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EXTRA



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Between
the Aids

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Create Balance Between the AID'S

A student of German Olympian Nicole Uphoff explains this foundation concept.

By Barbara Strawson • Photos by Alois Müller

There are times when you have the opportunity to make a choice that will dramatically change your life. Choosing a new path can be risky because there is no guarantee that it will be better than the path you are already on. For me, this moment arrived nearly three years ago when I had the opportunity to train with Nicole Uphoff in Germany.

My experience began by learning the basics of Nicole's training system. Nicole

and her students warned me that the first two months would be difficult, and they were right. I felt as if I were in kindergarten again, working hard to master the concept that is the foundation for all other dressage training: balancing the horse between my hands and legs.

When a rider can create this balance, he will be able to ride the horse totally from his seat and leg in any frame and through transitions and movements. Most problems seem to occur when the rider has lost this balance between the hands and legs and, as a result, has lost

To create balance between the aids, I need to make sure there is even weight in the reins and even pressure with my legs. I must keep my body straight and my weight evenly distributed in the saddle.



Barbara Strawson was assistant trainer at Hilltop Farm in Colora, Maryland for 11 years. In 2001, she traveled to Germany to train with four-time Olympic gold medalist Nicole Uphoff, who introduced her to the concept of "creating balance between the hands and the legs." In this article, Strawson explains her early days with Uphoff, learning this essential basic.

The WeightAID



LEFT: By turning my shoulders slightly in the direction of the bend and not collapsing to either side, I can keep my weight to the inside. Without the "kink" in my position, Donnerfee's energy can flow through his body whether he is turning or bending.

RIGHT: When I first went to Nicole's, I was unstable and uneven in my hips. I dropped my left shoulder and collapsed in my rib cage, which threw my weight to the right. This caused me to block my horse from coming through.

the connection with his horse.

To achieve this balance, my first focus was on the use of my seat—my weight, my legs, my butt muscles and back—as well as overall body tone. As I achieved control over my seat, I was able to work on the contact and coordination of my hands. In this article, I'll go over how I learned these concepts, and I'll give two exercises to practice creating this balance.

Using my Weight

Under Nicole's instruction, I realized that I needed to use my weight more effectively when asking my horse to turn or bend. I was inadvertently letting my weight shift to the outside. I was unstable and uneven in my hips. I dropped my inside shoulder and collapsed in my rib cage, which threw my weight to the outside.

This position problem caused me to block my horse from coming through. The energy that is created from the hind end and is supposed to flow over his back and into a steady contact in the reins had no where to go. This prevented him from doing what I asked. "Blocking" a horse's energy is similar to what would happen if your horse stepped on a garden hose. The water would stop flowing because of the kink in the hose. The incorrect use of my weight was acting like a kink that stopped the flow of energy through my horse.

In an effort to sit straight and to the inside of the bend, I thought about putting more weight on my inside stirrup. I also worked at achieving balance to the inside by concentrating on keeping my body aligned correctly. By opening (or turning) my shoulders slightly in the

direction of the bend and not collapsing to either side, I succeeded in keeping my weight to the inside.

Without the "kink," my horse's energy could flow through his body whether he was straight or bent. I practiced using my body to ask him to bend on the longe line, too. I would bend the horse to the inside or outside by turning my shoulders and keeping my hips, seat, weight and legs properly aligned. Nicole told me when I was correct or not and reminded me of what the feeling should be.

Using my Leg

Originally, my lower leg was often too far forward or back and not consistently on my horse. Once I was able to use my weight correctly, my leg remained solid—always on the horse but not tight or clamping and in line with my shoulder, hip and heel.

Next I needed to learn the proper use of my legs. I learned how to use my inside versus outside leg or my upper versus lower leg. I also learned the details of how to use my leg to energize the horse versus turning or asking for a movement. Each part of your leg has a different function, and it is the combination of each of these functions that creates the desired effect and response from the horse. For example, to ask the horse to bend in his rib cage, you use the inside lower leg at the girth with your weight to the inside. The outside upper leg helps control the shoulder and turn the horse, while the outside lower leg held slightly back helps create bend through the horse's body by preventing the haunches from going out. Both lower legs can ask for more energy from the horse. Tapping with both lower legs will create a more expressive gait; asking with the outside lower leg in the canter asks the horse to be more active in his hind end. The upper legs (in combination with the seat, back, and lower legs) also ask the horse to collect his gaits and make downward transitions. I will

The LegAIDS



ABOVE: Once I was able to use my weight correctly, my leg remained solidly in the correct position — always on the horse and in line with my shoulder, hip and heel but not tight or clamping.

