

## Equine Balance Equation Part 4 Balance Rider and Saddle

The equine balance equation has a great deal to do with a balanced rider, and a balanced saddle. The rider's ability to stay balanced on his horse will keep rider and horse more comfortable.

Balance is equilibrium, a state where weight is equally distributed. Ninety percent of humans are right-handed but both left- and right-handed riders need to be ambidextrous. The rider who is equally strong and coordinated on both sides has a better chance of having a comfortable and safe ride. Stretching and strength-training exercises can help you with your left and right sides. When riding, first pay attention to your posture at the halt and walk. Work on form before you add speed. Stand in your stirrups at all 3 gaits to improve your balance. Flexibility, coordination, durability and strength are all part of keeping the rider balanced. Take away any one of these things and an unbalanced state can occur.

Flexibility is the range of motion in a joint. A rider must be especially flexible in the pelvis and hips. The rhythmic movement of a horse can improve your flexibility. The movement of the horse closely approximates the movement of your pelvis during walking. The older you are, the more time and attention you will have to spend to ensure that you are comfortable during and after riding. It is best if you work stretching into your everyday life. Walk out to feed each horse on pasture twice a day; frequently used items on the top shelf so you have to stretch to reach for them; bend over to use a short brush and pan to pick up manure or debris in the grooming area or in your daily cleaning. Stretching yourself daily just like stretching your horse will prove to be very beneficial.

Coordination is a combination of balance, timing, agility, and maneuverability. Since your nervous system is the last to respond to training, it may take years to fine-tune your neuromuscular skills. That's one of the reasons why a smooth performance is so greatly admired in top-notch riders... it takes time to develop! Once you have developed riding skills, however, they are much easier to regain. Like riding a bike, you never forget.

Practice is the most valuable way to improve your sense of timing. Providing you don't practice something so many times that it makes you sore or your horse hyper-anticipatory, resentful, or sour. Imagine or anticipate the action just prior to a particular movement in order to get your muscles ready. Use quiet verbal or mental preparatory commands to help develop a sense of timing for the aids. Participation in active companion sports will also increase your coordination and timing. Be absolutely sure that you are practicing correctly because it will become a habit whether it is right or wrong. If you ride incorrectly, you may be faced with a very difficult time relearning. Many riders have said "I rode wrong for twenty

years and am now trying to retrain my body to ride correctly." It is much more difficult to change deeply ingrained old habits than it is to learn correct ones the first time around.

Durability is the toughness, strength, and soundness of your joints. The best way to become a more durable rider is to ride more!

Strength is the ability of your body or a part of your body to apply a force. As you are strengthening your knees and ankles give them an occasional break by riding at a walk with your feet out of the stirrups or get off and lead. Being more balanced won't just be good for you it will be good for your horse. Horses are great compensators and will compensate for your mistakes. The better you become the more comfortable your horse will feel.

Balanced saddles are just as important, a saddle that does not fit you or your horse will make you both miserable.

Fitting saddles is like fitting a child's shoe; it needs to be done correctly to allow for movement without pinching or pain. If you are noticing discomfort or changes in your horse's attitude or behavior under saddle then it may be time for a professional assessment of how your saddle is fitting.

All of the following steps need to be done with your horse standing squarely on level ground with his head and neck straight ahead, so an assistant may be necessary. Perform all the steps on both sides of your horse. Most horses are asymmetrical and with the saddle in direct contact with your horse's back, with no pad. Place the saddle slightly forward on the horse's withers. Next, press down on the pommel and slide the saddle rearward until it stops at the resting place which is dictated by each horse's conformation. Repeat this procedure several times until you feel the saddle stop in the same spot repeatedly, well behind the shoulder blade. Resist the temptation to place the saddle too far forward on the withers. This is a very common fitting mistake and can interfere with your horse's soundness and movement. Place one hand in the center of the saddle and press down to secure the saddle in place as you test for panel pressure. Run your other hand between the front of the panels and your horse's musculature and feel for any uneven pressure under the points. The front panel should not pinch the withers in any area. While maintaining pressure on the top of the saddle run your hand palm up under the entire panel along the back feeling for even pressure. You may also raise the sweat flap to ensure that the panels fit snugly as well as evenly on both sides of the withers and along the back to check for bridging. Bridging is a space near the center of the saddle where the panels do not make good contact with the horse's back. Wool stuffed panels are almost universally considered superior to foam for the following reasons: (assuming correctly designed panels) wool conforms to the many shapes of the horses back and can be adjusted if necessary to correct for a multitude of fitting problems. You cannot, however, correct for a poorly designed or incorrectly fitted tree. Visualize a straight line parallel to the ground from the pommel to the cantle. In

saddles with deep or moderately deep seats, the cantle should be between 2 to 3 inches higher than the pommel. In shallower seats, such as close contact jumping saddles, the cantle may only be approximately 1 to 2 inches higher than the pommel. In almost any saddle, if the cantle is level with or below the pommel, the saddle is not properly fitted. There should be adequate clearance between the pommel and the top of the horse's withers, approximately two to three fingers. More than three fingers' clearance may mean the pommel is too high, i.e. the tree is too narrow. A saddle with less than 2 to 3 fingers may mean that the saddle is too wide. With wool stuffed panels, make allowance for the saddle to settle approximately one half of one inch. There is an exception to this indicator: horses with flat, round withers may have more clearance than usual under the pommel. In these situations you may need to rely more on the balance of the seat and pommel to cantle relationship. On horses with high, narrow withers maintaining proper clearance is something that has to be monitored and maintained. There should also be an adequate clearance over the spine and connective tissue throughout the channel of the saddle. A channel that is too narrow will impede the horse's movement dramatically and may even cause the spine to be observably sore. Feel the width of the spine and connective tissue with your fingers and estimate its width. The channel of the saddle should completely clear this width, resting on the long back muscle of the back called the longissimus dorsi.

The saddle should never go behind the 18th thoracic vertebra, which is the vertebra corresponding with the last rib. Behind this vertebra are the lumbar vertebrae, which is the weakest, non-weight bearing area of the back.

Throughout the whole saddle fitting process, and the ability of the rider being more balance, monitor your horse's response. Watch his ears and body language. Does he try to step away from you when you are mounting him or flinch when you put a saddle on his back? Or is the opposite true; is he more accepting of you? How does he move when he is ridden? Does he seem freer or more restricted?

The horse is the most honest indicator we have so always pay attention, the more we learn to listen to our horse the better both of you will be.