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OPTIMIZING YOUR HORSE'S SOUNDNESS FROM THE SADDLE

The key to a horse's longevity is riding him in balance.

By Beth Baumert

Dressage horses often live long, healthy lives—especially when ridden by riders who have a feel for balance. In fact, the best thing you can do for your horse's health and longevity is to ride him in a way that's friendly to his body—in a way

that makes him stronger instead of stressing him out. That means riding him in balance because tension and stress are inevitable when your horse is out of balance. When in balance, your horse is free to move forward in rhythm, with suppleness, reaching for the bit—all without tension.

Horses have a few innate balance issues even without the weight of a rider, and the successful rider is always managing those issues. Two of the balance issues are longitudinal, or back to front.

Back-to-Front Balance Issues

First, the horse by nature is inclined to be more eager with the forehand than the hindquarters. As a result, the forehand and the hindquarters aren't always coordinated with one another. When you ask your horse to do an upward transition from halt to walk, walk to trot or trot to canter, what happens? Does your horse give you a whole-bodied response in the upward transition or is he inclined to initiate movement with just his front end? If you're like most, your horse moves off with the front end and he is fairly unconscious about his hind end so it drags behind him as if it were a trailer behind the pulling front end. In fact, we can think of the front end as the "pulling engine" and the hind end as the "pushing engine."

When the pulling engine is dominant in the moment of any upward transition, the horse covers a little more ground with the front end than with the hind end. As a direct result, the horse gets a bit long in the frame, hollow in the back (with the shoulders down) and sometimes unpleasant in the hand. When the

By nature, the horse is wider in his hips than he is in the shoulders. Left to his own devices, the horse's wide thrust from behind is inclined to throw his weight onto the forehand. Under saddle, the rider can help her horse step under his center of gravity by narrowing the hind legs in shoulder-fore.



hindquarters are the driving force, causing the horse to cover ground, it has the effect of lifting the forehand.

Likewise, check out your horse's downward transitions. When going from canter to trot, trot to walk or walk to halt, what stops first? Often it is the hind end that quits as the front end keeps going. The result is the same sprawled horse who is hollow and tense in the back, on the forehand and unpleasant in the hand.

Of course, the horse has an even more basic balance issue: He is innately built on the forehand because his relatively large head and neck protrude off an otherwise table-like structure.

The Solution

Half halts and transitions are the rider's primary tools to improve the balance of the horse. With these tools, you will gently and

Decide what you want from your horse's hindquarters. If you need more power, then you need more thrust. If the power is making your horse stiff, you need less thrust. If he pops his hindquarters off the ground or becomes crooked behind the saddle, he is avoiding engagement. If he is crooked, you also need to refine the reach. Maybe you don't necessarily want *more* reach, but you want him to reach to a specific place—under your center of gravity, instead of to the side.

As I said, transitions and half halts help your horse's coordination and balance. Let's look at how each works.

Half Halts

Half halts balance your horse by helping him wait with his forehand and work more specifically with the hindquarters. The half halt is sometimes not understood clearly because it can mean so many different things.

“The balance is best when the center of gravity of the rider is directly over the center of gravity of the horse ...”

persistently teach your horse to respond with his back and hindquarters to your seat and leg aids. He shouldn't respond with his front end first. You want his forehand to relax and wait a second so your horse doesn't sprawl onto the forehand and you want your horse's hind legs to work more eagerly with you.

But *how* do you want your horse's hindquarters to work with you? It helps to be specific about what you want. Let's look at the three things your horse's hind leg does:

1. It thrusts (off the ground),
2. then it reaches (ideally under your center of gravity),
3. and finally it engages or carries weight appropriately for his training and strength.

For example, it can mean:

- Balance under me in shoulder-fore right.
- Balance under me in preparation for an extension.
- Balance under me in the shape of a 10-meter bend left.
- Balance under me before this change of direction.
- Balance under me in preparation to jump this fence.

And we could go on and on. A half halt means countless things, but it always means “balance under me” by waiting with the forehand and getting the hindquarters in a position to carry. The balance is best when the center of gravity of the rider is directly over the center of gravity of the horse and the horse steps with his inside hind foot

directly under that point.

Contrary to the mystifying reputation of half halts, anyone can do them. It's true that the more experience you have, the more successful they will be, but the sooner you start, the better. Check out the sidebar “How to do a Half Halt” on page 6. Then try Exercise 2 on page 7 to improve your half halts.

