

MEL *Leming* Horsemanship



RIDING WITH *Synchronicity*

What does a horse's body position look like when it is working in a good balance with hind quarter engagement?



Very few people seem to have an understanding of the balance and self carriage that horses need to have, in order to be ridden so that they can remain sound, healthy, happy and athletic. This is a very important subject in all of my courses. It is equally as important as using psychology to work with horses. Their mind will be in a

better frame when their body is and vice – versa.

This article is to give you a pictorial view so you have more of an idea of what you are looking for at the end result and in the process. These pictures are of students at the recent Ultimate Horsemanship Experience (UHE)

To keep it very short and simple the key points are:

- That horses need to push with their hindquarters for forward propulsion rather than pull themselves along with their front legs. And the hindquarters rather than the front end, need to bear more of the weight of the horse, saddle and rider - most people know this. What a lot of people don't know is the only way that this can happen is through the hind legs reaching further forward under the body and this can only happen if the horse's back can lift up under the saddle and the rider. So there is a way to sit on a horse to encourage this and the saddle must allow the back to lift. Engagement of the hindquarters can only be achieved if the horse's mental and emotional state is right and if the physical body is in a healthy enough condition state to allow it.
- The horse's head and neck is its balancing system. Its position is the symptom of what is going on in the horse's back, ribcage and hind quarters. It just gives you feedback rather than it being the part that you have to make the adjustments to.

It is very hard to achieve something if you don't know what you are looking for. So that needs to be the starting point and this article can help you there.

Figure 1.

Sarah Tunnicliffe riding on the last day in the recent New Zealand UHE course on her young andalusian horse. Here you can see a lot of softness in the body of the horse and the rider and a very happy relaxed expression on the horse's face - Sarah looks deep in thought, there was a lot to take in during those 5 days.

The horse is showing a lot of reach in his stride, softness in the joints and lightness in the placement of the feet on the ground. The horse's hind leg is starting to reach further up under the body almost under the back cinch. For higher levels of hindquarter engagement this hind foot would reach even further, it



Figure 1.

could reach as far and the front cinch. Where the hind leg is placed when it is supporting the weight is the important part. A lot of horses when they are impulsive and hollow will over track with their hind feet but in the moment of the weight bearing phase of the stride the foot will be positioned behind the stifle. When this is the case the hind legs are doing nothing to support the horse's weight or propel the horse forward and the front legs will be doing all the work and pulling the horse along.

What would be even better in this picture is more lift through the back and especially the wither as you will notice it looks like the neck dips down just in front of the saddle. This saddle could be restricting this horse a little.

Figure 2

Joy Wooton -Banyandah UHE.

This horse typically wasn't very interested in going forward much at all. She had a very short choppy stride and did all the work with her front legs, pulling herself along. As moving and being ridden was so uncomfortable and such hard work for her, her attitude and expression were usually very unhappy. Here you can see that after adjusting the saddle,



Figure 2.

changing the rider's dynamics and several sessions of Energy and Bodywork this mare is starting to open up and reach out in her stride. You might notice how she is really reaching and extending her front leg, all the way to her toe - this is not typically seen in most horses but it should be.

The mare still has some restriction through her hindquarters, back and shoulders which is why her head and neck are up and she is not reaching forward through her shoulder as well as she could, but it's a huge improvement and the look on her face says it all.

Figure 3

Sue Storrier and Ted at the Banyandah UHE Course. Again this horse was described as an under impulsive horse that lacked interest in being ridden unless his interest was kept through external stimuli, for example, trail rides or gathering sheep. When moving and being ridden doesn't feel good to horses they will either shut down or at the other end of the spectrum they will try to just run away, that is be over impulsive. For the horse that is shut down the external stimuli or a job takes their mind off the fact that they aren't enjoying being ridden. This strategy will work for a while until you run out of ways and ideas to keep their interest. When you can get riding and moving to feel good to them, which it can, that will be the real answer.

