

## *Pressure and Balance – Part I*

I have been anxiously waiting to write this series of thoughts on the use of two critical tools or aids... pressure and balance. Collecting the ideas and feelings I have been sharing in clinics these past few years, and gathering them up on paper will help riders of all disciplines who are aspiring to develop effortless communication between horse and rider. Being able to take the time to discuss this concept, dissect it into small bite size pieces, and then give everyone some practical applications will be fun and hopefully provocative.

The format for this series of articles will be as follows:

**First:** Let's make sure we are all on the same page with some definitions of commonly used terms. These will be mostly my interpretations of what I have read and watched in following the master horsemen and women of old and aspiring horsemen of present. If you have a different understand of these terms, it will open up a great opportunity for dialogue and in the end help all of us to take ownership in our own horsemanship!

**Second:** We will begin to analyze these two essential tools...Pressure & Balance...and look at which of our body parts enhance their application and the reasons WHY we need to be so aware of how these aids work in concert.

**Third:** Every month we will look at HOW to apply these tools to the four basic movements: Forward, Backwards or Rein Back, Crossing the Hindquarters or Disengagement, and Sideways in both leg-yield and half-pass postures. (Note: In Part I – Balance – This third portion – the HOW portion - is found on the web site at: [www.tnthorsemanship.com/articles](http://www.tnthorsemanship.com/articles).)

So, let's get started with those definitions. These can be tricky because they may vary with locality, subtleties of language, and to a small degree, with the types of jobs you may ask to accomplish with your horse. The main objective is for us to develop an understanding that will create a similar picture for the humans. The horses will react universally if we communicate with clear and consistent images in our mind's eye and our body language.

**Aids** – Aids are reminders to the horse that re-enforce the suggestion or picture you are asking him to accomplish. You do not want them to become crutches on which the horse relies, but rather reminders that ultimately enhance the movement or request. Common aids or tools are your seat (as in seat bones and pelvis structure), leg (primarily lower leg and ankles), and hands. Other tools which should also be used only as a reminder (i.e. Get in...Get out...Get a Reaction) are

the use of the whip, spur, and rommel. Eventually these may be worn for the honor and tradition of where you have developed your horse, but hardly ever used.

**Pressure** – Should be seen as a compression of air, a caress, or a suction of air to move or shape the horse. Pressure is primarily a lower body function, from below the knee, and in some disciplines using the thigh muscle. Pressure can be applied to ask the horse to move away from it (as in achieving forward, crossing hind quarters, and leg-yields), arch slightly around it (for slight lateral bend), or to set up the request for the horse to move into the pressure (as in half pass postures, canter pirouette, and spins).

**Balance** - Is that state of equilibrium, that is in harmony with gravity and movement, which allows for poise of both horse and rider effortlessly. Balance is primarily an upper body function, beginning with the seat bones and pelvis, up the rib cage to the shoulders, head, and eyes.

**Rhythm** – Is the beat of the music you are developing with your horse. Rhythm changes with the different gaits, in that a walk is a four-beat march, a trot is a two-beat Irish jig, and the canter\* is a three-beat waltz. \*Note: In some regions, particularly out west, you will hear this three-beat gait called a gallop or lop. In most international terms, a gallop is a four-beat gait or a run, in which there is a moment in each stride when all four feet are off the ground.

**Timing** – Is the measure of when you ask for a specific movement. Timing is greatly influenced by your knowledge of where the feet are, so you can influence where to place them. As example, it is difficult to ask the hind foot to move under the horse's belly if you ask for the movement after the foot has already left the ground traveling on a straight line...You'd be late and your timing would be off! You ultimately influence timing right before you need the movement. With those definitions, let us now go back to truly dissecting how we can utilize first balance then pressure to work in harmony with our intentions, seat, leg, and hands to develop this symphony called horsemanship.



*Alice riding without stirrups, demonstrating an independent seat*

### Regarding Balance:

Balance, in both horse and rider can be found fore and aft (head to tail), side to side, on the diagonal, and to some degree, up and down. It is greatly influenced by our eyes and ears or in other words by our focus and attention. Have you ever had someone call out to you or make a very loud noise when you were not paying attention, and upon whirling around to focus with your eyes and ears, you became out of balance? I suspect it could be like this for the horse quite often. We shout at them with our aids, and they lose their equilibrium, become tense and braced, and have difficulty accomplishing the job at hand.

