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Since the late 1980's the people behind the BALANCE organization have been studying the impact that saddles and riding have on the health, soundness and general wellbeing of ridden horses.

From early in their research, it became clear that the majority of horses that had spent more than a few weeks in conventionally fitted saddles were exhibiting negative symptoms caused by those saddles.

For more information on these symptoms, the reasons that saddles can cause them and for help to explore a more constructive approach to saddling, please go to the BALANCE website:

www.BALANCEinternational.com

They knew that if the horse could be moved into the BALANCE Saddling System, which respects and supports correct (bio-mechanically correct) movement, posture and behaviour in the horse, that improvements would be seen. However, for some horses, things had gone so far in terms of deterioration of natural movement patterns, posture and muscle mass that these horses were no longer considered to be sound or strong enough to be ridden. For them, it was clear that more help was needed, before they were offered a better saddle.

This is what led to the development of a simple and highly effective programme that horse owners were given, to aid recovery of their saddle damaged horses in ways that just changing the saddle itself could not address.

This presentation is designed to take you through some aspects of the BALANCE Remedial Programme so that you can understand how and why it can help horses recover from previous injury, lameness or health issues. It also shows how and why this simple programme can form the foundation for basic training and handling of young or spoilt horses who need re-training.

Let's look at a couple of examples of saddle related damage that are all too common in the ridden horse.

Example 1. Severe muscle wastage and underdevelopment.

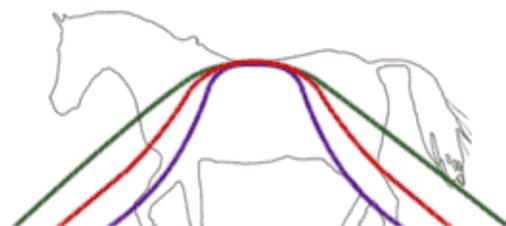


The picture to the left shows a horse whose body tells a story through the way it looks and feels.

You can see that there is considerable lack of muscle mass through the whole top line and neck. The withers look high, relative to the rib cage, because there is little of his original, natural and healthy muscle left to fill the gaps!

Because so many horses have saddle related muscle wastage, or underdevelopment, this horse's problems were not recognised for most of his life. He was simply described as having "high, narrow withers" as if it were part of his conformation.

This diagram shows the kind of progressive decline of muscle mass over several years and relates to horse shown above. The **green outline** showing his original, natural and healthy shape and the progressive decline to the **purple outline**. Take a look at the saddle shape in the photo above.



Can you see that it is a close match to the **purple profile**! If this horse had started out his ridden life in a saddle that was the same shape as his original **green profile**, he would never have lost so much muscle and would have found the whole process of being ridden a more pleasant experience!

When you look at the **outermost, green profile** which was his healthy, well muscled shape, one could hardly describe this as "narrow" and his withers were well covered and 'hidden' by strong, healthy muscle, as they always should have been. No one in their right mind would suggest using a narrow fit tree on him, but because the first saddle that he was fitted in was the ever 'popular' medium width, his body started a gradual decline to what you see in the picture. The medium width tree was similar in shape to the **red line** on the diagram, so you can see that from the first day he was ridden, his experience would have been one of compression, restriction and discomfort.

If a client sends us pictures/video of a horse with the kind of muscle wastage that this horse has, we will always suggest that the horse is allowed time on the **Remedial Programme** as outlined in this information sheet, before they purchase another saddle.

Example 2. Dropped Back (weak back) Posture.

Another example of when we would suggest the Remedial Programme for a specific benefit, is in cases where prolonged use of saddles that have inhibited movement, and/or riding methods that have encouraged/allowed disengagement of the hindquarters, has led to this weakened posture.



1. You can see how this horse has developed a posture where his back is pulled down through the saddle area, through repeated and regular disengagement whilst carrying the weight of a rider.



2. Here is the same horse after he had spent some time in a BALANCE saddle and his rider had been paying attention to the way he was using his body.

Can you see in picture 2 how much more lifted and level the horse's back has become than compared to picture 1?