Ted usually had absolutely no interest in being ridden in an arena and being schooled – but by day 5 he couldn't believe how good being ridden and his body could feel. Again this was achieved through adjusting the saddle, the rider's position and working on the body with the Energy work.

Ted began experimenting with how he moved, as you can see in the picture above, he is experimenting with ways to lighten his front end and use his hindquarter. At first he tried to lift his head and neck to find his balance, in the next picture you will see that he finds a better way to do it. You can see by the look on his face and the softness in the joints of his legs that he is feeling OK about it all.

Again notice the extension through to the toe in the lower legs and feet. Ted is just starting to try to reach through with the hind legs. It is important that people can understand the process of experimenting that the horse will need to go through in their body as they try to find the most efficient way to move. They must feel supported in this process so they will keep trying instead of feeling criticised because it is not perfect yet.



Figure 3.

Figure 4

Here is Ted after he has figured a bit more out. Now he is starting to stretch through his whole spine, lift up through the back and particularly the wither area, causing the head and neck to lengthen and lower. You can see



Figure 4.

how much more reach he now has with his stride especially in front. You might notice how much more reach Sue has with her legs now. You can get the feeling that he is 'swinging' along, that means that the hind legs have started to push instead of the front legs pulling him along. This is happening because the horse physically 'can' do it now, previously it was impossible.

Figure 5-1 & 5-2

Bonnie McIntyre - This combination probably made the most dramatic change of all at the Banyandah UHE. In the first riding session this little horse was very impulsive and

extremely hollow and looked very uncomfortable to ride. Neither



Figure 5 - 1



Figure 5 - 2

her mind, emotions nor body were in the right place as you can see in the photos above. She was very much on the forehand and both the horse and rider had a lot of brace in their bodies because of their lack of balance. Simply changing Bonnie's position and balance at the rising trot made a big change almost immediately in this little mare.



Figure 6

Figure 6

By the last day they were ready to learn more about engagement. Above and following are some photos of the process. Here the little horse is starting to lift her back and be able to reach through with the hind legs. At this point she is still very down hill with more of her weight on the forehand. Bonnie's position is excellent with a lovely quiet, consistent rein contact and good focus to help the horse.



Figure 7

Figure 7

With a little more instruction to Bonnie on how to encourage the horse to lift her belly, ribcage and back the little mare started to experiment with trying to lift more through her back and whither to lighten her front end. Note the expression on the horse's face, she is enjoying the session. She is really reaching well in her stride and having her nose in front of the vertical is excellent. She just needs to lift up through the back and the whither a little more.



Figure 8

Figure 8

In this picture the mare has experimented with lifting more up through her whither and is stretching her neck down to do this. Because she still has too much restriction and not enough power in her HQ's at this stage her nose comes behind the vertical slightly and she is still a little on the forehand. But they are really starting to get it. Through continuing to work on the mare's body to free her up more and more and with Bonnie's knowledge of the riding dynamics this combination will just keep getting better and better.

Ideally for a casual everyday working trot the outline of the horse would be somewhere between the above picture and the previous one, with the whither up and the nose more in front of the vertical.

At first some horses may need some rein contact to get to this level of self carriage but later they will be able to find it and maintain it

on a loose rein. This is the quality of movement and the balance that all horses need as a starting point – no matter what discipline they are in and even just for trail riding. They don't always need to be ridden with this much rein contact or mental concentration, remember these photos are of the learning process, but this is the minimum level of balance and hindquarter engagement necessary for a sound, healthy, happy and athletic riding horse. From here and while still maintaining the qualities of lifting, lengthening, reaching, stretching and opening the whole body, the horse's body shape or outline will conform as needed to produce the degree of hind quarter engagement needed for the specific manoeuvre required whether it be for dressage, cutting or any where in between.

Advancing...

Following are pictures of myself riding Alchemist showing the process for increasing collection and engagement. This horse is an interesting project for me. Without a doubt one of the biggest teachers I will ever have.

He was very unsound particularly on the right hind, he always stepped short and was uneven on a right hand circle and had no possibility to engage his hindquarters at all. He was given to me by Pat and Linda Parelli after I had been able to make so much progress with his rejuvenation.



