CHALLENGING BALANCE TO STRENGTHEN BALANCE

WITH ERIC DIERKS

Horses and riders at all levels must remember the basics and strive every day for rhythm and balance in riding, training, and life.

BY ERIC DIERKS, WITH AMBER HEINTZBERGER
PHOTOS BY AMBER HEINTZBERGER

Life has a rhythm to offer and the better you dance with it and accept falling in and out of that rhythm, the more in balance you will be. While training a horse, I like to put myself in the horse's shoes, so to speak.

If I am required to do a task, I would like to do it in balance to improve the longevity of my body and not have the fear of falling down or falling apart. If someone were to stand over me and dictate when and how I should accomplish that task, I would feel a certain level of anxiety over my actions, causing tension and lack of rhythm. However, if someone were to allow me to find my own balance while offering guidance in rhythm, I would feel a more confident, strengthening result.

The struggle to find your center of gravity is the strengthening process to maintaining balance. Hence, while I train my horses I seek to challenge their balance in order to make them stronger and gain more confidence in themselves and in me as a rider.

BALANCE TAKES DISCIPLINE

To be in balance takes a lot of discipline. Think of all the actions you make during the day, from getting out of bed to making coffee to grooming your horse. Were you conscious of your own balance? More than likely—unless you were expecting something to jump out of the rafters to attack you—you would be walking around half slouched with yours eyes on the ground.

To be in balance takes work; you have to engage certain muscle groups to be in balance. Anyone can bend over to pick up a horse's foot, but if you were not conscious of your balance and did the same repetition 20 times, you may not be able to walk the next day. You would also be more aware of your capable work load limit. Nobody wants to be told their limit, so we tend to contort our bodies just to get the job done, putting strain on one muscle, rather than using our whole body.

Now, let's get back to your horse. The horse is naturally a grazing animal that was not intended for riding, but any horse that accepts the weight of a person on their back can carry a rider. However, to carry the rider in balance, while being challenged through walk, trot, and canter, then over jumps and galloping, will take more effort and discipline on both horse and rider's part. Your horse is your best friend, partner, and investment. To protect your investment and keep them physically healthy and even mentally happy, it is worth the long-term effort of working in balance.

WHAT IS THE BALANCED PICTURE?

In order to ride in balance, visualize what the horse physically has to do to be in balance. Although we are two different species, you can compare how each lowers their center of gravity to be in balance. The rider, when standing on the ground, will lower his or her center of gravity vertically, from their head to their toes, while being conscious of their weight even over their feet. As the knees bend, the hips come back, the shoulders forward, the chin up, and the hands and arms come forward. The more one lowers their center of gravity, the more potential power is made, and the higher they may jump, or throw a ball further.

A horse, on the other hand, lowers his center of gravity horizontally, from tail to nose. Naturally, the horse will propel his weight forward with the strong hind limbs to the front end and will have to engage from behind and stretch over his back and neck to keep from falling on the forehand.

With a rider in balance on the horse's back, forward motion can be introduced while giving guidance with natural aids. The more a horse lowers his center of gravity, the more one can say he is "collected." The more collected a horse is, the more potential power they have. A balanced horse appears level on all four feet while maintaining controlled energy in rhythm. When the hind end is properly engaged, the lightness of the horse's front limbs propel him up and forward rather than downhill.

There are many factors that make a balanced picture with a rider on a horse. First, both have to be independent of each other. The horse cannot solely depend on the rider, nor the rider on the horse for balance. The two work in harmony and in rhythm with each other. There is a mutual respect for each other. Though one may be the lead in the dance, the other has a desire to please and follow.

CONTROL IS HIGHLY OVERRATED

Most, if not all, control problems are a result of an unbalanced horse. When I am riding my horse and assessing my balance, I stick with four points I am in control of:

1.) My Own Balanced Position
2.) Creating Forward Energy
3.) The Track
4.) The Rhythm

My Own Balanced Position

If I am not in the center of my own balance, how can I expect my horse to be? Ask yourself while you are riding if you are completely independent in balance from the horse, the reins, or even the knee rolls in the saddle. Make sure all your natural aids can work independently.

If independent from your horse's balance, you will find your own center of gravity lower, depending on your stirrup length. The faster the horse or job at hand, the shorter the rider's stirrup should be. The shorter the stirrup, the more a rider can lower their center of gravity to go with the horse at a gallop or jump.

While on the flat, the stirrup should be longer so the rider can stretch taller, complementing the horse's length of frame. When your horse is strong, or as I commonly hear, "on the muscle," ask not just how much you are pulling back but for how long you are pulling back, enabling your horse's balance to go against you. There needs to be a "give and take," or a beginning and an end

to every aid that is completed before the horse starts to balance against the rider. Whether the leg or rein aids, they should last no more than a quarter of a stride before you release the pressure.

Creating Forward Energy

Energy can be interpreted many different ways. Energy may be anxiety, excitability, tension, or impulsion. There are many different examples of energy, but whether negative or positive, I feel it is a horse's will to survive. As long as I have a horse with energy, I have a horse that wants to do something, a desire to take action. Once you have that energy, it is a matter of directing it in a positive way. I find that directing a horse's energy is easier than trying to create energy where there is none, which is like trying to dance with someone that has no desire to even be there.