Transitions

Transitions, like half halts, also ask your horse to “balance under me.” But, doing transitions with your horse might not help him much unless you understand why you are doing them and you are looking for the desired result. Here's what you want to happen:

- When **downward transitions** are successful, they give you the same result as the “whoa” portion of the half halt: They close the horse's frame from behind and connect the rein aid to the hindquarters. Sometimes they also transfer weight from the front to the back. Downward transitions teach your horse to wait with the forehand and engage (by carrying weight appropriate to his level of strength and training) the hindquarters.
- **Upward transitions** teach your horse to thrust and reach with the inside hind leg under your center of gravity. Exercise 2 will improve the effectiveness of your transitions.

Lateral Balance

The balance of horses is also laterally challenged not only because they are inclined to be either left- or right-sided in the same way that people are either right- or left-handed. Also, horses are anatomically wider in the hindquarters than they are in the forehand. The horse's wide hindquarters thrust his weight onto the forehand. Those wide hindquarters also mean he can't track straight. As the horse moves on a straight line down the track, the inside hind leg is, without the help of an

educated rider, traveling on a track of its own, closer to the inside of the arena than it should be. Because of the horse's natural left- or right-handed (hoofed) situation, this is even more often the case when the horse is tracking right. Not only is the right hind leg not carrying its share of weight, the thrust of the right hind leg sends the horse's shoulders off to the left, making the horse heavy in the left rein.

Horses are completely unable to fix this situation on their own. When they are well-educated, they can easily be straightened by an educated rider because they understand, but the horse will never volunteer to be straight. He needs the rider's help.

The Solution: It's the rider's first job to narrow the track of the inside hind so that it tracks behind the inside fore and then to further narrow it (to the left in this case in which the horse is tracking right) until it steps in the space between the horse's front feet, which is ideally underneath the rider's and the horse's aligned center of gravity.

As the horse narrows the inside hind leg to the left, it will, of course, be his inclination to accommodate with the outside hind by moving it to the left also, but you want that hind leg to continue tracking behind the outside hind to help carry the weight on the outside.

This positioning of the horse is called

shoulder-fore, which is not exactly an exercise. It is the way the rider should always help the horse carry himself. The rider uses inside leg to outside rein with a guarding outside leg that prevents the haunches from stepping out. Riding in shoulder-fore is simply riding straight, and you want to do that all the time.

Try the exercises on page 7 and be patient but persistent. Enjoy the process because this balancing challenge is nothing like putting your car in drive and then applying the brake. It's a lot harder than that. Help your horse to coordinate himself and your reward will be a healthy, sound, happy horse that has many useful years. 🐾

How to Do a Half Halt

The rider's half halt has three parts: Go, whoa and soften.

These three parts ideally synchronize with the motion of the horse within each stride.

Go. The "go" part of your half halt is associated with the moment when your horse thrusts and reaches with his inside hind leg. Be sure that you feel the result of his thrust in your hand as your horse is stepping toward the bit and in front of your leg. He must reach for the bit, or the half halt can't do its job of connecting the horse from front to back—and during the next phase, from back to front. My favorite image of this reaching from back to front is expressed through judge Janet Foy's notion of the horse's commitment to the bit. She says the energy from the hind legs, flowing through the horse's topline, should reach the poll and "turn on the light." When the horse is in front of the leg and going ideally, this imaginary light won't flicker and threaten to go out during half halts. In other words, you should be able to half halt without compromising your horse's commitment to the bit. When your horse reaches for the bit, he doesn't simply draw on your hands. Rather, he draws on your seat and back and deepens your entire vertical self, which enables the next phase of the half halt.

Whoa. The "whoa" part of your half halt is associated with the horse's engaging moment, when one of your horse's hind legs is bent and his hoof is flat on the ground, carrying weight. This is the only moment when you can improve your horse's balance by shifting more weight behind. The rein aid connects to the

hindquarters and the weight shifts from the forehand to the hind leg that is on the ground. Here are the aids for the whoa portion of the half halt:

Your hands normally should follow your horse's mouth in motion. During the brief whoa moment of the half halt, your reins *stop following and, at the same time*, your seat and leg close to ask the horse to come under behind. As a result, the weight from the forehand transfers to the hind leg that is on the ground. That hind leg is ideally stepping right underneath the rider's seat. At the lower levels your half halt may only make a connection between the bit and your horse's hindquarters, but later in your horse's training you want to shift weight to the hindquarters, which will collect your horse. If your horse's imaginary light bulb is flickering or threatening to go out, the whoa portion of your half halt needs more leg—or perhaps your hand has inadvertently come back. When used correctly, these aids don't shorten the neck (which is a common problem resulting from too much rein aid); rather they close the horse's frame by shortening his body behind the saddle.