As I mentioned earlier, balance is mostly a function of the upper body for the human. Horse and riders who seem to operate in perfect agreement are able to fix, refine, and adjust with eyes, shoulders, and core area forward, backwards, side to side, and on the diagonal to be in balance *with* the movement. We want to position our seat bones, hips, shoulders, and focus so that it does not inhibit the rhythm, and is in time to influence the feet. Some tips that help me to visualize and feel for balance are:

Seat Bone Dowels – I picture my seat bones as two dowels that plug-in on either side of my horse's back bone. As I make one a little longer, and the other a bit shorter, I essentially 'weight' or balance on that seat bone. Remember that these are small, very small adjustments – no more than lightly squeezing a grape under one seat bone.



*Gloria & Juandero showing a nice connected seat and balanced fruit basket in an uphill rhythmic canter with shoulder blade weight over seat bones, & slightly balanced to the left.*

Fruit Basket – I stole this analysis from one of my clients, who said she had been asked to visualize herself with a large basket of fruit upon her head.

Her job was to not spill the fruit by dropping a shoulder or looking down, and *to keep the basket balanced slightly in the direction of travel* over the seat bone on that same side.

Shoulder Blade Weight – Picture your shoulder blades as having plum weights attached, keeping your weight balanced over your seat bones. The scapula are not being pulled or pinched together, rather they rest back with an open chest muscle.

Ball and Chair Practice – There are lots of great exercises that you can accomplish with a balance ball, or at the edge of a hard seat chair. You can practice sitting up to have equal balance on each seat bone, supported by a positive tension in your core area. Then try slight shifting of your seat bone dowels, accompanied by an adjustment of your fruit basket, to feel how little movement it takes to 'weight' one cheek bone and then the other. (Note the suggested books and DVDs at the end of this article.)

Two-Legged Horse – As you have heard me say before, I have yet to have my two-leg horse lie to me regarding the balance and focus I will need in the saddle. Become a kid again, and start riding circles, sideways, backing up, cantering, trotting, walking with rhythm. Then close your eyes to discover where your balance had to be to accomplish these tasks. I think you will discover that good posture, focus, having a clear picture, positive tension in your core area, a balanced fruit basket, all contributed to your success!

As you practice your horsemanship this month, pay particular attention to your balance. How does it affect the use of your aids? How little does it take to communicate to your horse? How much fun is it when you find that perfect balance with your horse? In our comparison of horsemanship to the music made by the symphony... We have developed and schooled the string and wind section by looking at balance. Next month, we will add the brass and percussion by examining pressure. Then in Part III we will bring everything together under the watchful eye of the conductor to develop beautiful music!

### Useful Reading & Materials:

Riding Essentials by Francous Lemaire de Ruffieu  
Advanced Dressage by Anthony Crossley  
Fundamentals of Dressage by Alfred Knopfhart  
Neurodynamics – Phase I Dynamic Movement by Dr. Jim Warner (use of the balance ball)  
[www.dynamichorsemanship.com](http://www.dynamichorsemanship.com)  
Eclectic Horseman Magazine – Series of articles by Wendy Murdock, plus access to many great books and videos, including Ride Like a Natural Series of DVDs from Wendy Murdock; [www.eclectic-horseman.com](http://www.eclectic-horseman.com)

## Applying BALANCE Concepts to Basic Movements

**Balances with Forward Movements:** In general, as you ask your horse to move forward and maintain forward momentum, your seat bone balances come from a place of being relaxed to becoming engaged. Your pelvis will become more vertical, but not enough to pull the dowels from their sockets, with your body more erect and shoulder blade weight over the seat bones with a slight balance back / aft to ask the hind end of the horse to drive forward. The balance is not a leaning back and pushing with your seat, but rather a slight redirecting of the balance in the horse to his hind quarters to request the forward movement. As you progress to forward on a circle, or forward and sideways, and forward at varying gaits, you will adjust your balance to stay with the movement of the horse. As example, on a circle to the right at a trot, your balance is slightly over your right or inside seat bone, with shoulders and focus following the arch of the circle, and quite equal fore and aft.



