

Developing a Connected

PARTNERSHIP WITH YOUR TRAIL HORSE



“WHY DO I GET A BACKACHE WHEN I RIDE?”

Neutral posture holds the
key to pain-free riding.
Here's how to find it.

.....
part eight by PEGGY CUMMINGS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TROY PALMER-HUGHES

Are you looking to improve your balance, ease and lightness in the saddle, making the ride smoother for both you and your horse? Follow Peggy Cummings each month as she provides insights and commentary into the balance and movement of trail riders and their mounts. We invite you to submit photos for consideration for use in the column, which will appear in both Trail Blazer magazine and on www.trailtownUSA.com. Send your photos to Editor@trailblazermagazine.us

Sometimes, despite our best efforts to ride in good form, our back and other joints—knees, hips or ankles—begin to ache. When you unconsciously brace or tense against the motion of the horse's movement, perhaps to stay on board or to protect your body in some way, the muscles along your spine tighten as your arms, back and legs work harder to maintain stability. These compensations can lead to acute or chronic backache, not to mention painful hips, ankles or knees. In this article we will get to the root of why it hurts, and learn the key to pain-free movement.

When your body is not in proper alignment to receive movement (absorb shock), your joints will be jarred and compressed. Alignment is when the body parts “stack” without tension (such as when you are trying to keep your shoulders back or sit up straight). It is when your head is on top of the shoulder girdle and the rib cage is underneath and on top of the hips. As shown in the illustrations, “Neutral” is the only place where the sternum (breastbone) and the sacrum (tailbone) are parallel to each other, where they must be to keep you in alignment.

The cervical and lumbar vertebrae have the most mobility, which also makes them more susceptible to stress and discomfort if you brace against the movement of the horse. Such repetitive stress can lead to back pain.

In addition, everyone has a dominant side that “takes over,” while the weaker side compensates, causing not only back and joint pain but torsion (twisting) in the body. One often hears: “My chiropractor told me I have one leg longer than the other.” This is rarely genetic, but most often the result of the twisting and uneven loads that we subject our bodies to from the time we are children.

KIND OF A DRAG

When a crooked, already compensating rider gets on a horse she often becomes further compressed during motion. Then the horse compensates against the drag of the human body and also becomes more crooked. The horse most probably started heavy on the forehand and slightly out of alignment. The rider, seeking to influence the motion, does this with compression—pulling on the reins, pushing with the seat bones, using “more leg.” This downward spiraling cycle produces back and joint pain, stiffness, undue use of force and frustration in the rider. The horse is often similarly frustrated, and the result can be spooks, spins and other “evasions” as he too attempts to escape the discomfort and conflicting signals.

A NEW APPROACH TO REDUCING PAIN

Instead of looking at all the evasions in the horse and how to correct them, let’s look at the *posture and alignment of the rider* and how it may be contributing to those behaviors in the horse. The horse is in a no-choice position of having to carry the “dead weight” of a rider, on the forehand, in discomfort, which often produces pain, unsoundness and evasions. It is equally possible to reverse this cycle, and the responsibility for this reversal begins with placing more emphasis on the alignment of the

rider’s body as well as the negative effects of the lack of alignment to both rider and horse.

The ideal alignment for a human body, regardless of activity, occurs when all the bones and joints have freedom to move during movement and to withstand whatever forces come upon it without bracing or compressing. The forces that happen to the human body while you are sitting on a horse include:

- The force of the horse’s movement that is received primarily from the back, through the rider’s seat and legs, which I call “the Wave”
- The force of movement (gravity, G-force) coming to the front of the rider’s body, especially the upper body since it is in space, which I call “the Wind.”

Consider the human body as a buoy in the water: the upper body is like the gently bobbing part visible above the water, and the legs and feet are the line and anchor. What is significant about a buoy in the water is:

- Its capability to right itself between the wind and the waves
- Its ability to float and maintain lightness

- A buoy in order to be a buoy always has an anchor
- Through the rhythm of the wind and the waves it has a consistent reconnection to its anchor
- It is always in a gentle rhythmic oscillation.