Soften. Finally, all of your aids soften. This softening doesn't mean your aids turn to slack relaxation that abandons the horse. Rather, all the rider's aids, for a moment, give the horse breathing room. The rider's position maintains its tone and its ability to channel the horse's energy and perpetuate the horse's motion in rhythm. The soften re-invites the go (thrust) of the next stride.

Exercise 1: Shoulder-fore

Walk straight into a mirror or have a friend or instructor stand directly in front of you as you walk straight toward him. Your friend doesn't even need to be experienced. He just needs to give you feedback or video your horse walking on a straight line.

1. Flex your horse very slightly to the right (inside) and establish a connection between your inside leg to your outside rein.
2. Ask your horse to step with his inside (right) hind foot

between the tracks of the two front feet.

3. The outside (left) hind foot should be invisible because it steps in the same track as the left fore.

This may feel ridiculously difficult, but persist quietly. When you figure out how to do this, your horse will help you maintain it because he likes to be balanced at least as much as you do. Change directions and ride shoulder-fore left. Next do it in trot and in canter.

Exercise 2: Half Halts and Transitions

In this exercise, not only will you be doing half halts and transitions, you will be doing them in the shoulder-fore that you practiced in Exercise 1 and that you try to maintain in all your work.

Plan to do transitions at predictable places such as A, B, C and E or R, S, V and P.

Your horse will start to anticipate the transition and he will also start to anticipate your suggestions as to *how* he does his transitions. Start with trot-walk-trot transitions.

1. Begin in trot and start your half halts three to five strides before you actually want to do your transition to walk. Half halt like this: Stop following with your hands. Fix them and push with your seat and legs into your fixed hands. If that doesn't work, close your fist and push into your fixed hand. Do it three to five times before you want your transition. Don't let your horse drop out from

underneath you and quit before you get to the letter. At the letter, walk.

2. **Analyze:** Did he keep trotting with his hind legs with the same amount of energy during your half halts? Did he stay connected through the topline or did his shoulders drop? Stay in shoulder-fore and persist. This may not be something you can do well in a day, but it is worth persisting.
3. Next, ask for an upward transition to trot. Be aware that he will want to start with the front legs. Ask him to start with the hind legs, which will have the effect of lifting the forehand.
4. **Analyze:** Did he move off with his whole body, or did the forehand initiate the transition?



Beth Baumert and Alan, her husband of more than 50 years, divide their time between Wellington, Florida, and Columbia Lake, Connecticut. Their Cloverlea Farm in Columbia was a center for excellence for 45 years. Since the sale of the farm, Beth teaches clinics. She is a USDF Certified Instructor and an "L" program graduate with distinction of the USDF judging program. Baumert is the author of *When Two Spines Align: Dressage Dynamics*, released in 2014 by Trafalgar Square Books. She was the technical editor for *Dressage Today* and is president/CEO of The Dressage Foundation.



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Welcome OLD MAN WINTER

Fall maintenance and winter planning for your farm

By Karen Brittle

Ah, autumn! In many regions, that means it's time for the best riding of the year. Temperatures are finally bearable and crisp fall days reinvigorate horse and rider. Colored leaves, dramatic sunsets and harvest moons provide especially scenic backdrops to training sessions: Autumn is the time of year when being on horseback is simply an enriching and inspiring sensory experience.

While making the most of all fall has to offer, seasoned trainers also utilize this time of year to begin preparations for winter facility management, horse care and training. Proactive fall maintenance means beginning to winterize the facility to ensure high-quality horse care and productive riding can continue even during the inclement

“It's much easier to get ahead and make small repairs now than handle preventable problems once it's icy and cold.”
—Carol Seaman

weather to come. So what should be on your “Fall To-Do List”? In the following pages, established dressage trainers, who are also experienced facility managers, share their priorities for fall facility maintenance and winter preparations.

