle. Most often, their horses have difficulty with lead changes because they are not balanced in their seat. And when the rider is not balanced here, it is almost impossible for them to control the rest of their body and use their aids independently.

In particular, this problem is often caused when the rider is stronger on the right side of their body than their left. In the saddle, it typically looks like they are sitting more in the right seat bone, the right leg feels longer than the left and the left leg turns out to grip better and make up for the imbalance.

This person typically holds onto the left rein more tightly, they lean more into the left shoulder and often the left side of their torso is twisted a bit to the right.

All of these factors make it extremely hard for the horse to pick up the left lead as the rider is too heavily right sided. The horse can't feel the rider well on the left side and most likely, to him, the rider feels like he is sliding to the right. These factors unbalance the horse's movement and make it extremely hard for the horse to pick up the left lead.

As a short term solution the rider can slide their right butt cheek over to the left to sit more in their left seat and open the left shoulder to balance themselves out.

The long term solution is to get off the horse and learn how to notice when they are “uneven” in

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their seat and to strengthen the correct muscles.

Here's one exercise to accomplish that.



### **Pelvic Bowl**

The goal of this exercise is to learn how to move your pelvis while engaging your core, stretch and release tension in your lower back, improve your posture and notice where your seat bones are in space. This is extremely important for the rider as these skills create a more effective and independent seat.

Start out lying on your back with your knees bent, your feet flat on the floor and your arms by your sides. While doing this exercise it is important to notice what muscles you are using to move your pelvis. Pull your belly button in at about 30% of your tightest squeeze. Do not squeeze your abs too much as this will cause you to become rigid. Relax your buttocks and the front and back of your legs. Stay focused on relaxing your body as you move.

1. Start by flattening your back to the mat. Notice that as you are doing this, your tailbone lifts off the mat towards the ceiling. Keep your legs and pelvis still.
2. Lift your left hip then lower it.
3. Press the tailbone down into the mat, allowing your back to arch.
4. Lift your right hip and then lower it.
5. Repeat eight times in this order and then reverse eight times.
6. Make sure you remember to breathe during this exercise.

While simple, this exercise can have a profound effect on teaching you how to move your seat. The most important thing to focus on during this exercise is to notice what your body is doing. The attention to form is more important than the number of repetitions.

Remember, it is the same as training your horse. It is better to stop when the exercise is performed well than to get tired and sacrifice form.

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Controlling your seat can mean the difference between a balanced walk, trot or canter, keeping your balance over a jump, successful flying lead changes and more.

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*Author Elizabeth Hanson is the creator of Equestrian Pilates®, in which she gives clinics nation-wide. Clients report dramatic improvements in their riding skills, health and enjoyment. Being able to sit the trot better, improved use of the aids and relief from low back pain are among the system's many benefits. Visit [www.equestrianpilates.com](http://www.equestrianpilates.com) to schedule a clinic or purchase her ebook.*