BUOYED AND BALANCED, NATURALLY

The most natural position for the pelvis and overall posture in motion is a “neutral” position because in this position, the body naturally buoys (moves back and forth equally) automatically. *The byproduct of neutral posture is the most stable and shock absorbing position you can have for life.* Having neutral pelvis and thus a neutral posture provides:

- SAFETY! When you are in balance and neutral posture, you can easily stay with your horse during unexpected stops, spooks or spins
- The only place where the hips and limbs have independent movement

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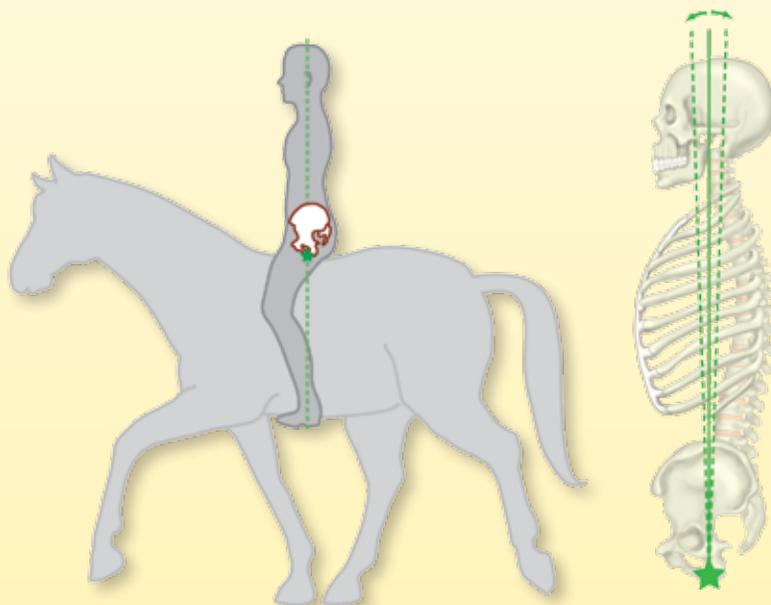


FIGURE 1: NEUTRAL POSTURE

It’s the only place where the sternum (breastbone) and the sacrum (tailbone) are parallel to each other, where they must be to keep you in alignment. When your body is in neutral, your arms and legs are free to move independently and swing during movement. Your legs drape softly around the horse with a slight pocket of air under the knee at a standstill. The calf has contact and your feet are level. The movement of the body is dynamic and the body is live weight. The spine and back lengthen and widen during motion and equal and opposing body parts are working in support of each other to create balance. RIGHT: When your upper body can move with a slight oscillating rhythm like a buoy in the water, you will be the most stable and pain free, able to rebalance with ease.

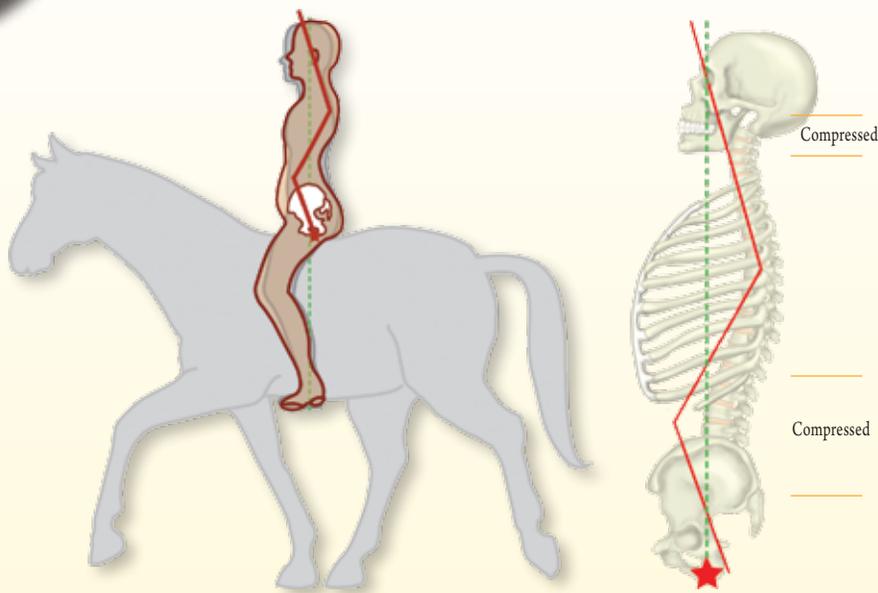


FIGURE 2: ARCHED POSTURE

This drawing shows an “arched” posture, in which the lower back is hollowed, the heels are driven down, and the sternum and sacrum are jammed and compressed. This posture, although often taught as “correct,” contributes greatly to stressed and painful joints in the rider and horse as well as shallow breathing. RIGHT: Note compressive forces associated with this posture.