Figure 9

Figure 9

My goal for this session was to get his wither and back up more (he looks flat in front of the saddle) so that he could get his hind legs further underneath him and be more powerful and athletic.



Figure 10

Figure 10

Here his wither and back is more up but there is not enough push from his hind leg therefore his nose comes behind the vertical. If the rider (me) would only lift her sternum and focus up, then the horse would be able to lift his sternum and focus and the hind legs would be able to come through more.



Figure 11

Figure 11

Now we are starting to both lift more in front and his nose has come more onto the vertical, ideally I would like his nose just in front of the vertical this means that the hindquarters are really powering. His weight is still slightly more on the front end. You can see by the

expression on his face that this is not as easy for him. If you look behind the saddle, to the loin area, you will see how long and flat that area is, you will also see the muscle tension there. His body is physically finding it hard to go with this much engagement but he is trying very hard.

Figure 12

I ask him to try and engage more and come up more in front. He tries but you can again see by the look on his face that this is hard for him but he still tries. It no longer feels effortless and easy for him and I can feel he is struggling and it is beginning to feel like hard work for me and that I need to push him, so that tells me that is all he is physically capable of at this point.



Figure 12

You can see the tension in his neck and shoulder and hindquarters and he is no longer reaching with the front legs like he should. Even though his front end has come up he has started to flatten out through the wither rather than lift up out of it. So it is not more training that he needs right now, it is more bodywork to free him up further. His mind was willing but the body couldn't do it. This was a very talented jumping horse that has been previously physically pushed beyond his limits. That is the reason why he ended up being donated to the Parelli Ranch in such a bad physical, mental and emotional state – and the reason that he now is my horse.

Ultimate

HORSEMANSHIP EXPERIENCE

COURSES 2008

Incorporating

- **Connecting with Horses**
 - **Riding with Synchronicity**
 - **Universal Energetic Bodywork**
- with Mel Fleming & Tony Robinson**



Figure 13

So we finish the session in a place where he feels soft and comfortable and go home to think out where to work on his body so we can get to the next level. We have already come along way just for him to be sound at all.

Hopefully this has given you some more ideas about what you need to be aiming for. It is a combination of connecting with their mind, emotions and spirit, having the saddle fit right and having the rider's dynamics and balance right, on a horse that is physically able to do it. I had learned and figured out a lot about the psychology (mind, emotions, spirit), saddle fitting and riding dynamics but Tony Robinson's Universal Energetic Bodywork has enabled me to help horses physically be able to do it. It has become such an essential part of my training now that I had to invite him to co – teach with me as it was the only way that I could give students the whole picture and all the ingredients that they needed.

I'd like to take this opportunity to wish you all Merry Christmas and a very happy New Year.

Until next time,

cheers *Mel*

JANUARY

Jan 21st -27th (7 day course)
'Banyandah', via Howlong, NSW

FEBRUARY

Feb 2nd -3rd (2 day course)
Introductory course, Groundwork only
Coffs Harbour area, NSW

Feb. 6th-10th (5 day course)
Coffs Harbour, NSW

Feb. 20th-24th (TBA) (5 day course)
Tasmania

MARCH

March 1st-4th (4 day course)
Bangalow, NSW

March 8th-12th (TBA) (5 day course)
Townsville, QLD

March 19th-30th (10 day course)
Moonbi, via Tamworth, NSW

APRIL

April 2nd -6th (5 day course)
Unconfident riders Adelaide, SA

April 9th-13th (5 day course)
Confident riders Adelaide, SA

April 23rd-27th (TBA) - 5 day course
Margaret River , WA

MAY

May 7th-11th (5 day course)
Gold Coast, QLD

May 21st-25th (5 day course)
East Gippsland, VIC

For all enquiries and bookings contact Mel Fleming
email: mel@melfleming.com.au
02 6760 5519 or Int: **+61 2 6760 5519**
or go to website: www.melfleming.com.au