

Sidelines Magazine

by Dr. Bev Gordon

Riding forward for balance

The training of the horse as an athlete, capable of performing at higher levels of training, is directly related to your ability to move the horse forward, or “get to the feet”, a term used by the late great horseman Tom Dorrance. It is an important aspect of training to have the ability to effectively ride your horse forward, at any given moment in time. This is primary; proper training cannot proceed without effective driving aids having been established. Once this is achieved, we can use the horse’s respect for the forward driving aids to develop collection. Without the ability to be effective at driving and collecting the horse at will, balance and self-carriage will be sacrificed and the development of the horse as an athlete cannot be adequately attained.

So, with that in mind, let’s look at the connection between riding forward and developing balance.

- 1- Ride forward to go faster, i.e. racehorses. Horses gain both impulsion and development of their hind end pushing (driving) muscles needed when performing extended gaits.
- 2- Ride forward to develop aids to collect. This gives the horse the opportunity to understand the aids necessary to execute longitudinal flexion and extension of his frame (front to back). Changing of the horse’s frame and shifting weight backward onto haunches, such as in the half halt, re-balances the horse and improves self-carriage.
- 3- Ride forward to teach horse to “stay in front of the seat’ during longitudinal changes of frame. This helps to keep the horse on the bit, and encourages him to use his back.
- 4- Riding forward and back, through transitions into, out of, and within the gaits develop the carrying muscles used in collection.

5- Forwardness helps with straightness. Straightness is necessary for good self carriage and therefore balance.

6- Riding forward supple horses and keeps horses respectful of the aids, and freer in the mind and body,

Horses who do not move forward immediately when being asked to do so with light aids need to have this issue addressed before continuing training.

Riding Forward and Back

Remember the first time you swung a leg over a horse and you were taught to use your legs to ask the horse go, and use your reins to ask the horse to stop? We used our legs only to make the horse move forward (we had to start somewhere). At some point in time someone confused us by telling us now we need to use our legs to slow or stop the horse as well. Time and training introduced new variables, and as your riding skills progressed and your aids became more subtle and effective, you began to use your legs to not only ask the horse to move forward, but to ask the horse to halt and collect as well. In order to do this, we needed to learn a few more pertinent facts, such as when we use our legs to bring a horse back from forward movement it involves the use of additional supportive aids. (Things got really confusing when we were taught forward doesn't necessarily mean moving faster and covering more ground, as in Piaffe for example) These additional supportive aids encompassed adding the effect of the seat and weight aids. The altered change in the rider's body balance transmits his *intent* to the horse.

By this time you should be getting the idea that moving the horses forward, and bringing them back into collection is a key element in developing balance. There are many different training exercises you can choose from to develop the horse's longitudinal flexion and extension. I will not cover specific exercises in this article, however, transitions within the gait, both on circles and straight lines, should always be part of any training session, regardless of the discipline you ride. Always think "forward" and "in front of the seat" especially when doing collected work, such as walk or canter pirouettes, and even in the rein-back in dressage.

Biomechanics, Balance, and Feel

It's interesting to note that while extension and collection are at opposing ends of equine movement, there are similarities between the two with regard to balance. 1) Correct execution of each of these two extreme movements involves having the horse's sequence of steps become slower, i.e., decreased tempo. 2) Additionally, in both extension and collection the horse will step his hind legs deeper under his body. Both of these movements encourage increased engagement of the hindquarters, with the major difference being in the direction of thrust. Collection (carrying muscles) creates an *upward* thrust, and extension (pushing or driving muscles) creates a *forward* more ground-covering thrust. Moreover, the weight shift the horse experiences riding forward and back has a similar balance as if you were to push a baby carriage up one side of the hill and keep it from rolling down the hill on the other side. (Horses find it a more natural balance to extend the trot UP the hill; many horses actually prefer to canter up hills rather than walk. But you wouldn't want to ride extended trot DOWN the hill. In fact, most horses are quite happy to walk when going down hills).

Self-carriage - *a horse in dynamic balance* - can only be realized when there is no compromise on his immediate acceptance of and response to the forward driving aids. Riding forward (and back!) is essential for the horse to learn balance.

Until next time,

Dr. Bev Gordon