



Gaited Horsemanship



with

Larry Whitesell & Jennifer Bauer.

Balanced Rider Equals Balanced Horse

By: Jennifer Bauer

It is amazing what a horse can do in the pasture, beautiful rollbacks, spins, piaffe, transitions up and down. Then we get on their back and it seems like it is impossible. Sometimes when we ask for a turn right, they go left. When we ask a horse to stop, they just keep going. Why does this happen to riders when the lead mare simply has to look and the horses stop, turn or backs up, but when we ask in what seems like a more obvious way they totally ignore us.

It all goes back to instinct. Energy, balance, and rhythm are what horses need to live and survive out in the wild. When there is a storm approaching, the energy in the air tells a horse to move to a safer place. A horse out of balance is going to get captured faster by a mountain lion than the horse that is balanced. The rhythm of a herd tells the whole herd if they should be going faster or slower. It is brought back to what nature tells them to do. In riding and working with horses we try to replicate these natural instincts; we try to become part of the herd by becoming the herd leader.

The herd leader is the one who gets everyone out of trouble. When you go on a trail ride and something is spooky like a bag or deer. I want my horse to ask to me if it should be scared of that and trust me to get the herd out of trouble. I want my horse to follow my energy, balance, and rhythm.

For my first article for our newsletter I want to talk about balance as a rider in the saddle. If I am balanced, the horse will be more balanced; if the horse is more balanced, he will have more confidence. When you balance the horse he will have more confidence in you. When I talk about balance in the horse, I talk about the horse not falling on one shoulder or another and using his rear legs to push himself forward. Keeping weight distributed over each leg. When a rider gets on and pulls left or pulls right, the horse is thrown out of balance and then will rush, slow down and get dull, or get spooky. With a gaited horse they will stop gaiting. The better balanced we get, the better balanced our horse will become and then he will get safer, softer, and more smooth.

An example of being balanced is having a young child on your shoulders. If that child start to move around a lot, that same small child feels like it weighs a lot and it can be very difficult to keep your balance. When he moves, we brace our shoulders and compensate so that we both don't fall. If that child is still and quiet, isn't it easier for the adult to carry the child? In turn,

we are able to carry them longer because they don't feel like they weigh as much because we aren't brace our muscles. This is just something to keep in mind when we are riding our horses. The quieter and more balanced I am, the more the horse can do because he is balanced.

When we work horses in training, we don't do a lot exercises. The exercises we do though, work the entire body. In the exercises, one of the most important things we work on is ourselves. If I throw myself out of balance to try to get a horse to do a maneuver, what is the maneuver worth? It is like when you work out at the gym. I remember practicing for gymnastics, if we worked on something we had to get it right 20 times. If I sloppily practiced the move, that is what the end result would be. If those 20 times I practiced that move were balanced and smooth, the end product was significantly better.

When I work with people first exercise we do from the beginning with both horse and rider is the walk off. This is something you can practice over and over again when you are going down the trail. We want the horse to walk off from behind when they take their first step. When a horse pulls themselves forward from the front, they go onto the forehand. The reason we want our horses to walk off from behind is so they take their first step off engaged from the rear end and in the gaited horse world, this is how we get gait. With a trotting horse if the horse takes off from the rear end you are able to do good transitions to both trot and canter. This can also be good practice for walk to gait transitions. When I want my horse to go from walk to gait, I want it to be smooth.

When we ask for the halt to walk transition or the walk to gait transition it is going to be the same. I want my horse to walk from its rear end, lift his back and walk off. When I ask my horse to walk off, I pick up my reins (not high, just about where the saddle horn is), look where I'm going, squeeze my inside calf, allow my horse to lift his back by sitting light, and then walk off. What you should feel is the horse picking you up in the saddle and walking off. A lot of horses will also put their head down in order to lift their back up and thus be able walk off easier.

As a balanced rider, be careful that you are not leaning too far forward or squeezing your rear end. When you lean forward the horse is thrown out of balance and has to go to his forehand. When you squeeze your rear end you are blocking the horse's back from coming up and not allowing him to use his rear end to walk forward.

When you ride with friends, take the time to watch: does my horse walk from the rear end or does he pull himself forward? If you can't tell, have your friend watch you and your horse, does your horse pick you up in the saddle. As you start to watch people do this you will begin to actually see the saddle come off the horse's back.

Doing these exercise not only helps get your horse more engaged, but it also help with horses that don't like to stand, horse that take off when you don't ask them to and can help get a horse to pay attention. In all of these cases, there is only one problem though; the horse does not know when you want him to walk off. Too many times we just let our horses walk off. We need to make the walk off a purposeful movement. As soon as it is a purposeful

movement, it will make more sense to the horse.

If you are balanced, your horse will become balanced.

Jennifer Bauer Gaited Horsemanship

www.gaitedhorsemanship.com

Larry Whitesell Gaited Horsemanship

www.whitesellgaitedhorsemanship.com

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450 Lance Drive | Baxter, TN 38544

whitesellgaitedhorsemanship.com & gaitedhorsemanship.com

Larry: info@whitesellgaitedhorsemanship.com & Jennifer: info@gaitedhorsemanship.com