ABOVE RIGHT: Each part of the leg has a different function. It is the combination of each of these that creates the desired effect and response from the horse. For example, to ask the horse to bend in his rib cage, I use the inside lower leg at the girth with my weight to the inside.

RIGHT: The upper outside leg helps control the horse's shoulder and helps turn the horse; the outside lower leg, slightly back, helps to create bend through the horse's body by preventing the haunches from going out.



explain that in more detail later.

Using "Positive Tension"

I was always very loose and supple on a horse and was able to easily follow the rhythm, but at times, it was as if I were just a passenger, not a leading dance partner. I was so loose that my body lost its integrity when I tried to do something. Some riders may have a different problem. Other riders may be too stiff in the back and seat, in which case they need to

work on more suppling and lightness. For me, riding actively means always feeling what the Germans call *Spannung* in my body. Nicole describes it as "positive tension," and it enables me to direct my horse. I compare this feeling to standing in a boat in rough seas. Your muscles must maintain a certain amount of stretchy tension so you don't fall over but still be flexible enough to go with the waves. This, along with the correct alignment of my body, has been the most diffi-

cult concept for me to master.

I also needed to sit deeper, although I'm not referring to a driving seat. For me, this meant sitting slightly back more on my seat and feeling heavier and connected to the horse through my seat and back; to ride actively and not just sit there letting the horse carry me around. Of course, depending on what the horse needed, sometimes I sat heavier and used my back, but I learned that I could not lighten up afterward so much that I was

The ReinAIDS



The inside hand may slightly lead to the inside to encourage the horse to bend. The outside hand creates an elastic border to assist in maintaining the bend.

ineffective, thus allowing the horse to take advantage.

Using My Butt Muscles

I also learned how to “squeeze my cheeks,” or make my butt muscles firm, when asking for a downward transition or collection. Likewise, I learned how to relax the muscles to get forward movement. I am still laughing about the first time I understood this. I was on the longe line (no stirrups or reins), and the horse was running off in the trot. Nicole kept saying “squeeze your cheeks.” I nearly fell off laughing, but I learned that tightening the butt muscles also influences the back and legs to be firm and brings you deeper into the saddle. I made endless transitions on the longe, and I began to feel how to use my seat and back. I felt how squeezing my cheeks and bracing my back made the horse wait for me and helped him listen to my seat aid. I braced my back by increasing the stretchy positive tension in my back and sitting against the movement a bit. It is not really sitting against the flow of the horse because the energy still flows through, but it causes the horse to wait, and it increases my horse’s stability and balance. I could feel when to relax

my back again and go with the horse to maintain the movement or ask him to go more forward. I could feel how I needed to always be connected to the horse, maintaining the positive tension, without getting too light or too hard. We did every transition imaginable without my hands. It was through these transitions that I learned the feeling of positive tension, weight in my seat and bracing my back.

Using my Hands for Consistent Contact

I realized that I needed to have a much more consistent contact in both reins. I had developed the habit of dropping one rein or the other, especially when the horse was strong. I realized that giving did not mean dropping. I needed to trust that my body could do the work instead of my hands. To keep the contact, I carried my hands a little wider than normal and evenly balanced on either side of the horse’s neck. This is more comfortable for the horse’s mouth because the bit is straighter and more even, and it helps me to keep contact while the horse stretches. (Nicole often rides her horses deep and round with her hands wide. When the horse is ridden into a normal frame, then her hands are more conventional—closer

together.) With more correct use of my legs, seat and body tone, I am now able to keep a soft, steady contact with my hands, receiving the energy from the horse’s back and directing it into the desired frame with squeezes or half halts. Half halts are the final touch in creating the balance between the hands and legs.

Putting the Concepts Together

To make a downward transition or a half halt, I have learned to brace my back, squeeze my cheeks and close my knees, while keeping my lower leg on to use when necessary to keep the horse active. In addition, I coordinate my fingers and hands only to keep the horse round and chewing on the bit. When I am able to put all of these tools together correctly, I have the feeling of what Nicole calls, “the balance between both legs and hands.” This is a feeling of pure harmony with the horse. I have the ability to direct my horse wherever I want, keeping consistent rhythm, suppleness, straightness and contact. I feel as if I could go on forever. It’s like being absorbed in a conversation with an old friend. You have a give-and-take with each other.

Exercises for Balance Between the Aids

The following exercises helped me achieve balance between hands and legs:

Flexing and bending

Teaching the horse to bend in both directions also teaches the rider to coordinate the aids. “Flexion” refers to a slight turning of the horse’s head at the poll, and the neck is only slightly bent. Your inside hand asks for the flexion by squeezing slightly as if you are asking the horse to chew on the bit. You do not want to flex the head and neck more than the horse is bent in the rib cage. “Bend” refers to the flexion as well as the bend through the rib cage; he is evenly bent through his length.

