

BREATHE LIFE INTO TRAINING by Jenny Rolfe

Rider Position and Seat

THE HORSE IS OUR MIRROR

The rider can become highly influential when he learns how to sit on a horse, in self carriage, allowing both stability and fluidity - from the seat and core.

If 'the horse becomes our mirror', it is fundamental to ride within a secure natural poise and self-carriage. In this way the horse can reflect our balance and posture enhanced by regular breathing. We can then effectively ride to encourage a calm energy, within his movement.

The key to fluidity within riding is to understand how to use our seat and core whilst keeping freedom of mobility so we can move with the motion of the horse. When we learn how to instigate movement from our core, we give our upper body more stability. This allows our legs to relax and lengthen, more freely, to hang down around the rib cage of the horse.

SELF-AWARENESS

It is helpful to become more aware, of places within our body, where we hold tension. For instance, if you clench your fist tightly, your whole arms will become tight and restricted. If you push too much weight down into your heel, the leg will become tight, right up to the inner thigh, which will restrict the mobility of the seat and core.

Try this simple exercise. Whilst walking on foot, breathe deeply into your stomach and follow with a deep exhalation. Can you feel the swing and release within your hips and more freedom within your arms?

If you then try breathing in and then follow with more shallow breathing, much of this release and mobilization disappears.

It is interesting to watch a person jogging using regular, deep breathing as this enables them to maintain a steady rhythm and energy within each stride. Every athlete can enhance performance, both mentally and physically by using lateral breathing.

The rider, unlike the athlete, has not only to focus on personal balance and energy flow, but also, upon another living being. The horse is not only extremely strong, but demonstrates high sensitivity with a natural inbuilt instinct of both fear and flight.

It is little wonder that when we seek to understand more about harmony in horsemanship, the journey is one of our whole life!

A puppet could sit on a horse in a good position but would be totally ineffective as a rider. We need to

become balanced and harmonious with the horse which is enhanced by an awareness of the physical, mental and spiritual balance of the rider.

The horse is blessed with much intelligence and sensitivity. He will be tuned into our state of mind as well as our physical balance. When you study a dance partnership, it may give the impression of being artistic and visual, but it is the unseen bond and the spiritual empathy which may be capable of creating the magic.

If we look at our body awareness and posture, we can begin to understand how our poise and breathing can affect the horse. We are all different in our body shapes and hence we hold our tension in different places. The techniques of yoga, Pilates and the Alexander technique, all have their place in helping us to achieve deeper and calmer mental attitudes, combined with suppleness and good posture. It is interesting to observe the body poise, balance and artistry within the martial arts; body movements are centred and flow in an amazingly balanced way. It is possible to achieve a similar energy flow within riding which will enhance both performance and ease of movement, for the horse.

POWER of the BREATH

It is worth examining the influence of breathing which can either facilitate balance and mobility or conversely, has the power to block movement within our body.

You may find it interesting to try these easy exercises which show quite graphically how breathing can have a profound influence on our ability to move.

1. Stand normally, in good posture then lean forward as if touching your toes. Now return to your normal 'standing' position

Now take a very deep inward breath and try to repeat this exercise.

You will find that the deep inhalation will block your forward movement. This is the power of our breathing. It can either enhance mobility or create stilted movement.

2. A further exercise is to stand tall and really arch your back, placing your hands on your hips. Bring your sternum (breast bone) both up and out. Then take a deep inward breath.

Now try to mobilize your seat and pelvis both backwards and forwards. You will find that your arched back tightens your spine which will restrict fluidity when you are riding. Our aim is for good posture whilst maintaining fluidity within our core. If we can ride whilst maintaining a 'neutral' seat or core, it can become effective to use to either instigate energy or to re-balance and steady, as a 'half halt'.

3. Stand normally in good posture and push your weight down into your heel -bringing your toe upwards.

Now place your hand on your inner thigh and feel the tightness through your whole leg. When we overstretch and tighten any of our joints and muscles, this will be mirrored through out our body.

SELF CARRIAGE -TOP to TOE'

'Self-carriage, for the rider, means that he becomes responsible for supporting his body through breathing and balance within a natural posture.

Let us look at the rider - from top to toe, to gain more body awareness.

- * Soften your facial muscles and the focus of your eyes.
- * Have the feeling of breathing, into the space around you. Grow taller and expand your posture allowing your head to come slightly forward and upwards. Do not tighten the back of the neck but allow it to lengthen, keeping a relaxed jaw. Create a feeling from within, of pride and self assurance.
- * Cultivate the feeling that your head is balanced in lightness, floating above the shoulders, as a balloon above your body . This lengthening of the neck helps to release the shoulders.
- * Keep the softer feel in the sternum whilst breathing. Expand the chest (but not by lifting through the ribcage but by breathing wide and full, 'into your spine')
- * Feel the centre of energy created through abdominal breathing. Lengthen the spine, and ensure the upper torso is in self-carriage, supported by the waist and abdominal muscles.
- * Relax your shoulders, allowing expansion and elevation of your upper body through lateral breathing.
- * The arms from the shoulder to the elbow form part of the strong centre. Allow the weight to drop down your arm, into a relaxed elbow.
- * The arms from the elbow to hand are light in order to hold the reins with feel.
- * Legs should hang down either side of the horse - feeling relaxed - like wet flannels!
- * The knee joints are released not locked.
- * The feet are placed in the stirrup as if putting on a pair of 'carpet slippers'
- * The whole person should feel energized with a feeling of poise and pride.

MASTER THE BALANCE- MASTER THE HORSE

All paces and movements require that both horse and rider learn to move together with a natural 'flow' and balance. When we sit on the back of the horse we immediately disturb their natural balance. The art of balanced riding is to become aware of our own poise and equilibrium and this will allow us to feel 'at one' with the movement and spirit of the horse. Horse and rider in perfect harmony.

It is extremely important for us to feel stability and balance, so it is essential to have a saddle, correctly fitted and sitting well on the horse. This will aid the rider in achieving a good, balanced position.

The horse moves not only forwards but upwards with each stride, whilst his rib cage will swing from side to side. If the rider continually uses strong legs, this will prevent the horse relaxing his rib cage causing stilted movement and fluidity will be lost.

An athlete needs to move in self carriage and if the rider restricts movement with strong legs and hands,

the horse will become tight and tense within his training.

Many hours of ridden work on the lunge will help to develop a seat with both stability and mobility, capable of flowing with the horse through his different paces with a natural balance. Once this becomes established, it will be possible to help the horse to re-adjust his balance as necessary and make progress within his training.

You may find it useful to spend a few minutes, with focus on self-awareness and breathing, before you ride. When you commence riding, concentrate on your lateral breathing and self carriage, whilst walking the horse on a loose rein.

The horse will be our greatest teacher and he will reflect our mood, poise and self carriage. The rider who is focused and self aware, tuning into the nature of the horse, will be able to produce true harmony. When we learn to 'Master the balance' we can then 'Master the horse'.

Jenny gives regular clinics with her Iberian stallions, which specialize in 'rider posture and breathing techniques',

Her web site is www.spanishdressagehorses.com for more information