

September 2007 Beyond the Basics

Pressure and Balance – Part III

The pursuit of horsemanship – a true partnership between horse and human – is a never ending journey. So often in our clinics we find ourselves saying, “It is all quite simple, it just isn’t easy!”. I have had the pleasure of watching beautiful riders such as Bettina Drummond, sit effortlessly a top a magnificent Lusitano stallion, and perform a dance that is nothing short of a ballet. The dance steps are simple and ancient. But, accomplishing them, with fluidity, rhythm, balance, and impeccable timing, took years of practice, study, style, and some incredible natural ability on the part of both horse and rider. Similar to listening to a very accomplished musician, they allow the music to sound as if it were simple, being played with ease and feeling. However, getting to that point was not “easy”!

As we begin to discuss Part III of this series on Pressure and Balance, it is important that we keep in mind that as layers are added to our horsemanship knowledge, it can at times become overwhelming. It may seem that in combining our aids to achieve specific maneuvers and movements that everything gets complicated. You may well begin to wonder if you ever knew how to ride, and certainly whether or not you deserve the loyalty of these magnificent creatures...the horse. Welcome to your new title...***Aspiring Horseman!*** As you go deeper in your horsemanship journey, you will discover there are never-ending layers of understanding. And while our success will always go back to the *simple* basics, that doesn’t mean that the road to achievement with grace is *easy*. I am drawn to a statement I heard. Ray Hunt say several times during the Tom Dorrance benefit in Texas a few years ago, as he addressed invited clinicians from all over the world who had gathered to honor Mr. Dorrance. Mr. Hunt said, “It is amazing what you can learn after you think you know it all”. As we move forward in discussing how pressure and balance work together in communicating with our horse, keep an open mind, take a deep breath, and remember that the principles are quite simple...just not easy to accomplish!

A Couple of Reminders:

Mental & Physical Preparation – It is important to the success of achieving effortless movement in both horse and rider, that both partners are physically fit. Having the ability to separate your body parts to identify specific pressure and balance aids, is critical to their success in effecting the horse. Much of this is

accomplished by training your brain to train the muscles. Use of a balance ball or similar device can really aid us humans. Supple exercises and work-in-hand can greatly aid the horse. Plus supple and flexing exercises for the human both on the ground and in the saddle will make every ride more positive. (Note: Review the Suggested Reading/Video list from previous articles.)

K.I.S. H Method – Some of you are familiar with the KISS Method. (i.e. Keep, It, Simple, Stupid). Well horses rarely call us humans “stupid”, they just think that we provide pretty poor leadership at times! So the horses have taught me to use the KISH Method. (i.e. Keep, It, Simple, Human!) Remember to break things down into simple parts, have a clear picture of what you want to accomplish, take a deep breath, and allow the movement to happen, with a release and reward at the end. As Mr. Juno Oliveira will remind us, “Build up your horse with *simple* exercises.”

Posture...Posture...Posture – With good posture, a positive attitude, and focus, simple maneuvers can be accomplished with ease. Sit up, free up your pelvis and core area, which will lengthen your leg, relax your ankles, and I will bet your picture will easily be conveyed to the horse. In addition, as my little friend once observed, “If you have good posture, your horse will become braver”. Self-confidence through self-carriage!

Let’s Talk Balance & Pressure Specifics:

Two-Track Maneuvers – Leg-Yields and Half-Pass are “two-track” maneuvers, in that if we were to draw lines marking the hoof prints, there would be two-sets of lines. Usually we will geometrically picture these two-lines on a diagonal, or a 45 degree angle from the horse’s body. Occasionally, as in a side-pass to get a gate, or in some trail classes, you will be asked to two-track your horse without forward and diagonal motion. Two-track exercises are critical for every type of riding you are doing. They not only gymnastically prepare your horse, but they also reconfirm your ability to communicate to all four corners of your horse, and to position his feet.

Ted sidepasses Sami using flag.



