

POSTURAL AWARENESS - by Diana Jamieson, Chester Farm.

I was in the round yard working with one of the young horses today, noticing how he moved and how I moved, when I started thinking (yet again!) about the impact and influence we have when we are handling our horses from the ground, let alone when we sit on their backs.

Anyone who has ever come to one of my flatwork riding or horsemanship groundwork lessons will have heard me often mentioning how our posture and body position is so important in providing cues to our horse on how to carry himself, how to move and how to behave. It is an often overlooked fact how much we can assist our horse from the ground by using our own body positioning and posture to also encourage him into better balance and way of going.

As a horse rider we must recognise that the second we sit on our horse's back we immediately apply to him all of our own balances, symetries and energies (or unfortunately our imbalances!), so our goal becomes to ride every moment with the best possible position and thought pattern that we can to enable our horse to use himself evenly and with confidence in his load.

If we take a look at the common practise of lunging a horse (which in itself seems able to cause controversy these days with people either for or against it for various reasons), some people will see this as a pointless exercise sending your horse around in mindless circles, others may feel it gets rid of any cobwebs that might be hidden before they hop on for a ride. Like anything, I feel lunging a horse can be done well with thought and focus to assessing, communicating and gaining respect from your horse before you ride or as a useful exercise in it's own right, while it can also be done blindly with complete lack of communication or focus and no real regard for what the horse - or the handler! - is actually doing. The latter is, in my opinion, a total waste of time and achieves nothing.

I prefer to see all groundwork and lunging or circling exercises as not only an opportunity for us to check where our horse is at both mentally and physically, especially important with young or "problem" horses, but also as an opportunity for us as the handler or rider to improve our posture, feel and timing, whether we plan to then progress onto riding or not.

We ideally expect our horse to progress through ridden training into being able to himself carry a posture of balance, softness, lightness and rhythm, yet how many of us can truly say that we can do that consistently ourselves? If we attempted to walk in a simple straight line towards a mirror, would we be in perfect symmetry and balance, carrying our weight evenly down through both legs, swinging forward equally from our hips and with both of our feet touching and leaving the ground the same? Do we tromp along or shuffle or walk with lightness and energy in our steps? It only takes a quick look at the heels of your shoes to notice if you wear down the soles or place more weight on one foot or inner or outer sides of your feet. And we haven't even considered the impact of our upper body yet!

Thinking of our own posture again, we seek to encourage our horse to carry his weight back over his hindquarters, lift his belly and shoulders to lighten his forehand - mechanically this position offers the horse the most efficient way of going utilising his body conformation to perform with optimum power and balance.

This is the exact same thing we need to seek for ourselves as we work with our horse on the ground or as we ride (or just move around in general!). If I am lunging or doing groundwork with my horse, my personal posture has a huge influence on how my horse reacts. If I am holding the lunge rein tightly in my fist or standing rigidly fixed or pivoting on one spot I am creating immediate tension down the rein and in my body, but if I hold the rein or rope the same way as the rein in my hand when riding and I walk in a small forward stepping circle keeping in line with my horse as he circles me, I am offering him a soft rein feel and showing him both rhythm and forward momentum in my steps - the very same things we are seeking from him. If I am standing up tall in balance with weight down through my heels, an open chest and shoulders, breathing evenly with a relaxed jaw, have a soft elastic arm holding the rein and a calm, positive thought in mind of what I am aiming to achieve, I am giving my horse every reason to find these same feelings for himself, while also improving my own posture for both on and off the saddle.

Compare this to standing slouched with rounded shoulders, leaning forward, head down, teeth clenched, thinking grumpy thoughts about what went on at the office earlier in the day - no part of this position gives our horse any reason to feel confident or motivated, let alone bother concentrating on the job at hand if we are not as committed to the task in our heads either.

The connection we can have with our horse even when standing metres away from him is very important to understand when we consider we are in the presence of an animal who relies on body language and their senses to survive. Sadly modern technology in the world today has seen so many people lose track of their own senses and ability to read basic body language acquired from face to face contact and interaction. There are also plenty of horses out there that have learned to completely ignore their human handler's body language because the people simply haven't listened or been aware of what they were doing, giving inconsistent messages, so the horse has learned to "switch off". A prime modern example of this is seeing people talking or texting on their phones while leading / lunging / riding their horse! Expecting the horse to concentrate, obey commands and focus 100% when you aren't simply isn't fair and will see you miss those all important cues that could have seen you react quicker before your horse runs into you from behind or puts in a buck. My pet hate is seeing horses being totally ignored but then being harshly told off when things get out of hand all because the person hasn't been listening or concentrating on what the horse has actually been saying to them all this time. We need to learn not to be so quick to blame the horse for our own mistakes!

It's not just when we are with horses that we can practise for better riding posture and handling technique. Setting good habits in practise will make things much easier when you then come to working with your horses. Become aware of your habits through the day and think about situations where you can make changes that will help you with your horses. For example, if you spend all day slouching with rounded shoulders and head titled down over a desk, you are making it much harder for yourself to then expect to sit up nicely with good posture when you sit on your horse!

If you expect your horse to be fit and alert and using himself nicely then it is only logical that we need to be able to offer this too if we want to work in unison and be the best we can in this partnership. Remember we reflect our horse and our horse reflects us.

Improve your posture (in or out of the saddle) by thinking about what you want to see in your horse. For example, if you are weak in your core muscles then practise doing exercises that strengthen those areas in YOUR body that you wish to develop in your horse. Think about where your horses' weaknesses are and consider that you might be doing the very same in your own body (dropping your inside shoulder is a very common one), then find ways to fix it in your own body position to help show him the way to also improve. Mentally focus on the task at hand and try to be completely "in the zone" so that your horse understands your attention is fully on him and you will start to notice more subtle changes in his movements when they first begin to happen so you can react quicker to set things on the right track again. That awareness is, for me, what true horse training is all about!

Working with your horse on the ground is such an important part of owning and training a horse and there are so many things our horse can teach us about ourselves if we are open to acknowledging them. All it takes is the initial desire to be better, the awareness of what you are doing and the ability to be open to change that will lead towards the path of improvement.

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