Your goal is to direct the horse's energy forward. Off of a whispering leg my horse is expected to go forward. If my horse resists the leg aid, the intensity of my leg will increase without emotion until the horse moves forward. Forward motion is always rewarded immediately by giving the hand forward and relaxing the pressure from the leg when he responds. Think of it this way: your horse has to see an open door to go forward, so make sure you have a sympathetic rein contact that allows him to go in a positive direction.

The Track

The track is where I direct the energy laterally (from side to side). Without guidance from the rider, horses can drift about the arena, falling in and out of balance. I think about keeping the horse underneath me like a unicycle. Straightness is paramount to finding their center. If the horse is falling one way or the other, it is usually due to too much bend in the neck, rather than in

the body. Too much bend in the neck is usually a result of the rider balancing on one rein or sitting more to one side than the other.

The Rhythm

A combination of stride length and tempo speed with cadence, the rhythm is how I direct the energy longitudinally. If I were to maintain a consistent stride length at a constant tempo with energy to each step, I would have rhythm. Now, every horse has a different range of stride length and a unique tempo that makes it comfortable for him to stay in balance.

To tell whether your horse is in rhythm, you can listen to the footfalls. A walk is a four-beat rhythm, a trot two beats, and a canter three beats. You may also feel it by delivering the energy forward and backing it up longitudinally underneath you by speeding up or slowing down the tempo without changing stride length, or shortening and lengthening the stride without changing the tempo. Be aware that every step has to have energy or cadence, otherwise the rhythm becomes weak.

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When interpreting a balanced horse, controllable gallop, or a desirable jump, always ask, in the order that follows: 1) Are you in a balanced position? 2) Do you have forward energy? 3) Are you riding your intended track and are you straight on your intended track? 4) Are you in a desirable rhythm?

RIDE THE FUTURE, RIDE THE POSITIVE

When you ride for balance, always ride the next stride in the direction you would like to go. Try not to correct your horse for a wrong step, losing your rhythm. You are always better off allowing your partnership to grow through guidance rather than dictatorship. Besides, wouldn't you rather dance with somebody that allowed you to find the rhythm again instead of being told where you

should have put your feet? The joy in the dance is finding the rhythm in it together. Overcorrecting, throwing emotion into it, or becoming actively passive does not complement the rhythm. Find that your eyes, leg, seat, and hands are riding the future.

There are many problems that lend themselves to becoming opportunities. If problems are looked at as problems, they are looked at negatively and often avoided. If I look at "problems" as challenges, they become opportunities to break down and master the finer points. When you overcome challenges, your confidence continues to grow and you produce positive results. I also find that teaching challenging students makes me a better instructor; as long as I make progress, I am 100 percent successful.

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CHALLENGING BALANCE TO STRENGTHEN BALANCE

The fight to find one's balance is also the journey to strengthening the balance. While I am riding my horses I am always challenging the balance both laterally and longitudinally, pushing the limitations within the horse's capabilities. When choosing an exercise, be conscious of what you are challenging your equine partner to accomplish. Here are a few examples:

Challenging Lateral Balance (straightness):

-Different range of circle sizes
-Lateral movements such as leg yield, shoulder-in, travers, renvers, and half-pass
-Jumping a jump on a diagonal
-Working on the side of a hill
-Jumping skinny or narrow jumps

Challenging Longitudinal Balance (collection/engagement):

-Transitions between gaits
-Adjustability in stride length
-Cavalletti
-Going up and down hills
-Jumping a range of related distances with stride adjustability
-Jumping various widths of jumps

ENJOYING THE JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

Enjoy the journey through discovery. Most riders are very goal driven. I think goals are useful, but you have to keep the wellbeing of your equine partner in mind. Set your goals around a learning process rather than competing at a particular level or achieving a certain score. Your horse does not feel the satisfaction from achieving that score or competing at a higher level, but your horse wants to please you, so take the time to appreciate the little things that make up the big picture.

If you are expecting only positive results, you will be quickly humbled. There is no such thing as perfection; no matter how well I accomplish a task, I know I can improve upon it. When I ride and teach for progress rather than perfection and my horse and I make progress, I feel 100 percent successful.

Always reward your horse for making progress in his training, and approach life with a never ending will to learn. Nothing is more rewarding than seeing a pupil or horse solve a problem themselves and become more accountable for their own balance in life.

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CHALLENGING THE BALANCE UP AND DOWN HILLS

A great exercise to challenge and strengthen your horse's balance and confidence is to work up and down hills. Going up the hill teaches the horse how to lengthen his outline while maintaining power. Be aware of maintaining a strong length of stride with cadence while going uphill. Your horse will want to elongate the stride to pull himself up the hill; to keep the push, shorten the stride, and maintain an upbeat tempo.

Going downhill is also beneficial in challenging the horse to shorten his outline without falling on the forehand. Going downhill can be quite daunting, but if you understand the fundamentals of balance it can also be very rewarding. Some horses will elongate the stride and go faster down the hill, especially if the rider is balanced against them, while some will shorten the stride and slow the tempo to be more conservative. If you are aware of maintaining an upbeat cadence with a shorter stride than what the horse offers while maintaining straightness on your track, the benefits are tremendous in building confidence, coordination, and strength.

Learning to go up and down hills is a two-way street for both horse and rider: the rider also strengthens his or her skills going up and down hills, challenging their balanced position, and building a stronger partnership with the horse. I cannot stress how important it is for both the rider and horse to be accountable for their own balance.