

Understanding Braces

In a recent 2-part article, *Origins of Resistances*, I discussed Resistances and their relationship to training. In part 1, *Classifying Resistances*, I briefly mentioned something called "braces". Since that time, my e-mail has been flooded with readers wanting to know more about them. Because your ability to recognize braces is an important part of alleviating your horse's resistances, I am dedicating this article toward a greater explanation of this subject.

So, let's review. Resistances which inhibit movement are referred to as "braces". The definition of a brace is:

Lack of correct, full, voluntary, and unimpeded movement in any able direction, demonstrated by a smooth, tension-free, and willing response on the part of the horse.

For example, a horse who does not step as deeply under his body on one side would be seen as manifesting a brace on that side. It is the *effect* of the brace that is often noticed, such as when we see a horse half-pass well to the right and not so well to the left. The actual origin of the brace needs further investigation.

While many braces can be obvious to trainers and riders, not all braces are easily observable. (Fortunately, there are methods available to help us observe and determine the more subtle braces. Unfortunately, I cannot include a discussion of these methods at this time)

As stated previously, a brace is a resistance that we notice or feel with regard to the quality of the horse's movement where the response by the horse is less than an optimal reaction to an aid. Braces can (and do) occur at all levels of riding. Braces result in horse's lack of impulsion and engagement, poor performance, difficulty learning, crookedness, tension, soundness problems, behavioral problems, and loss of overall potential. Braces can be categorized into three groups. (Sorry, a little bit technical here)

Classifying Braces

Group 1) **Simple braces** – These are usually the easiest to observe and the easiest to correct. Commonly, they include the horse's inability move freely through the shoulders (I.e. step forward, sideways, or backward on a 45

degree angle) or hind quarters (i.e. step deeply under and across the body). Decreasing hind end braces improves impulsion, straightness and engagement. Decreasing front end braces improves lightness of the shoulders, carrying capacity of the hind quarters, self-carriage and collection, (Of course, all braces are related as the horse moves as a single unit, each part affecting the others in a positive or negative manner.) Unfortunately, not all braces are simple.

Group 2) **Complex braces** - Braces usually observed at higher levels of performance and often originate from compromised ability of the horse to move hind end around the front end, and the front end around the hind. Often involves some spinal component (not necessarily a physical problem; more commonly a training issue i.e., lack of spinal rotation or bend at some level).

Group 3) **Complicated braces** – Some braces are compensations for other braces. These braces can be found anywhere in the body, and are often the result of a combination of more than one brace.

Here are some more examples of the *effects* of a brace: horse falling on his forehand, dragging one or more feet when backing, uneven Piaffe, crooked to a jump, difficulty bending on one side, etc.

A breakdown at the higher levels of riding can often be traced back to a flaw in the foundation, and this is usually the consequence of a brace.

So, first we observe the brace, and then we identify its exact origin, and then address it to make a change in the horse's movement and his response to the aids. For example, your horse demonstrates right lead canter problems. This might be the result of a simple left hind brace, or a complex right sided brace in both the right hind leg and the ribs. We might address these braces by either health care intervention or re-training, depending on our diagnosis.

Observing braces and understanding how to alleviate them is central to improving your horse's performance

Performance and movement problems are often the result of a brace. In other words - "alleviate the braces" to improve performance.

And finally, on the topic of equine movement, here are some final thoughts:

"The horse is the ultimate expression of freedom of movement, grace and beauty, spirit, strength and forgiveness, and especially kindness of soul.

It is our privilege to understand and appreciate this, and our obligation to learn not to interfere with this expression of movement but do all we can to encourage and support it."

Until next time,

Dr. Bev Gordon