This illustration shows why it is important not to assume that a postural issue is permanent in its nature. So often the dropped back posture is described as being a conformational fault, as if it is permanent when, in reality, with the majority of ridden horses, it is merely one of the more noticeable symptoms of incorrect movement when under the influence of the rider.

There are many ways in which a horse can be helped to recover to its strong, healthy and vibrant self. Many of them are simple and achievable by a committed handler and rider.

We will take a look at these in the next few pages.

The first thing to understand is what helps your horse do well in terms of his movement, health and habits, and probably more importantly, why good movement and correct training are so important.

Again, much more information on this subject can be found through the BALANCE website, but to give you a brief version.....

•The horse is not structurally designed to carry the extra weight of a rider.

•This doesn't mean he can't or shouldn't be asked to do this job, but it does mean that the rider needs to understand and take responsibility for helping (training) the horse to acquire the skills and strength needed to manage, what is, an unnatural thing for him to do.

•Without correct training, the horse will naturally be pressed forward and down into his front legs and feet by the rider's weight. This overloads the forequarter and suppresses the correct bio-mechanics of movement.

•Most horses, over time, will learn to compensate and adapt to this unnatural and inefficient way of using their bodies and as such, appear to accept the act of being ridden.

•However, these compensations come at considerable cost to the horse in terms of his own health, soundness, performance and well being.

•Lack of muscle and weakened posture are the least of his problems. Long term mis-use of his body and the in-balance this creates in his structural integrity can lead to stress and eventual damage to hooves, tendons, joints, muscles and even the function of internal organs.

•The horse has to be trained to strengthen his body in a way he would not need to do in his natural state if he is to carry the unnatural weight of a rider in a way that does him no harm.

•Simply put... .. when carrying a rider in motion, the horse has to be able to bring his hind feet further forward underneath his body than he does when left to his own devices. His powerful hind-quarters have to be developed as much as possible to carry the rider, rather than the extra weight being allowed to stay over the more vulnerable forelimbs.

•Training a horse to do this is not complicated, but it does require some focus and commitment because everything you do when you are handling your horse and riding your horse will either take you towards this goal or away from it. The key is for the rider/handler to start noticing what helps and what hinders. Then to increase the helping tactics and reduce the hindering tactics.

So, what are some of the things that you can look at and assess in your horse's life?

You first need to identify and remove, where possible, the negative influences in the horse's environment. Some examples are:

1. *a restrictive/uncomfortable saddle*
2. *an unreasonably demanding competition schedule*
3. *training/riding methods that do not respect equine bio-mechanics*
4. *discomfort in the feet due to poor hoof care or farriery*
5. *unnatural postures in the horse created by past lifestyle e.g. pelvic misalignment, muscular spasms etc.(outside professional help is usually required to deal with such issues)*
6. *lack of provision for regular access to pasture, or at least, some turnout*
7. *lack of proper nutrition*
8. *discomfort in the mouth due to sharp/misaligned teeth*

Then put aside at least one month; or longer if your horse has a lot of muscle wastage or a very weak posture, in order to give him the best chance of recovery. Although this might seem like a long time, it is still, in our experience, the quickest way to get your horse into good shape.

What we are suggesting is that you do some of the activities described, every day or most days while on the programme. It is important that unless the horse is actually lame, in which case you should be getting instructions/advice from your Vet., etc., he gets to regularly move his body in a **relaxed, rhythmic, consistent** way. This helps him to:

- a. explore and re-discover a more efficient way of using his muscles, joints etc.**
Of all the things that the Remedial Programme does for a horse, this is the most valuable and important to understand. Once a horse has reached a state where the Remedial Programme has been advised by BALANCE, he will have had his natural movement patterns corrupted so that his central nervous system has been de-programmed to the degree that it accepts inefficiency as normal. HORSES DO NOT CHOOSE TO MOVE BADLY. The Remedial Programme creates an environment that enables him to rediscover his own blueprint for efficient, comfortable and easy movement. As this process happens his central nervous system is re-programmed to recognise and seek out this natural way of moving.
- b. improves oxygenating blood flow to all of his muscles and the organs.**
Compressed or wasted muscles cannot receive a healthy blood flow and therefore do not receive healthy levels of nutrients and oxygen. Rhythmic, elastic, efficient movement allows muscles to function fully in the way that they are designed to and keeps them healthy.
- c. improves the flow of lymphatic fluid.**
The important lymphatic system relies on mobility in the muscles to circulate around the body efficiently. A sluggish lymphatic system puts the horse's immune system under stress and slows the removal of toxins and debris from his system.