*Susan M. shows that balance can be achieved in the ground school as well, for both horse and rider with one driving rein, work in hand, or on the long line.*



*Alice and Enca, the PRE Stallion, show a balanced seat, hips, shoulders, and hands with a slight left bend. Note the shoulder blade positioning over the seat bones, and the outside hip slightly forward to accommodate the left bend.*

**Balance with Stopping & Rein Back:** The quickness and shape of the top-line varies slightly between disciplines. In working cows, the stop to a backup or rollback will find the hind quarters positioned well under the horse. In developing for dressage, the stop to a rein back might be more gradual, but still carry roundness in the top-line. In either case, the balance for the stop to a backup is the same. You will start from a forward on a straight line posture, balanced equally over both seat bones.

As you envision the halt, picture your seat dowels melting into the back of the horse, and at a 45 degree angle to the earth. Accompany this picture with a pulling in of your stomach muscles, as if you had just been punched in the belly, a slight rounding of your shoulders, and the pelvic pubis area tipping upwards. After the halt, picture your horse sneaking his feet backwards and picking them up so that no one could hear the two-beat rhythm. This could only be accomplished if the rider got out of his way, and changed the balance from the hind quarters driving under at the stop, to becoming neutral and light. First, relax your stomach muscle and tilt your pelvis to a more vertical position. Become internally light, breathing and opening your chest, and placing your shoulder blade weight over your hips. The balance of the movement will move from hind quarters, to neutral, allowing the diagonal pairs to sneak backwards.



*Don moves with Foremost lightly in the reinback. Note his legs are relaxed, and he is slightly forward to release the energy thru the topline in reverse.*

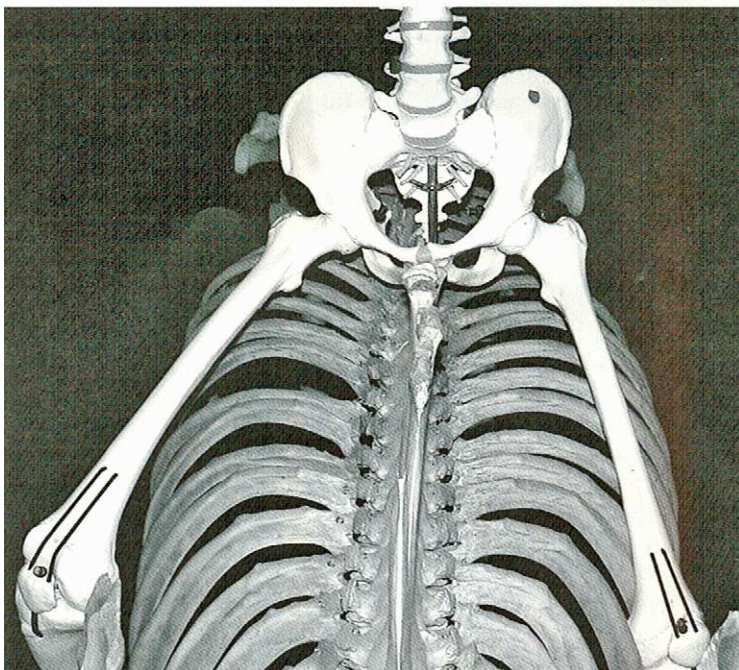
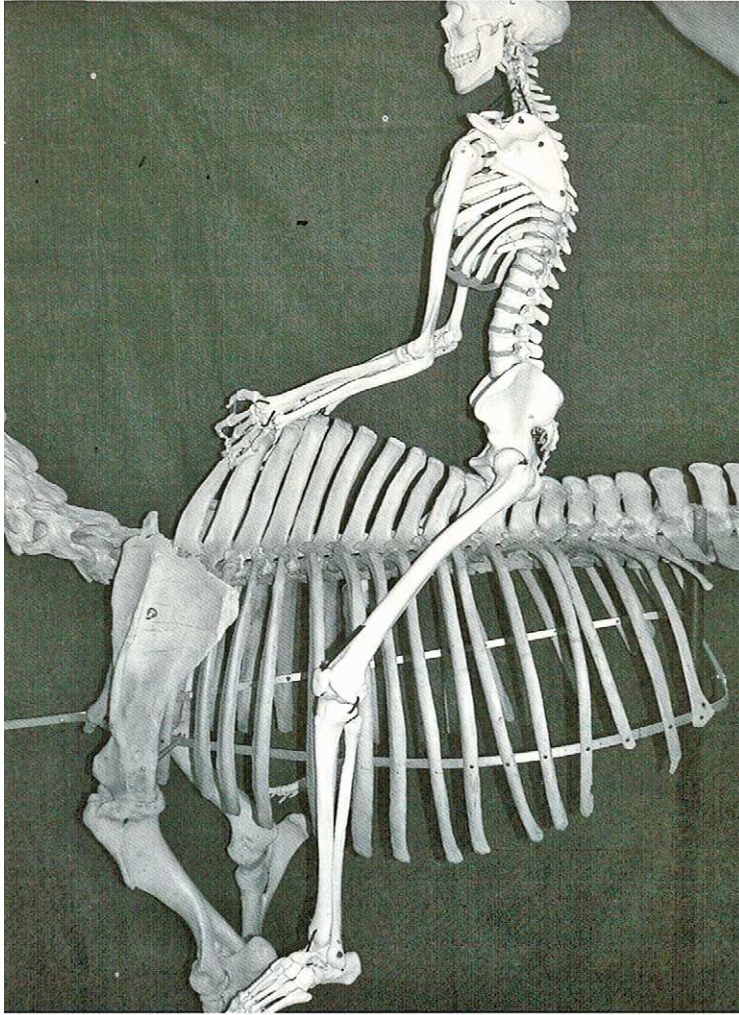
**Balances to Aid Crossing of the Hind Quarters:** Some people will call this exercise a “disengagement”, so let’s clarify the movement first: The crossing of the hind quarters or disengagement asks the horse to carry the energy from his inside hind foot, across under his belly towards the outside fore foot and shoulder. The balance in this movement is primarily influenced by your focus and shoulders. To accomplish this maneuver your focus will come to the inside of the arch, and your shoulder on the inside of the bend will come back with your outside hip going forward. In so doing it is almost impossible not to put your inside leg on the horse (Pressure...Next Month’s Article!) and also lighten your inside seat bone. The balance will be unconscious if you prepare your eyes, ears, shoulders, and hips. You free-up the inside hip of the horse with your position and balance. Equally so you can stop the flow of movement from inside hip to outside shoulder by balancing up on your outside seat bone and squaring up your shoulders and hips.



