



Using BALANCE for Endurance

Some thoughts about using BALANCE Saddles, or Functional Saddling, for Endurance, Long-Distance Riding & Competitive Trail Rides



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As more people see and hear about the many benefits of the BALANCE Saddling System, it is inevitable that horse owners who do long distance riding and competing will want what it can offer. Therefore, it is important to clarify a few things about the relationship between endurance riding and the BALANCE Saddling System.

The truth is that they do not always sit easily with each other. The BALANCE Saddling System is designed to allow the horse to move in a bio-mechanically efficient, safe and comfortable way when carrying the weight of a rider. This has to involve a definite degree of engagement (collection) throughout the horse's dynamic posture in order that his point of balance can shift up and back away from the forehand. The hindquarters need to be engaged sufficiently forward and under enough of the horse's body to provide an upwards lift as well as a forward push.

To ask a horse to carry the weight of a rider when in a disengaged state is only asking for trouble because of the increased stress on the forelimbs and feet that occurs when the forelimbs are carrying too much weight.

We are not suggesting that an endurance horse is asked to work with the level of engagement needed to correctly perform Grand Prix level dressage movements, but it is not helpful or kind to mostly ride on a loose rein contact, at an extended trot!

In order to achieve a state of engagement where the whole horse is physically better able to cope with additional weight on his back, there has to be the right combination of energy, speed and tempo and for the rider to be taking responsibility for their own poise.

This kind of attention to the quality of movement and balance is rarely seen in any form of long distance riding. It *is* possible to ride a horse for long distances with enough engagement to minimise the stresses, but quality of the horse's movement and balance has to be the ruling factor rather than the number of miles covered in a given time.

In modern competitive endurance or trail riding, speed is the governing factor. Therefore, what happens is that the horses are ridden at speeds that are too fast for the horse to stay balanced in each of the paces. There is little or no engagement and the horse has to carry the burden of its rider on top of a body that is already suffering considerable bio-mechanical stresses due to its loss of natural balance and co-ordination. This does not mean that the horse cannot perform in this way.

Many do, but it is not without a cost in terms of comfort, soundness, wear and tear on their bodies and mental health.

The hidden damage from saddles vs the obvious damage from saddles

In competitive endurance riding, the aim is to avoid incurring penalties or even having to withdraw through topical injury, or obvious lameness. As far as the saddle is concerned, the worst observable thing that can happen is for the saddle/pads/girth to cause a topical skin lesion through friction. This can be enough to prevent the completion of the ride and is therefore looked upon as a main factor when choosing the right saddle/pads and girth.

From the horse's point of view, for something to cause the skin to break down it must be uncomfortable and undesirable, but often, the things that the horse suffers from most as a result of saddles are not so easily spotted. For example, severe pressure from a saddle can create real problems for the horse but also tends to shut down blood vessels, effectively numbing the area until well after a ride has finished. The Vet at the end of a ride could be looking at a horse with severe saddle related damage and not be able to see any symptoms. No swelling, no sensitivity, no lesions in the skin surface. However, if he were to look at the horse again 12 hours later, the story can be very different. Look at it again in a few months and the damage can be showing in loss of pigmentation in the hair, muscle atrophy and a weakened posture.

In addition to the short term symptoms of saddle damage, there is the long term bio-mechanical impact that being ridden over hundreds of miles in an unbalanced way has on the whole horse's system. When this is repeatedly done, the whole movement and appearance of the horse can change dramatically.

How does all this fit in with the BALANCE Saddling System?

Well the truth is that it doesn't always fit in easily at all. There *are* many riders who have used BALANCE saddles with good results in endurance riding because they pay attention to their horses needs. There are others who have not had an easy time because the BALANCE Saddling System:

- ⦿ Will show up any lack of rider balance/co-ordination,
- ⦿ Will not work well on a horse who has its back disengaged.
- ⦿ Will encourage the horse to move its back and more movement tends to increase the potential for friction unless the rider is very aware of their own posture and movement.

The BALANCE Saddling System works beautifully for as long as the horse and rider can work towards, and then maintain, a state of poise and engagement. As soon as this stops, it is time to get off the horse. In our opinion, this should be the deciding factor when assessing how long and how far to ride. For some horse/rider combinations it could be after 5 minutes or half a mile. For others they

might be able to maintain this supportive state for a much longer period of time or for far greater distance. It's all about quality versus quantity.

We know from many years of experience, that whatever 'sport' the ridden horse is asked to do, when his physical needs are respected and understood, the BALANCE Saddling System works extremely well.

It is what it is. It does what it does and it remains an incredibly useful tool which supports good riding but highlights practices which are not in keeping with the horse's best interests because the **System** will appear not to work in these circumstances!

- A tightly fitted saddle will inhibit correct (bio-mechanical) movement
- A tightly fitted saddle will encourage the horse to keep his back down and disengaged.
- A disengaged back leads to disengaged (non-supporting) hind quarters.
- Disengaged hind quarters cause over loading of the front limbs.
- A tightly fitted saddle will be more stable for a crooked/unbalanced rider because it is anchored down into the soft tissues of the horse's back.
- A tightly fitted saddle doesn't tend to cause friction against the horse's coat and skin because it is too tight to move.
- A tightly fitted saddle does create high areas of pressure.
- An unstructured (treeless) saddle can cause higher than desirable areas of pressure from stirrup attachments and girth attachments.
- A unstructured saddle can encourage a dropped back posture over time when the riders weight is concentrated through the centre.

A BALANCE Saddle and Pads, when used correctly.....

- ✦ Will support correct movement in the horse and rider.
- ✦ Will allow and encourage the horse to lift his back into an engaged state.
- ✦ This will allow and encourage the hind quarters to engage and support the weight of the horse and his rider.
- ✦ Will expose poor balance, co-ordination in the rider because it wraps around the horse's body rather than digging into it.
- ✦ Can create potential for friction between the pads and the horse's back if the rider is not stable and/or the horse's movement is too loose and disengaged over longer periods of time.
- ✦ Does not create high areas of pressure when used correctly.
- ✦ Has enough structure within it, to support the rider's weight over a large area and enough structure for the horse to get clear and helpful feedback (feel-back) from his rider.

So, the results you will get when you use a BALANCE saddle and BALANCE pad System will be judged as good or bad according to what is important to you.

To summarize...

We would love to encourage more endurance riders to work with the BALANCE Saddling System with BALANCE saddles and/or with other makes of saddle that have enough horse friendly design features to utilise this approach, but we also want to be open about the fact that a saddle like this, that is fitted to support bio-mechanical correctness (balance) in the horse when carrying a rider, could also cause some hair ruffling and even some friction to skin if then used on a horse that spends most of its time in a disengaged posture when ridden and or under a rider who is unbalanced, uncoordinated etc. in the way they ride.

Many long term BALANCE saddle users consider their saddle to be one of their most effective teachers because it will show up situations where there is a conflict between the movement of the horse and his rider that they can quickly address, thus encouraging them to monitor their own skills.



This is a picture of one of our clients successfully competing in the Tevis cup in the USA in her BALANCE saddle, but she had spent many months training her horse to carry her in better balance before embarking on such a challenge.