

Just as with humans, posture is critical to comfort, performance and injury prevention in horses.

by Julie Weisz

Horses were not designed to carry riders on their backs. They can do so easily and joyously with the proper muscle development, but unless care is taken in that development, it can lead to many problems.



Much focus has been placed on the rider's equitation. Good position is of paramount importance for a variety of reasons including balance, alignment, directing the horse effectively, and not impeding the horse's movement. The position of the horse is just as important as the position of the rider.

Studies have shown that people who work behind a desk can end up with back and other health complications from sitting in an unnatural position for many hours on a regular basis. It is estimated that 40 percent of people with back pain have spent long hours at a desk each day, indicating a strong correlation between back pain and being seated for extended periods of time. Back problems can also arise from bad posture. As we age, the spine being out of alignment from slumped shoulder can compress vertebrae and strain muscles as gravity takes its toll. By not paying attention to our posture or by sitting in a position that is unnatural to the way our bodies were anatomically designed, we can injure ourselves.

This same concept applies to horses. It may be uncomfortable for us to have good posture. It requires activating more core muscles and being more conscious of the way we are holding ourselves. This is true for horses also. By nature, they will not engage muscles they do not need

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to that may allow them to carry a rider more easily or perform better. However, we can help them develop to be more comfortable and better able to perform the jobs we ask of them.

Imagine carrying a backpack with bad posture for an hour almost every day. The additional weight will put extra strain on areas that are already at risk of injury from gravity's work on bad posture alone. Such is the case with adding the weight of a rider to the horse's back.

Supporting "the Bridge."

The horse is designed like a bridge—each leg acts as a pillar of support, and the thoracic and lumbar vertebrae make up the carrying span of the bridge. If the horse has bad posture or the muscles have not been developed correctly, we are going to put additional strain on the horse's back muscles and spine and other areas of the body that are compensating for this strain and imbalance.

Our goal should be to develop the muscles supporting the "bridge" in such a way that the horse can carry us easily and without strain.



If you look at photos of young horses cantering in pasture that have not yet started their training, you will see many examples of horses that could not easily sustain a rider on their backs with their current posture. You will see horses with their heads up in the air, backs hollowed, weight on the forehand, and leaning inward in the direction of the lead. Even though we strive to improve the breeding of our horses and have continued to breed better athletes, these horses are still not born with the balance capable of carrying a rider in a way that minimizes risk of injury or pain. Horses like the young horses just described may be able to stay sound without a rider for many years, perhaps even their whole lives, just like some people with bad posture can live their whole lives without back problems. However, particularly with horses asked to perform at high levels, it is essential that we train them to have better posture.

Just as sitting at a desk for too many hours or carrying a backpack with poor posture can impact our health and damage our backs, so can a variety of factors contribute to the horse's poor posture and muscle development.

Hoof imbalance would be equivalent to us attempting to perform sports with different shoes on each foot. Poor dentistry can negatively affect the way the horse holds their head and neck. Poor conformation, poorly fitting saddles, rider imbalances and insufficient training can all impact posture. If the horse is otherwise healthy and balanced, then their posture and development is reliant on our training techniques.

There are a variety of tools that I utilize in developing a more sound and capable athlete. Note that every horse is different, and the training techniques required for each horse may be unique to the individual, but these tools have proved beneficial in creating more balanced posture in my horses.

One of these tools is lunging and longlining with the use of a surcingle. Additional exercises for developing good equine posture involve shoulder-fore and what I call "Supple-A" and "Supple-B" exercises. These latter two you can find described in the continuation of this article online at www.ridingmagazine.com (below).

Lunging & Longlining

I use lunging and longlining as a tool to help the horse develop correctly without the interference of the rider and the rider's imbalances. I very rarely free lunge my horses as I believe it can actually encourage incorrect posture. If we have poor posture and then workout with that poor posture, we will be reinforcing that incorrect muscle development and may even strain or injure ourselves.



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This is also true of free lunging horses without proper posture development. Not only will we be allowing the horse to travel in an unbalanced manner, we will be forcing the horse to travel on a circle and sometimes at a faster speed than they might choose on their own. This will put undue strain on areas that are already strained by poor posture or natural imbalances.

When lunging, I use a rig designed as a part of the Balanced Equine Training program that includes a surcingle, side reins with rubber donuts for elasticity to simulate the rider's elbows, a hindquarter strap, and a single line. One of the primary tools I focus on is the training of "Supple A" in the horse, or the shape of the horse when bending to the inside.

The side rein on the outside of the horse is set low, attached immediately above the horse's elbow on the surcingle. This encourages the horse to stretch down. The inside side rein is set high and slightly shorter than the outside side rein, running from the bit back to the top ring on the surcingle.

Alternatively, I may run my lunge line through the bit and back to the top ring on the surcingle, which gives me greater control over the pressure applied to the bit and the shape of the horse's neck. By running the side rein high or attaching the line to the top ring, the bit is lifted into the more sensitive corner of the horse's mouth. If pressure is applied downward on the horse's mouth, you will be working on the bar of the mouth and thus pulling the horse into position and fighting against all of the neck musculature that will be engaged to resist such a motion. However, by lifting the inside of the bit up in the corner of the mouth, the horse will learn to reach for the contact and shape in a manner that is more correct with their anatomy.

I set the side reins tight enough to indicate that the horse should reach for the bit and engage the correct upper neck musculature, yet loose enough so that they are not forcing or trapping the horse into a particular position. The goal of the side reins is to encourage the horse to shape and reach for the bit, leading to what will become a "connection" and "throughness." The horse uses their head and neck for balance and it must be able to move as the horse moves. If movement is restricted too much, you can actually cause damage.