FROM THIS



TO THIS



FROM
THIS



TO
THIS





Remember the **Remedial Programme** is not designed to make the horse 'work hard' and build muscle like a body builder.

It is more about paying attention to the **quality** of the movement the horse can give, rather than quantity. It is about repairing damaged and weakened muscle and correcting damaged patterns of movement.

Having said this, owners are often amazed at how fit their horses can be after a month or two on this programme because the horse is using his body in an efficient way.

Hand Walking.

Have you realized how much information you can get about a horse's state of balance and movement from the way he leads and halts?

When you pay attention to the way he walks alongside you, you will have access to some important information.

If you lead your horse by allowing him to drag along behind you on a loose lead rein, he will be on his forehead and you will be getting no feedback on his state of balance. If he is pulling into the lead line, he will be on his forehead and using you to balance on rather than finding his own self-carriage.



When you take up a proper contact through the lead rein into a well fitted head-collar you will be able to feel how he is walking and how he is balanced through the feel of the contact of the lead rein. Then you can make subtle and helpful suggestions to improve his balance, movement and posture.

Leading is like riding from the ground; it can be done in a constructive way or a de-structive way.

Note: A western training halter is not helpful for this particular purpose because it is designed to do a different job altogether where the quality of movement is not focussed on as much as control.

When you ask the horse to walk on from a halt, can he step forward in a way that does not put more weight forward into the lead rein?

Can he step off with a hind leg first instead of automatically falling forward into his front legs?

Can he walk with his neck and head straight in front of his body rather than crooked to one side?

Can you lead him just as easily from both sides?

When he halts, does he habitually leave one hind leg back, and can you gently start to train him to arrange himself into a more balanced halt so that this becomes his new and helpful habit? You may initially need to use a long stick to touch his leg and draw attention to the one you would like him to bring forward in order to stand square*, but eventually, standing square will become his new habit and he will arrange himself.

Can you make sure that you are holding your own body in a good balance and state of engagement as you work with your horse?

It's hard to imagine but just taking your horse for a constructive walk every day for 15/20 minutes can be very beneficial and in a simple and physically undemanding way, can remind him how to use his body efficiently, even after many years of incorrect use.

**Make sure you are in a safe place to do this. When focussing on straightness in the halt and moving off into walk, it is helpful to have a wall or fence to work alongside.*

To Summarise the walking, halting and leading section.

Encourage a good positive walk, but try not to influence the head and neck position of the horse other than to keep it laterally straight. It is the relaxed, rhythmic use of the horse's whole body that helps the horse to recover. Pay attention to the way he comes into halt, and encourage him to arrange himself into an organised and square halt with his hind-feet stepped up under his body and straight. The simple exercise of repeatedly walking and then halting into this square and engaged posture can help the horse to get into good habits regarding the amount of engagement he holds in his body.

When you ride you can have the same intention of asking your horse to step forward into the halt in a way that sustains a state of engagement for a few moments before you either move forward into a walk, or finish and dismount.

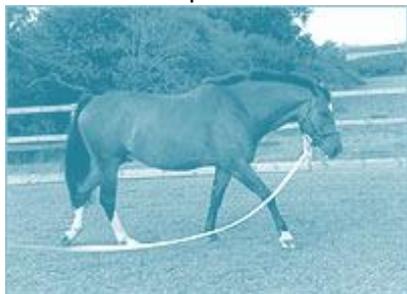
Remember that you are training your horse all the time you are with him and depending on how you interact with him, you are either training his body to be strong, engaged, elastic and better equipped to carry the weight of a rider, or training his body to be weak, dis-engaged and at risk of sustaining injury and discomfort through carrying the weight of a rider.

Lungeing

Good lungeing will take the work you have done in hand with your leading and move it into other paces.

