

Align Yourself

How to gain balance on a horse



Those of us who spend time with horses know that they bring out the best in us! Horses work in many types of therapy programs for this very reason.

When we work with them, we have influence and can affect their soundness if we throw them off balance or ask for things they are not ready to do. We need to be agile and balanced, ourselves, if we want to help our horse stay agile and balanced (this will help his joints and muscles stay strong and avoid injury).

If you want to become physically stronger, take care of a horse (or 2, or 3...). The daily moving of hay bales, mucking (cleaning) stalls and pastures, unrolling and re-rolling water hoses, grooming, riding, repairing fences, etc. will burn lots of calories and build muscle. An old friend and teacher once advised me to "park the car as far away from the store as you can and walk to the entrance". It's good advice.

If you spend time with horses, you walk a lot! When others advise you to "make it easier on yourself" and "use the tractor" for something you can easily do yourself - thank them for their concern, but do tell them that *The Path of Equus* brings opportunity to move more and be more...truly healthy.

Do you ride? One way to expand your equestrian path is to "*align yourself*" with mounted exercises that help to train your body to be in balance with your horse's body and to have relationship with gravity and movement.

When you are first learning to ride, you have an "interfering seat". As you grow and practice, you gain a "following seat". This is when you are no longer a burden for him/her to carry. In time, you develop an "influencing seat" and you improve your horse with your riding!

There is a series of exercises we use for students and ourselves that can help cultivate the feeling of what is correct and in balance, both with the horse and his movement as well as with the earth.

You can use a round pen or have someone longe you on your horse, or do the movements while riding up an arroyo or through a meadow. Set yourself (and your horse) up for success by choosing nice weather, quiet surroundings and good footing. Do these only on a very gentle horse.

Arms out from the shoulders (like an airplane) will show your shoulders where to be - open and relaxed - first at a stand still, then at a walk, then trot and finally at a canter. You can start with only one arm extended, slowly trading back and forth from one to the other.



Reaching straight up with your arms will show your spine how to stretch and center. This is also first done standing still, then at walk, trot and finally at a canter.



Lifting your thigh (one side at a time) away from the saddle/horse will show your hips how to align and holding your ankle with the hand (on the same side) with the knee bent will show your knee and thigh how to stay back under your body. These leg exercises must be done in very small increments to avoid pulling a muscle! It is important to move slowly in stages to gain the most from them.



The leg work will take much longer than the arm movements, so work standing still should be a priority, even though they can be done at all the gaits. Do them only one side at a time. Do all of the exercises equally in each direction.

By feeling the correctness of one's position when mounted, through a series of body movements, the rider can "self correct" any time. Some schools have mirrors where riders can watch their own positions. Some riders have daily instruction. Most of us face each day and just do the best we can. These tools can help us and will benefit the horses by making us easier to carry.

Learning to ride a horse requires three things:

- **Theory** – the student must study the reasons and philosophy of horsemanship.
- **Direction** – there must be instruction; "eyes on the ground" to offer guidance.
- **Practice** – the rider needs hours in the saddle to find her balance and "feel".