The hindquarter strap runs across the horse's hind legs above the hocks and attaches back to the surcingle with elastic cord. This causes the horse to tilt the pelvis anteriorly, allowing the back to come up, increasing impulsion, and encouraging the horse to propel more from the hind

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legs. If the pelvis is allowing greater impulsion and use of the longissimus muscles in the back without tension, then the back will be lifted and working more correctly, developing musculature that supports the weight of the rider.

The bend through the shape of the circle combined with the elastic side reins and hindquarter strap all encourage the horse to travel in a more balanced manner that is more capable of supporting the weight and aids of the rider.

Many riders and trainers refer to the development of a “topline.” Some of the topline muscles include the longissimus dorsi and longissimus costarum muscles that are directly beneath the saddle and rider’s seat. By using this lunging method effectively, the horse will propel themselves more correctly from the hindquarters and reach for the connection of the bit, thereby developing their topline. This development of the back muscles will better support the weight of the rider.

Explanations of two more exercises that will help develop your horse’s posture can be found in the online continuation of this article at www.ridingmagazine.com (below).

Author Julie Weisz utilizes the Balanced Equine Training program which, similar to physical therapy, focuses on the anatomy of horse and rider to develop more sound and balanced athletes. She uses her anatomical understanding and dressage fundamentals to help horses and riders excel in a variety of disciplines. Julie’s background as a youth is primarily in equitation and jumpers. Her accomplishments in equitation include winning the Onondarka Medal Finals and placing 1st in the Maclay Regional Medal Finals, CPHA Medal Finals, PCHA Medal Finals, and PHA West Medal Finals. She has had success in international jumper competitions, winning classes up to 1.40m and attending shows in Calgary, Canada; Arezzo, Italy; Birmingham, England; Valkenswaard, the Netherlands; and Dubai, UAE. Julie’s training business, Elpis Enterprises, is now based out of Del Rio Farms in Fallbrook. She attends A-rated and county level hunter/jumper and dressage shows.

Developing Equine Posture

This continuation of our April 2016 issue article on equine posture by hunter/jumper trainer Julie Weisz describes two additional exercises: Shoulder fore and “suppling A and B”.



It is my belief that the idea of “straight” is never truly straight. If a horse is allowed to go straight without any interference, they will travel in a way that compensates for all of their imbalances and poor posture. If a horse has an injury, they will modify their range of motion to protect themselves from experiencing the pain. Unless they are rehabilitated appropriately and taught to use their full range of motion again, there may always be some level of compromised movement. This is also true of horses that are not trained to travel with better posture. Whether from conformation or injury, they will not necessarily travel in a way that is most balanced.

With most of my horses, I am always working toward the achievement of the shoulder fore movement when I am traveling “straight.” In shoulder fore, the horse travels at a lesser angle than in shoulder in. The outside hind leg stays on the outside track, and the shoulders are very slightly to the inside. The horse is shaped through their neck and body to the inside. This position encourages the horse to push off more from the outside hind leg and to stay more balanced when turning. We do not want the horse to fall in or lean to the inside, as this will increase the pressure on the inside legs and might even lead to slipping through turns from lack of balance. By keeping the horse in shoulder fore, the horse maintains better balance.

To achieve shoulder fore, I begin by asking the horse for the bend required on an approximately 15m circle. When I leave the circle and travel straight ahead, I try to maintain the bend from the circle. I keep the shape created from the circle, but my inside leg sends the horse straight ahead instead of using outside leg to continue the turn of the circle. The outside rein is also applied to prevent the horse’s haunches from falling away from the left leg instead of the horse travelling straight ahead. There is a constant “pitch” and “catch” sensation as the rider “pitches” the horse straight ahead from the left leg and “catches” the shape of the horse with the outside rein.

Supple A and Supple B

In order to achieve better balance in my horses, I ask them to shape to both the inside and the outside on a 20m circle in the walk, trot, and canter. I refer to inside bend as Supple A and outside bend as Supple B. I use the term “supple” because this exercise works to supple both the inside and outside of the horse. We want to develop muscles that are supple as opposed to tense as they will work more effectively and be less likely to “break.” The more elasticity the muscles have, the more they will be capable of sustaining the work that is required of them without injury.



In Supple A, I ask the horse to shape mostly from the inside aids. I lift the inside rein up so that the bit is lifted into the corner of the mouth. This asks the horse to position and shape through the neck to the inside. My inside leg stays forward by the girth, toward the front of the horse’s rib cage. I time the application of my inside leg aid such that when the horse’s inside hind leg is off the ground, I am asking the horse to step away very slightly. When the inside hind leg is on the ground, the horse’s ribcage is in such a position that the belly can be moved over. In essence, I am attempting to “supple” the horse around and away from my inside leg. The act of moving the belly over encourages the back to move and swing, encouraging elasticity, suppleness and balance.

In Supple B, I ask the horse to shape using primarily the outside aids. Essentially, I ask the horse to position to the outside and turn from and shape around my outside leg. My outside leg is now forward at the front of the horse’s rib cage, and I apply my outside leg aid when the outside hind leg is off the ground. I lift up the outside rein to ask the horse to shape to the outside and turn away from the shape.

This exercise increases the flexibility of the horse and the suppleness of their muscles as those muscles extend and contract through the exercise. Just as all people are either right-handed or left-handed, all horses are right-sided or left-sided. Unless we ask the horse to work both sides

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evenly, one side will be more developed than the other as a result of their natural side preference. A person can become nearly ambidextrous if they are required to use both hands to perform the same tasks. They will have more difficulty with their non-dominant side at first, but with practice, both sides can develop to have nearly identical capabilities. We can apply this same concept with our horses, and this exercise helps our horses to become more “ambidextrous.” By working both sides of the horse evenly, they can travel and perform with better balance in both directions.



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