*Note how Tilly has moved her inside, left hind leg under her belly, towards the outside right shoulder in the first picture, and then balanced up on all four legs in the second picture. My balance has followed the movement, with my left seat bone getting a bit lighter, as my right hip moves forward in picture A. In the second picture I have balanced my two seat bone dowels and squared my shoulders to match Tilly’s.*

**Balances to Enhance Sideways Movements:** I am going to procrastinate on fully answering this question until Part III of this series, as it demands a complete analysis and truly combines the use of balance and pressure. So at this point, let’s just say that in general you will sit or **balance in the direction of travel**. As example: If I am asking my horse to leg yield on the diagonal with a left bend, but moving right...My balance will be slightly to the **right**, with the right leg feeling a little longer than the left but relaxed, creating a situation where my left seat dowel is slightly higher than the right. Now I can already hear the cries...That’s not the way I was taught to leg yield or side pass! So here is your challenge: Go out and ride your two-leg horse sideways. Using the scenario above (i.e. left bend, moving sideways to the right) try opening your right or outside leg as you may have been taught to side pass your horse. Now try to move! You will notice that it is difficult to move your left leg sideways when you are standing on it. Next try lengthening your right leg while you bring your fruit basket to the right. I think you will notice that your left leg became light and you can now position it easily on a sideways movement.

Reproduced from Eclectic Horseman Magazine  
*Why Ride Circles? The beginning of Lateral Bending* by  
Wendy Murdoch (May/June Issue 2006)



*If you think that your seat bones, as influenced by the balance in your pelvis, hips, torso, shoulders, neck, head and eyes have little effect on your horse, look more closely at where you are sitting on his skeletal structure!*

**Allow me to express my appreciation to Eclectic Horseman Magazine and the wonderful articles written by Wendy Murdoch regarding balance and many other deeply informative pieces. I highly recommend this publication for aspiring horseman, and encourage you to check out the clinics, books, and videos/DVDs by Ms. Murdoch.**

[www.eclectic-horseman.com](http://www.eclectic-horseman.com)