- ⊗ The only posture where the core muscles automatically activate to maintain stability, especially during stress (imagine having to walk in water chest high as quickly as possible)
- ⊗ The only posture that allows dynamic expansion during movement
- ⊗ The only posture that facilitates deep breathing and proper expansion of the rib cage during breathing
- ⊗ The only posture where your body is live weight (bones and joints have freedom to move during movement)
- ⊗ Recovery and stability are easier on a horse and on the ground when influencing a horse that is out of balance
- ⊗ This is the only posture where the two sides of the body can become more equal during movement, and the energy of the feet in the human and the hind feet in the horse can come through the body to create a reciprocal, energetic, elastic, light movement
- ⊗ The only posture where an oscillating rhythm is created during movement which overrides tension and bracing
- ⊗ The only posture where two bodies can truly synchronize in motion
- ⊗ The only posture where there is a distinction in which the internal muscles of the body are used for alignment and support (core muscles) and the external muscles (arms, legs and muscles along the spine) are used to facilitate movement.

When your body is in neutral, the sternum and sacrum are parallel to each other. The arms and legs are free to move independently, and can swing during movement. The collarbones are straight, the shoulders are relaxed and the head sits level on top of the shoulder girdle. The legs softly drape around the horse with a slight pocket of air under the knee at a standstill. The calf has contact and the feet are level. The movement of the body is dynamic and the body is live weight. The spine and back lengthen and widen during motion and equal and opposing body parts are working in support of each other to create balance.

Why doesn't everybody ride like this? I think one of the biggest factors is the lack of education about how to move in our bodies as young children. When I teach children, they are so quick to “get it”; that is, how to move about in a more neutral posture. They particularly get excited about having more strength in an easy way, especially in situations of a horse getting heavy or pulling.

Another factor is that we, as adults, are fairly

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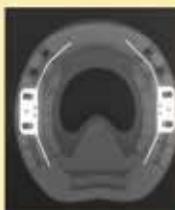


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unaware of the dynamics of our own bodies in motion. We often resort to useless postural habits while pushing, lifting, carrying, walking, running, not to mention riding. We take our unconscious habits with us wherever we go. We are not taught enough how to attain ease of movement in a way that is easily incorporated into our daily lives with simple, tactile ways of reminding ourselves.

I find most people are more interested and motivated to make a change in their movement and postural habits when their body hurts, they have had an accident or when they are having trouble with their horse.

POSTURE PROBLEMS

The postures that riders succumb to most of the time and that can contribute to back and joint pain are:

- Arched posture
- Slumped posture
- Hypermobile posture

These postures are sometimes unconscious and, unfortunately, they are also taught due to ignorance or tradition to achieve a certain “look” or posture considered “correct.” Regrettably, lots of backaches and other joint problems are the result along with unhappy, uncomfortable horses. Riders put up

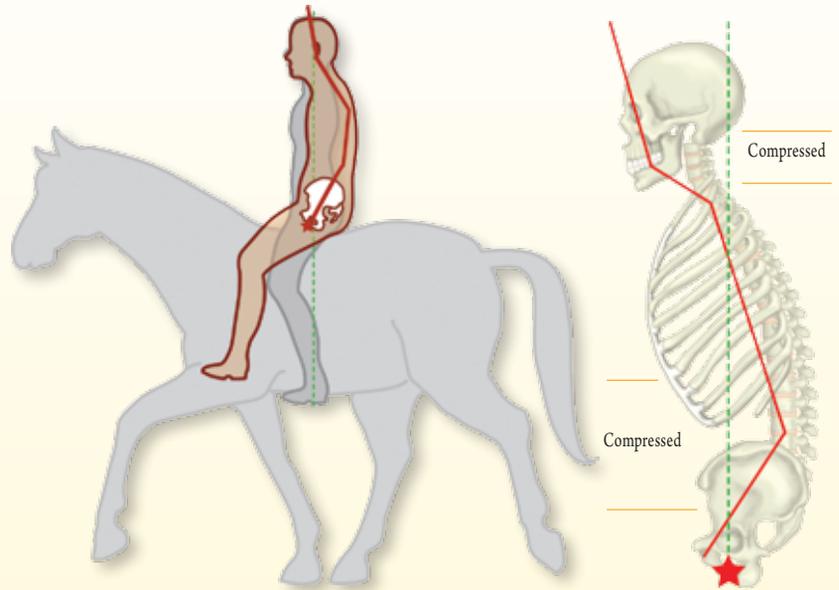


FIGURE 3: SLUMPED POSTURE

This drawing shows a “slumped” or pocket-sitter posture, in which the rider sits like a sack of wet cement on the horse, creating dead weight and compression. In this posture, the feet are braced forward, the sternum is dropped and the sacrum is tipped backward, rounding the rider’s back and creating compression in all of the joints. RIGHT: Note compressive forces associated with this posture.

