



Balance: part 1 – An Introduction

Our quest for balance starts with accepting each other; horses don't know us and never kid yourself that you know a horse. Through balance in all things we can grow and learn.

I could reasonably be described as a 'flat liner', in that it is rare for things to get me down or wind me up. I would like to say never, but I am human! I'm not sure that I started life this way; I'm a redhead and in my younger days displayed all the acknowledged signs of being one. Years of experience and consequences tamed me; my life found balance.

In our modern times the quest for mental, physical, emotional and spiritual balance is all consuming. The work/life balance being much documented in pursuit of happiness; any internet search will offer many ways of regaining control of one's life through different systems of rebalance. So what does balance mean to us in our equestrian lives and how does it affect us in our daily lives with our horses and our relationship with them?

Balance in equestrian terms is not unlike human balance. Physical balance can be affected by maturation, misalignment (caused by hoof imbalances, muscular spasm, TMJ, dental issues etc) and proprioception amongst others. The weight and imbalances of a rider can compound even minor balance concerns that the horse may have.

Mental balance is, in part, about giving our horses the best possible situation in which to live their lives; sufficient sustenance, shelter, safety, stimulation and good social groupings. Mental and emotional balance needs to consider our horse's fears and concerns; leaving the herd, seeing new things, learning new behaviours etc can all lead to imbalance.

I believe there is also a balance needed between what we can 'perfectly' expect and what we can really achieve. This balance means that sometimes we are forced to compromise. As the carer of an equine we have to ensure that those compromises don't affect the physical, mental or emotional balance of our horses. There is surely also a balance of belief; trying not to judge other beliefs without understanding them and keeping an open mind when science leads the way to new understanding.

If we accept that all aspects of balance impinge upon each other perhaps it's not difficult to accept that improvements in any area will affect the whole. The improvement of physical balance brings the added benefits of improved mental and emotional balance; they are inextricably linked. In subsequent articles I will look further at training for calm (emotional/mental balance) and physical balance; for now we'll touch briefly on them so that we can paint a broad picture of balance.

First lessons (preferably at liberty) based on positive reinforcement techniques will allow us to see the true horse in front of us so that we can tailor a specific and achievable

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plan. We need to be sympathetic to the emotional pressure that the horse is placed under during training sessions because if this mental balance is not addressed from the outset then future physical balance will be pretty much impossible.

The early physical balance that we can realistically expect from any horse is achieved from the ground. Teaching them to lead 'away' from us, not leaning on a rope (or hugging close at liberty) and just carrying themselves in their own space. No horse I've met yet has an innate sense of where my feet are; we both need our space and we should learn to understand each other's space (and the need for it). With the addition of stopping and starting (on quiet cues) we can progress to working on turns and circles, walking up and down hills etc. To further improve balance we will use gymnastic training. Through lateral bending we can extend the neck and spine so that the horse learns to use his whole body to balance rather than just his neck. Even before the first sitting on we can (and should) improve the balance from the ground.

Using lateral work, transitions and rein-back we can gradually improve and increase flexibility and balance further still, leading to connection and the ultimate goal, collection.

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