Combining Pressure & Balance in Leg-Yield

Exercises – Leg-Yield postures are movements where the horse moves *away* from the bend, he carries his weight from the inside hind quarter towards the outside shoulder, and he is slightly bending to the inside, while his body moves opposite the bend. If for example we are leg-yielding or moving sideways and forward, to the *right*, then the horse would be shaped laterally slightly to the *left*, and you could see his *left* eyelash. After taking your deep breath and visualizing this leg-yield to the right, on a diagonal, your body will start to naturally prepare your aids. Your balance will come slightly to the *right*, into your right seat bone, your right elbow will feel a bit heavier, your right leg will relax and get longer, and finally your fruit basket on top of your head will move from center to slightly right of the horse's mane line. Your pressure aids are helping the horse keep the proper bend (to the left), caressing at the girth with the left calve, and sending the energy from the left hind quarter to the right shoulder and rein. The right rein accepts this energy with a slight caress as the supportive rein. There is no need for any gross opening of the right rein, and certainly not a gross opening of the right leg! Simply relax the outside leg, and allow the horse to move sideways and forward.

Other Exercises that build on effectively combining balance and pressure in Leg-Yield postures: (Note: These exercises are more fully described in the “Rest of the Story” found at:

www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles/September

Beyond the Basics)

- ✓ Reverse or counter-bend half and full circles
- ✓ Sideways on a Circle or Shoulder-in on a Circle
- ✓ Shoulder-in (Three-track and Two-Track)
- ✓ Shoulder-out

Combining Pressure & Balance in Half-Pass

Exercises – Half-Pass postures are movements where the horse moves *into* the bend, generally carries his weight from the outside hind quarter to the inside shoulder, and his slight lateral bend is maintained in the direction of travel. So, if we are half-passing or moving sideways and forward to the *right*, the horse is shaped like a zucchini to the *right*, and you could see his *right* eyelash. After checking in to make sure you are present, taking that deep breath, and visualizing the movement and pattern you wish to ride, your posture will already start to dictate to your aids. Your focus is slightly to the *right*, your weight

moves into the right seat bone, the right elbow is heavy, and your fruit basket or shoulder-blade weight is slightly to the right. The pressure aids are minimal, as you don't want to think of “pushing” your horse sideways in the half-pass posture. Rather, your left or outside leg moves slightly back and holds the haunch, encouraging the movement from the left hind to the right fore, and into the right rein. There your right hand is waiting to receive the energy and flowing with the movement on the diagonal forward to the right. Your right leg relaxes and grows a little longer, and may have to caress slightly to remind the horse that the bend is to be maintained to the right.



Kristian prepares for a slight reverse bend. She can see Army's right eye lash, & his shoulders are moving to the left.



Certainly this movement is a little more foreign to us humans, but the horses use it all the time in herd situations. Watch a lead mare give instructions to a non-compliant herd member, and you will see that she may warn with body language and teeth, then back it up with assertively moving in a half-pass posture to reinforce that the next activity will be connecting the renegade with her teeth and hind feet! For us humans, I find the best way to become comfortable with my half-pass balances, is to ride my two-leg horse. If I can become proficient at riding the leg-yield exercises with a rhythmic flow between the exercises, it will also prepare me for the half-pass. However, please don't put this posture, and these exercises off! Your communication with your horse will jump leaps and bounds (in a positive direction!) once you begin to use half-pass postures.

Other exercises to build on combining pressure and balance aids in Half-Pass postures:

- ✓ Haunches-in and Haunches-out on straight lines
- ✓ Haunches-in and Haunches-out on circles

Pressure and Balance – Two critical components to riding. As you progress on your horsemanship journey, I hope you take a close look at how these two mechanisms work so intimately in developing light, soft, communication with our horses. Once you have experienced the symphony that combine's pressure, balance, with rhythm, and timing, under your watchful leadership as the conductor, you will simply want more!

Suggested Reading & Videos for Part III – Balance & Pressure:
Gymnastic Exercises for Horses – The Classical Way by Eleanor Russell
The Handbook of Riding Essentials by Francois Lemaire de Ruffieu
Video Series – Classical Dressage – The Philosophy of Ease by Philippe Karl



Here are a couple of examples of what NOT to do in your sideways work. Clearly I am trying to use my upper body to 'pressure' the horse sideways, and sitting heavily on the hip that I am asking Tilly to move!

I am preparing Tilly to go lightly sideways to the left. My left leg is relaxed, the right leg is caressing her ribcage, and my balance is slightly to the left, in the direction of travel. Much more attractive than the pictures at the right!