We suggest that when at all possible, you use no equipment other than a lunge cavesson or comfortable head-collar, comfortable boots or Polo wraps if necessary, together with your lunge line and whip (no saddle, rollers, side reins or gadgets). Choose a safe, enclosed area with level footing. Try to provide your horse with a positive, elastic contact through the lunge line in order to receive valuable feedback (feel-back) about his state of balance and straightness.

Rather than getting stuck on a 15 metre circle, it is a good idea to get the horse to walk and trot on as large an area as you can manage. You will need to walk a small circle rather than standing rooted to the spot. The walk needs to be rhythmic and unhurried, but have some purpose. Too little energy and impulsion is like riding a bicycle too slowly. Hard to balance and very wobbly! However, be sure that you don't bustle the horse along as he needs time to put each foot down separately in the natural four beat walk sequence.



Encouraging relaxed, rhythmic movement on the Remedial Programme.

Please note that it is advisable to use some form of comfortable leg protection for the horse when lunging, particularly with young, unbalanced and/or tense horses and any horse that is shod.

The head and neck position should not initially be interfered with by you, rather, observe the place/s that the horse wants to carry his head and neck and notice how this complements what he is doing with his body. Also, notice that the speed of the horse in each pace has a significant influence on how much he can 'let go' of tension throughout his body and this is often most easily spotted in the trot. You may initially need to allow or encourage your horse to walk/trot quite slowly in order to find the speed that allows the fullest range of movement through all the joints in the limbs, encourages the horse to experiment with his head/neck position, and be soft and relaxed through his body. What you are trying to achieve now is a 'therapeutic trot' with a degree of elasticity and ease.

If you speed up the trot in an attempt to make it look more active you will notice that the horse will, indeed, be more active in the limbs, but will also have to stabilise his loss of balance by making his body more rigid. The head/neck position also tends to become higher and stiffer in an attempt to balance. With this kind of trot you are only reinforcing undesirable patterns of movement in the horse. Again, the horse must spend equal time on each rein. Do not lunge for more than 20 minutes, with 5 to 10 minutes only at the beginning of the programme.

Try to keep a consistent, positive, elastic feel down the lunge rein all the time. Just as you would for a good rein contact. If the horse habitually bends his head/neck to the outside of the circle on one rein you can then start to ask him to keep his neck straighter so as to help him to let go of this habit and explore a different, and more even way, of organising his body. As your horse gets more elastic and better balanced, you can ask for more energy in the trot without losing the quality of the movement.



Bareback Riding

We do not recommend bare-back riding is done too often for the following reasons.

Whilst there is no doubt that bareback riding *can* increase the balance, co-ordination and confidence of the rider, it does very little for the horse.

In most cases where the Remedial Programme is considered to be necessary, the horse is not strong enough through his back and not correct enough in his movement and balance to cope with the rider's weight being concentrated into the small surface area of the riders seat, directly down onto his back.

Bareback pads offer a little more protection, but not enough to justify riding in them for any length of time. The fact that most bareback pads are attached through some form of girthing arrangement means that they tend to pull unacceptable and unhelpful amounts of pressure down onto the spine in one small area. Not such an issue with a horse that has good muscles but potentially damaging and uncomfortable for a horse that is recovering from muscle atrophy.



Some final thoughts.

We could write so much more about all of this, but we hope that this will give you some useful information and ideas to help you to help your horse to be as healthy and as happy as possible.



We would encourage you to take photos and back profiles of your horse before you start the programme, and also during the programme so that you can monitor the changes. It is exciting and encouraging to look at the changes as they happen but the daily changes are subtle, so you may not notice them at first. Having a record to refer to will show you how much progress your horse has made.



If you have someone who can video you working your horse from time to time, it will also be helpful to be able to observe things from a different perspective.

Enjoy the process because it tends to strengthen the bond between the horse and his rider when so much attention is being made to his needs.

Tense and tight bodies can benefit from a good grooming routine and some simple massage and touch techniques can encourage a horse to let go of tension.

When going through the Remedial Programme, we would suggest that whilst you pay attention to good hoof care, you do not embark on something as radical as changing the horse from being shod to being barefoot. If considered necessary, this process must be done with a great deal of care and planning.

BALANCE. *helping people helping horses...*