When putting the aids together in a proper bend, think about the concept of balancing the horse between your hands

and legs. It is your aids that maintain the straightness of the horse, and that creates the balance. A horse is “straight” when he is properly balanced, whether he is on a straight line or curve. An imaginary line can be drawn along his spine that conforms with the line of travel. When the horse is properly balanced between hands and legs, you are controlling all four corners of the horse and you guide each piece to proper straightness.

When the horse is correctly bent, you are able to ride him from the inside leg to the outside rein. First, you learn to ride the energy forward into a steady contact with both reins. Then as you ask for more bend, you send the energy with the inside leg into the outside rein, which along with the outside leg, directs the energy and encourages the horse to bend around your inside leg. You can test to see if you have a correct bend by giving the inside rein; your horse should maintain the bend, roundness and energy.

These basics are extremely important, because as you advance to the higher-level movements, you need to be able to guide all of the horse’s parts.

Counter flexion (or flexion to the outside) is an excellent suppling exercise that is good preparation for bending and serpentine exercises. You can start with your horse in a slight counter flexion. Maintain the counter flexion around the whole ring to then change rein across the diagonal to end up with the horse flexed to the inside. Do this in each direction. Once the horse understands the concept of counter flexing, you can do counter bending exercises. When you want a counter bend, the aids are the same except in reverse, meaning when you bend the horse to the outside, now the outside becomes your inside.

Riding Serpentes

Serpentines are an important part of my training program. When riding serpentines, I need to keep my weight to the

inside of the bend. For example, if I am making a loop to the left, with the left bend, my weight is to the left. I am using my right leg to turn as well as to keep the haunches in line. If I am making a loop to the left with a right bend, my weight is to the right toward the bend. My right leg is still turning the horse. Since this is a difficult suppling exercise, the horse may fall out of balance, so it is important to think of the balance between the hands and the legs. I might have to be a bit stronger with my leg at first by giving the horse a tap to explain what I want. It can be quite challenging to maintain your stability, keeping constant contact with the reins on either side of the neck when asking the horse to turn while he is on a counter bend. Crossing one rein over the neck is an indication that the rider’s legs are not working properly. As I become more consistent with my aids and my body, I feel the horse begins to stretch into the contact and become rounder over the back.

When these exercises are done correctly, my horse responds to the lightest aid and change in my weight. Coordination, concentration and use of “positive tension” bring together a feeling of balance between the hands and legs. 🐾

Training with Nicole

During my three years in Germany, Nicole’s teaching exceeded my expectations. Before returning home, I will compete Donnerfee, an 11-year-old Hanoverian Donnerhall mare owned by Jane MacElree and Hilltop Farm, at Grand Prix. And I will compete Hawkeye, a 6-year-old Oldenburg gelding by Hawthorne, owned by Joan Strawson and bred by Hilltop Farm, at L and M levels (approximately Second and Third Levels).

I also have had the wonderful opportunity of training and showing horses belonging to Nicole and will compete with some of them as well. When I return home, in addition to the continued training of these horses and others, I look forward to sharing my knowledge with my students in lessons and in clinics.



LEFT: Excessive flexing, such as I’m demonstrating here, teaches the horse to go incorrectly on the forehand.



RIGHT: Flexion to the outside is an excellent suppling tool that is good preparation for bending and serpentine exercises. You can start your horse in a slight counter flexion. Maintain the counter flexion around the whole ring and then change rein across the diagonal to end up with the horse flexed to the inside.



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A 10 for TURNOUT

Personal stylist Barbara Biernat tells you how to dress your shape to look your best in and out of the ring.

By Lindsay Paulsen with Barbara Biernat

We spend hours ensuring that our horses are meticulously groomed and sharply outfitted, from their smoothly braided forelocks to the tips of their polished hooves. But this often comes at the expense of our own appearance. After all, how often do you head out to the ring with a gleaming horse but covered in dirt yourself?

Feeling confident and comfortable in your riding clothes not only makes it easier to transition from the barn to wherever your day takes you, but it might have more of an effect on your riding than you would think.

“Dressage has so much to do with attitude. If you feel like a million bucks, you ride a little bit better,” says Barbara Biernat of Horse & Rider Boutique in Los Angeles, California.

Biernat is the outfitter of international-caliber riders such as Adrienne Lyle and Debbie McDonald and uses her skills as a personal shopper to add extra polish to their image in the show ring.