Maintain Pastures and Driveways

According to Carol Seaman, a Grand Prix competitor, USDF silver medalist and L Program graduate who owns and operates Outfoxed Farm in Chester, New York, fall is a

busy time, especially for her husband, Jim, who does much of the farm maintenance. “There are fallen leaves everywhere, which need to be raked, blown and cleaned out of gutters. But during the fall, Jim will also winterize our farm equipment, especially the large snow-plow attachments, Bobcat, backhoe, truck and tractors. One year, we had our first big snowfall on Halloween night, so we start early to make sure we're prepared.”

The Seamans drive flagged stakes into the ground to mark the edges of the farm's long gravel driveways, which will make plowing easier and safer when the time comes. Though any major driveway repairs are completed in springtime, the Seamans patch low spots with extra gravel during the fall. The more level the driveway is, the easier and more effective plowing will be. Seaman emphasizes the importance of marked pathways and well-maintained driveways in order to keep the facility accessible for clients as well as ensure that horses and people can get on and off the property in case of emergency.

Courtesy, Lisa Gruen





Courtesy, Carol Seaman

Carol and Jim Seaman patch low spots in the driveway with extra gravel during the fall. The more level it is, the easier it is to plow.

During the fall, the Seamans also check gates and fence lines for minor issues such as unstable rails. As the weather cools, they close barn and arena windows, checking that all latches work properly. This is a good time to check indoor and outdoor lights and bulbs, helping to ensure visibility around the farm, even as the days shorten. Seaman says, “It’s much easier to get ahead and make small repairs now than to try to handle preventable problems once it’s icy and bitter cold outside.”

Consider Water and Food Sources

Lisa Gruen, USDF bronze medalist and 2003 Maryland Dressage Association Trainer of the Year, operates Ryder Dressage from the Chesapeake Dressage Institute in Annapolis, Maryland. For Gruen, important winter preparations relate to ensuring the availability of fresh water and quality feed at all times. Gruen explains: “We want to make sure we don’t ever encounter problems watering

the horses, either inside the barn or when they’re turned out. Inside, we’re fortunate to have insulated pipes, so we rarely have a problem with water flow. However, we need to make sure our barn staff is trained to drain and disconnect hoses when the weather gets really cold, maybe even moving the hoses to a heated space like the tack room at night so they will be functional the next morning. Outdoors, we need to check that the electric sources are ready, as we use heated buckets that hang over the fences. In the mid-fall, we get those buckets out and check that they’re working well before it actually gets cold enough for us to need them. In our bigger fields, there are troughs with water-heating units in the bottom, so we also need to check that those are functional.”

Jaclyn Sicoli, a USDF silver medalist and L Program graduate with distinction, owns and operates Peace of Mind Dressage out of Woodvale Farm in Frederick, Maryland. She says that fall is also the

time to prepare for feeding the 25 horses under her care all winter long. “Horses will need more hay and grain to maintain weight in the winter. Certain horses don’t take well to coming off grass, so in the mid to late fall, we might add alfalfa cubes or rice bran to the feed, just to help keep their topline for the winter. While we don’t use round bales, we do hay the fields when horses are turned out during the day, beginning in late fall and continuing all winter. Therefore, I want to order as much hay as I can store before winter arrives to prevent being caught off guard by a shortage or if bad weather prevents a delivery.”

Attend to Arena Footing

Seaman emphasizes the key to good arena maintenance in fall and winter is the same as throughout the rest of the year: regular and careful attention to the quality of the footing and dust control. She explains, “We’re fortunate to have an automatic watering system in our indoor arena. I find if I sprinkle early in the morning and drag immediately, I can keep the footing nice all winter long and the dust does not



Lisa Gruen says that taking proper care of hoses is necessary to prevent problems when watering the horses.

become unmanageable.”

Sicoli mentions that facility owners who do not have a watering system in their indoor arena may consider adding magnesium chloride to the arena footing before winter sets in. According to Sicoli, magnesium raises the temperature at which footing freezes. It also helps reduce dust because it attracts and holds moisture. Note that it is important to research the specific magnesium chloride product—its ingredients, application, intended use and maintenance—before adding it to your indoor arena footing in order to ensure safety and efficacy. Because magnesium chloride will wash away if rained on or excessively watered, it is only suitable for indoor use.

Organize Equipment

As the days shorten and the nights get cooler, Seaman begins the process of swapping summer gear for winter gear in an organized way. In early October, fly masks and scrim sheets are sent out to a blanketing service for washing, repair and storage until they will be needed the following spring. Around the same time, sheets and winter blankets are returned from storage to the farm. Laundered,

repaired and labeled with the horse’s name, they are ready to go on the first cold night.

