

ACHIEVING BALANCE AND LEARNING TO “SEE” WHAT YOU LOOK AT

By

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A long time ago I had just returned to England from Switzerland where I had been working in Vevey for a year. I needed “a job” and I didn’t want to work in an office, for which I was qualified. I wanted to work with horses, for which, at the time, I was not, technically. So I did what everyone did in those far off days long before personal computers and websites and so on, I bought a copy of Horse & Hound (the English weekly for all horse related activities) and replied to an advertisement for a “big sister/horse trainer/riding teacher” job in Wiltshire.

I got the job which was with a private family, exercising and schooling the mother’s hunters and the children’s ponies, escorting the mother, and on week-ends the children, hunting, to hunter trials and horse shows and so on. I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to that mother. The family lived in a beautiful but drafty old English Manor House with stables, and land, and a groom and daily help in the house, but with much less money than many of their very wealthy friends and associates (who included such illustrious families as the Beauforts - Duke and Duchess of). Consequently the mother, who had a great ‘eye for a horse’ spent time going to Ireland, searching out good young horses and ponies, and bringing them over to train, hunt, show and often sell!

The year I spent with the family I learned how to truly LOOK at a horse. Mrs. W. taught me to look first at the horse standing, without tack, and see the skeleton. I learned with her help to really KNOW the bone structure of the horse in front of me. I learned that the horse should look ‘square’, with a leg at each corner. Then I learned how important movement is. Mrs. W. looked for a long, loose, swinging walk with each leg moving straight through and an even four beat rhythm. Very often these horses were not in good condition. Most were very underfed and most were not started under saddle, or had only been under saddle a few weeks, so the muscle structure was often very poorly developed, but I learned to see ‘potential’ in the raw material.

I had been lucky enough to own, train and compete my own horses almost all my life but the education I got there in Wiltshire was invaluable. We started and trained these youngsters together and I learned the importance of developing free forward movement, rhythm and suppleness which gave them balance.

Learning to “see” if a horse is balanced takes some practice. The first thing to understand is what exactly does “free forward movement” mean. Too often riders mistake rushing about as moving freely forward and they will ‘run’ their horses when they intend to trot, without the correct rhythm, often causing the horse to fall on the forehand and lose his balance. I like to think of “forward” as a state of mind in which the horse is ready, willing and able to carry out the rider’s wishes promptly and easily. A horse who is “forward” is listening to his rider, has confidence in his rider and a desire to promptly obey the aids. For his part, the rider must know in his mind and feel in his body the pace and rhythm that is right for the horse he is riding.

To be balanced the horse’s weight (and that of his rider) should be equally distributed over all four feet, he has a good natural rhythm, he is supple both laterally and longitudinally and he is engaged, i.e. connected to the rider from the leg into the hand. A horse that is not balanced will be stiff in his frame, have a choppy gait and inconsistent rhythm.

Start by finding your horse's correct tempo (the speed of the footfalls) where the horse is moving with sufficient energy but not running into your hand. This will let you feel the correct rhythm, where the horse is tracking up and is moving comfortably through his back. Practice watching as many horses being ridden as you can, especially if you tend to learn more easily through what you see. Look to see if the horse's hind legs are swinging freely forward and striking the ground well underneath his body - as near as possible under where the rider is sitting. Or perhaps they seem to be trailing a bit out behind the horse and his back might seem to be hollow. If that is the case the horse is not engaged and you will notice that he does not appear to be supple and cannot easily lengthen and shorten his stride.

Once you have the correct tempo and can maintain a consistent rhythm, you can start developing longitudinal suppleness by shortening and lengthening the horse's frame. To do this ride transitions both between gaits and within the gait. Especially in the downward transition from trot to walk you can teach the horse to understand the half-halt. The half-halt is a re-balancing or a slight check which causes the horse to shift some of his weight back towards the hindquarters.

When you start your young horse balance is your number one goal. Transitions, circles, trotting poles and cross-country riding are your main tools for developing balance in your horse. Particularly the transitions from trot to canter and from canter to trot require that you have developed good balance in your horse. If he is unbalanced he will run faster and faster in the trot getting heavier and heavier in your hand until he falls into the canter. Do not let this happen. Develop a good understanding of balancing your horse and before any transition prepare him, position him and only then perform the transition.

Refining your aids and developing a good understanding of balance and how to transfer it both back towards the rear to engage and collect your horse, and forward to extend him will put you well on the way to training a forward, supple and pleasant horse.