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“As a rider, it is essential that you learn about your own body alignment and maintain your mobility and agility. The ideal alignment for a human body, regardless of activity, occurs when all the bones and joints have freedom to move during movement and to withstand whatever forces come upon it without bracing or compressing.”

with a lot of unnecessary discomfort due to ignorance. In spite of all this, our wonderful horses carry our weight and many riders take pain pills to cope with their discomfort.

The “arched” posture is one in which the sternum is raised, which puts the upper body backward. The pelvis is tipped forward which adds more hollow to the lower back. There is compression between the sternum and the sacrum and throughout the joints of the spine and limbs. There is stress in the neck and shoulders, ribs, lower back and pelvis. Breathing is shallow. The rider who practices “sitting up straight” by putting her shoulders back and lifting her chest is in this posture. This rider also pushes the heels down and grips with the thighs. It is very damaging to the lower back and causes the most concussion to the body of the rider and the horse during motion.

The “slumped” posture is one in which the sternum is dropped and the pelvis is tipped backward. The back is rounded. There is compression between the sternum and the sacrum

and throughout the joints in the body. There is stress in the neck, shoulders, ribs, back and pelvis. Breathing is shallow. The rider who practices this position focuses on sitting on his/her pockets and bracing his feet forward. This posture creates a “sack of cement”-type of dead weight and just adds more load to the horse’s back.

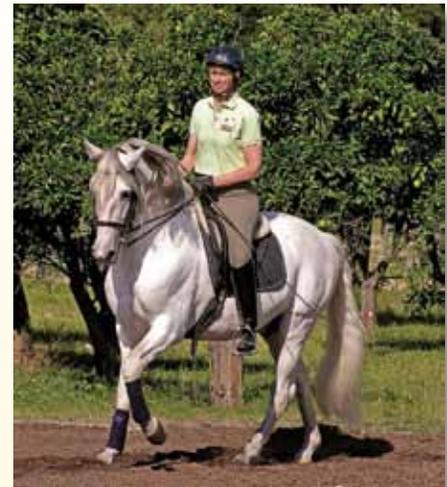
The “hypermobile” posture is one in which the body varies from slumping to arching with willow-like movement of the upper body, especially visible in the lower back. Sometimes the willow-like movement is accentuated because the rider is overly swinging the hips as taught by many instructors. There is compression in the body between the sternum and the sacrum and throughout the joints of the body. A rider who practices swinging with the pelvis like pumping on a swing is very hypermobile, especially at the sitting trot. This rider is very unstable, making it difficult for a horse to carry the “drag and dead weight.”

Although this is a subject for many more articles, discussions, and research, the saddle makes a qualitative difference not only to the horse’s back but to the rider’s body. *If the pelvis cannot sit level and be supported to rest in neutral, there will be undue stress and compensation in the rider’s body that will directly impact the horse’s way of moving.* And, though the saddle industry is improving some of its design, many saddles on the market do not allow a rider to sit in alignment. Consumers are not educated on how to evaluate a saddle from a postural and movement point of view particularly for their bodies.

STRENGTHENING CORE MUSCLES

Some of the most successful ways of preventing backaches when you ride is to do exercises to strengthen your core muscles, such as Pilates, Yoga, Aikido or other forms of martial arts, fitness and weight training at the gym. All of these require a capable instructor who can show you how to use your body in neutral. You have to become an informed consumer to find the right teacher for yourself.

Other ways of maintaining back health and body soundness are to get bodywork to



Peggy Cummings aboard Libérale, a 14-year-old Lusitano stallion.
Photo by Melanie Powell
(www.shybackstudios.com)

Peggy Cummings is the creator and founder of Connected Riding and Connected Groundwork, an approach to riding and handling horses that gives both horse and human more freedom, confidence and lightness in any situation. For further information, visit Peggy at www.connectedriding.com. Her latest book, “Connect With Your Horse From the Ground Up,” will be published in February from Trafalgar Square Books.

relieve cumulative stress. This can be massage, craniosacral work, osteopathic work and chiropractic work, to name a few. Feldenkrais and Alexander work are two wonderful modalities helping people realign their bodies in movement, and these methods are being used widely in other sports.

Last but not least, body awareness and biomechanics of the rider are still not part of mainstream equestrian education. Many clinicians tell you what to do with your horse, but do not know how to communicate what to do with your body to help the horse become more effective in his movement. As a rider, it is essential that you learn about your own body alignment and maintain your mobility and agility.

Unless you have had some injury, a backache does not need to happen to you because of poor posture or body use. I work with many riders that have had back aches, herniated disks, fused vertebrae and other severe joint injuries who continue to ride pain free as long as they are in neutral. I am one of those riders and am grateful that I chose to find another way to ride when I was told many years ago that I should stop riding because of my aching back!



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