During the fall, Sicoli takes stock of and orders any necessary equipment for keeping her horses comfortable during winter training. According to Sicoli, “Around the beginning of October, we pull out coolers, quarter sheets and fleece girth covers. I also make sure clipper blades are sharpened

and clippers are working well so we’ll be ready to clip as needed, usually sometime in November.”

In addition, Sicoli says that proper equipment for the rider/trainer is a critical investment for those who continue to train horses in a cold climate all winter. Mid to late fall is the time to make sure these essential items are on hand:

If You Plan to Migrate:

For those who move horses to Florida for winter training and competition, fall is the time to prepare for a big temporary move. Lisa Gruen has migrated from Maryland to Wellington many times, both shipping horses herself and working with commercial shippers. Here, Gruen shares key elements of the planning timeline that help ensure she and her horses arrive in Florida by the first of January:

SEPTEMBER: Secure Florida accommodations for horse and rider

OCTOBER: Allow horses brief downtime after regional competitions, then resume conditioning for winter season

NOVEMBER: Consult with farrier and adjust shoeing schedule as needed. Gruen explains: “Ideally, we try to plan it so they get their feet done in late December, about a week before they go. This way, they have a fresh shoeing for travel and are ready to hit the ground running when they arrive.” Likewise, consider when and how the horse is clipped. According to Gruen: “I typically clip horses around Thanksgiving, knowing I will likely need to clip again in Florida. I want them to already be clipped well before they go. I don’t want to do it too close to shipping, as that would another element of adjustment for the horse, which can affect his immune system and how well he copes generally.” Finally, reserve a commercial shipper for desired dates. If shipping yourself, now is a good time to get truck and trailer maintained for the trip and also book accommodations at a halfway point where you and your horse can overnight comfortably to break up the drive.

DECEMBER: Consider the horse’s supplements. Gruen explains travel and intense training are inherently stressful for horses and supporting digestive health is a top priority: “I always start the horse on ulcer preventives at least four or five days before the trip, with a full dose, and I plan to continue it in Florida while he’s acclimating or for the whole time he is down there, depending on the horse.” Gruen also adds immune-system supplements (different options are administered in the feed or as an injection by the veterinarian) to help prevent respiratory illness that can occur as a result of long travel. Because many horses will not drink sufficient amounts of water during shipping, Gruen plans to “prehydrate” the horse by adding electrolytes to his water and “soupy,” watery beet pulp to feed, beginning a week ahead of the trip. Upon arrival, closely monitoring the horse’s behavior and vital signs for several days is crucial. Of course, in the last week or so before departure, there is always the challenge of packing equipment, apparel and necessities for a three-month journey for horse and human.



Creative training is important in the winter. Cavalletti sessions and desensitization training can break up the monotony of riding indoors.

- Winter breeches, boots and layerable clothing
- Insulated ski pants that can zip over breeches in between rides
- Fleece riding gloves.

Prepare to Make the Most of It

“It is a good opportunity to reflect, rest a little and then set some realistic training goals...”

—Jaclyn Sicoli

Seaman and Sicoli, who both stick it out in northern climates for the winter, agree that aesthetic touches at a facility and realistic planning can help ease the transition from fall to winter. For example, Seaman positions visuals—such as mums in fall or evergreen boughs in winter—in the barn and arena to

provide an inviting seasonal flair. Seaman adds, “We’re also fortunate to have a great sound system in our arena. When it’s windy and cold, putting on some nice music and turning it up a bit can help muffle the wind. Riders enjoy it and it’s comforting for the horses, too.”

Sicoli values the quieter time that winter can provide for clients and horses, so late fall is the time to consider a community calendar that will keep clients engaged throughout the winter. She and her team offer video nights, Pilates workshops and other off-horse learning opportunities, as well as diversified

training, focused preparation for next season’s showing and goal-setting sessions. Seaman agrees that creative training is important in the winter: “We hosted a cavalletti clinic, which was fun for the horses and had a good turnout. Desensitization training is also always fun. These kind of activities get everyone off the 10-meter circles when stuck indoors.”

According to Sicoli, “If you are up in the Northeast and don’t travel to Florida, the clinicians who are in Florida will not be available in your area from December through March or April. So, there is, in sense, a training void, where you have to rely on your previous training, your videos, your books and magazines for inspiration.

“As competitions wind down in the late fall, it is a good opportunity to reflect, rest a little and then set some realistic training goals that will help keep the winter season productive for you and your horse.”

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