Here, she shares her advice for looking your best in breeches and beyond with special consideration for women’s unique shapes. Whether you find yourself top-heavy, bottom-heavy or more straight-lined, a few tips from this pro might change the way you think about riding clothes.

All Shapes

- Tuck in your shirt. It is always flattering and regardless of your shape, untucked shirts tend to look frumpy.
- A good vest is everyone’s friend. Correctly fitted, it can conceal problem areas, help create a desirable silhouette and look neat and professional.
- Stick to breeches made from a thicker cotton material or even denim. These tend to be the most flattering fabrics because their thickness offers structure and helps hide imperfections.
- Choose pants with a wider waistband and wear a wider belt. This is usually more flattering and more comfortable for all shapes and sizes.
- If you like to ride in full-seat breeches, always choose pants that have a darker seat, such as white pants with a gray seat. This creates a slimming effect. Never wear darker pants with a lighter seat.
- Unlined jackets tend to be cut for a tighter fit. If you want to give yourself a bit more room for comfort, order up a size.



- Wear a thin shirt underneath the more snug fitting technical-fabric show coats to reduce bulk. Similarly, avoid large belts under technical coats to prevent unflattering bulges.

Top-Heavy

- Reach for shirts with princess seams, which are flattering because they provide shape and definition. Straight looks tend to not flatter those who are heavier up top.
- Invest in a quality sports bra, which is crucial for a comfortable ride and a polished look.
- Wearing the correct sports bra also can affect the fit of shirts and coats. Make sure to wear a sports bra to the tack shop when you try on shirts and coats because it will affect gapping.
- If a coat fits everywhere else except in the chest, you can have the button moved horizontally to loosen or tighten the chest area.
- Look for shirts with gussets—usually triangular pieces of fabric sewn into a seam—to help create definition.
- If you have thinner legs with a larger waist, purchase pants with a comfort-fit waistband that stretches. This allows you to wear pants that are small enough in the legs but large enough in the waist. This is better than the alternative of having to go up a size, resulting in bagginess around the legs.



- Avoid shirts with large prints and bright colors.

Bottom-Heavy

- Opt for breeches with back pockets that have flattering placement.

Correctly placed, these can create a lifting and slimming effect.

- Always buy breeches that have a side seam. The long vertical line of the side seam will make legs look longer and thinner.
- Stick to pants that provide more structure and support, and generally avoid pull-on tights.
- Splurge on more-expensive pants, as cheaper pants will start to sag and won't look as good. With pants, Biernat says, you tend to get what you pay for.
- Choose contrasting full-seat breeches over knee-patch breeches.
- Don't be afraid to experiment with brighter colors for larger sizes.
- Wear boots that are tapered at the

ankle to give the illusion of more definition in the leg.

- Give denim breeches a shot. They can be a great option for those with a heavier lower half, as they tend to hold you in place better.
- Avoid side-zip breeches. A zipper in the front breaks up the midsection.
- Steer clear of low-rise pants. Instead, pick breeches with a mid-rise fit. Low-rise pants tend to get saggy, and breeches with a higher waist draw the eye upward.

Straight-Lined

- Create the illusion of curves with high-waisted breeches.
- Add more shape to your seat with breeches with pockets.
- A correctly fitted vest can help create the illusion of a waist.
- When purchasing a coat, make sure that the sleeves are long enough or that there is enough material in the sleeve that can be let out to accommodate a longer arm.
- If you have trouble finding a coat or shirt that is the right length, order a size up and have it tailored.
- Look for a coat that offers the right silhouette without being baggy.
- Detail on the back of a coat can help to create more feminine lines. 

WHERE TO SPLURGE, WHERE TO SAVE:

To cut unnecessary expenses, Barbara Biernat of Horse and Rider Boutique advises riders to strategically invest in more-expensive, higher-quality pieces of certain clothing while choosing more economic options for others.

SPLURGE

Helmet: Ensuring your safety should be a priority. Don't compromise the fit of a helmet for price.

Schooling breeches: Investing in quality breeches for schooling trumps spending money on show breeches. Schooling breeches tend to get the most wear, so make sure you buy styles that last and opt for more economical show breeches.

Boots: Footwear needs to stand up to a lot of use, and shoes made with good leather are worth the investment.

Coat: More-expensive coats usually have better tailoring, which gives a sharper appearance.

SAVE

Gloves: Explore less-expensive options for gloves, as there are plenty of options on the market that provide good quality for a reasonable price.

Stock tie: It is difficult to tell the difference between a cheaper stock tie and a more-expensive one when it is worn under your coat.

Shirt: Unless coats are waived, shirts often stay hidden. Therefore, comfort and functionality are more important than appearance.



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