

## Maybe It's Your Horse

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### Part I

Is your horse not performing to his full potential? Does he do something that just drives you crazy? For example during your dressage test he might stop and then take a single step forward, or when reining will slide not quite straight.

Before you conclude that the horse is intentionally defying you and is plotting and planning ways to spoil your dreams, make sure YOU have set the horse up to succeed rather than fail.

Are you sure that he is receiving proper nutrition? It's not enough to look at the hay and decide that it looks good and therefore must be good. Spend the \$40 and have it analyzed at Utah State Univeristy and know for sure. Then you can supplement as needed.

Even if a horse is receiving the proper nutrition he may not be able to make full use of it due to improper digestion. Have you had a veterinarian who specializes in dentistry do a comprehensive dental float? It may be that your horse cannot chew his food properly. If he can't chew well, he may not be digesting his feed all that well. Pain from sharp teeth edges can be a cause of constant low-grade stress which results in constant cortisol release will take a toll on a horse's overall health and affect his attitude towards work.

Dental issues can also directly affect performance. If a horse has a malocclusion (teeth don't line up) or if his teeth don't slide easily side to side, he may not be able to turn around a barrel as fast as you would like, he may not be able to take up a contact, he may not even be able to lower his head easily. Pain in the TMJ (temporal mandibular joint) can lead to head and neck alignment issues such as impaired lateral and vertical flexion. A retained wolf tooth can cause a lot of pain when a bit is in the horse's mouth. As soon as you take up a contact that horse is going to want to throw his head up and open his mouth. A nose band tying his mouth shut and a martingale are not the solutions.

Depending on your horse, he may need to have his teeth done every 6-18 months. Your equine dentist will be able to tell you the proper interval. While the dentist is working on the horse ask if you can look in the mouth, reach in there and feel how sharp those edges can get. The more you know, the better care you can provide. Please be aware that in Utah, only veterinarians or technicians under the direct supervision of a veterinarian can legally perform dentistry.

If you are sure that his teeth are perfect, what about his digestive health? A very

large percentage of performance horses have gastric ulcers. If you have a horse that is not performing to his potential and you have ruled out other causes, it may be time to talk to your vet about the possibility of gastric ulcers. If you do a lot of traveling with your horse (training, shows, competitions, races, etc.) or if your horse lives in a stall, there is a good chance your horse has ulcers or is at risk for ulcers. Talk to your vet about steps to take to prevent ulcers. Currently the only way to definitively diagnose gastric ulcers is with a scope. Not all veterinarians have a scope but, if after consulting with your vet you believe that your horse may have an ulcer; it may be time to take your horse to a referral veterinarian for a scope.

Some horses do not have adequate gut flora to properly digest their food. This can be caused by antibiotics and deworming regimens. A supplement for digestive help such as ABC Plus Fortified ([www.A-B-C-plus.com](http://www.A-B-C-plus.com)) or similar may be helpful.

What about the horse's hooves. Have you checked his feet? There is a lot of controversy right now about hooves, trimming, shod vs barefoot. Spend some time researching this topic as this is an area that is expanding greatly. The current theory is that soundness is promoted by achieving a slight heel-first landing whereas a toe-first landing can lead to lameness if the horse is not already lame. Regardless of the breed or discipline, the hooves should be trimmed and shod in a manner that will insure his long-term soundness rather than to achieve a certain type of movement today at the expense of future soundness.

How does your horse's saddle fit? It doesn't matter if it's a \$100 saddle that came with the horse or a several thousand dollar custom saddle; many, if not most, saddles do not fit the horse correctly. If your horse's back does not look like the back of an unstarted two-year old; chances are your saddle is negatively impacting your horse's performance, inhibiting his movement, affecting his long term soundness and causing discomfort if not pain. After riding, place your fingers on either side of the backbone, press just enough to blanch out the nail bed and run them down the horse's back. If he hollows his back or flinches, guess what? Your saddle is hurting. If your saddle fits your horse perfectly at the standstill, it's going to be too small when he starts to move and rounds his back. Check your saddle to see if it meets the eight criteria for proper fit: 1) Does it sit far enough back to allow the shoulder to fully rotate back (when the front leg is fully extended) without hitting the front of the saddle? The answer should be yes. 2) Does it extend past his last rib? The answer should be no, 3) is it wide enough? Wide enough means that you should be able to run your hand easily between the horse and saddle when the horse is standing still. 4) Is it horse shaped? Horse shaped means U-shaped, not V-shaped. 5) Are the panels stuffed hard or soft? They should be soft. 6) Are the panels relatively flat from the front to the back? They should be. 7) Are the panels relatively flat from side to center or are they more triangular? The static shape

of the horse is more triangular but once the horse is in motion the back lifts and becomes more flat. The saddle should accommodate the shape of the horse in motion. 8) The gullet needs to be wide enough to allow the spinous processes to bend without banging into the sides of the panels. Wide enough is a minimum of 2.5". A saddle should look too big in order to properly fit a horse in motion. To achieve a custom fit, use saddle pads and shims to fill in where you need. As your horse regains muscle you can remove pads and shims.

Horses are tremendous athletes and can generate huge forces on their muscles. An equine chiropractor and/or massage therapist can be a valuable addition to your training regimen.

Once the teeth, feet, saddle and overall physical health and soundness issues have been addressed you may find your horse's performance and attitude improve immediately. If not, ask yourself if you have presented the training to your horse in a logical, progressive and systematic way that makes sense to him. Horses rarely set out to defy us. If they are not performing well, perhaps they don't understand what you are asking. A fun way to check this is to ask a friend to "be the horse" and you attempt to communicate to them what you want, using silent cues and pressure/release just as you would ask your horse. Don't use words. If your friend can't figure out what you want, perhaps your horse can't either.

Next month we'll look at the influence of the rider on the performance of the horse.

### ...MAYBE IT'S YOU Part II

Last month we addressed things within the horse that might affect or prevent the horse's ability to perform. Now that those have been addressed....

It might not be the horse; it might be you! That extra step after a halt or crooked slide may be because of your body's signals to the horse. Signals that you may not even be aware of. You hold your horse to a high standard of performance and now it's time to look in the mirror.

Do you know what you are doing when you are on the horse? Are you aware of your breathing and able to maintain a nice relaxed rhythm of breathe in and breathe out? If you get tense and start to breath shallowly or hold your breath it will convey tension and nervousness to your horse. If you are nervous, then the horse will be nervous too. Here is a breathing pattern that works very well to calm the human. Breathe in for a 6 count, breath out for a 6 count and then pause for a 3 count. Repeat for as long as necessary to calm down. You may not be able to stop the butterflies but at least you can get them flying in formation. Don't stop breathing just because you are concentrating. You can

start to use breath as a way to communicate with your horse. Breathe in during an upward transition and breathe out for a downward transition. You will be amazed how soon you can stop your horse just by taking a deep breath in and then breathing out.

Are you aware of your posture in the saddle? Are your joints soft and elastic? Are your feet resting in the stirrups or are you braced? Is your head, neck and back relaxed or can you feel tension in places? Are your hands relaxed or do you have a death grip on the reins? Are your eyes soft and aware of all that is around you or are you staring at your horse's poll? Your horse is keenly aware of all of this and trying to sort through the noise to figure out what you want.

Human children start out with good self awareness and skeletal alignment. Along the way, we lose that self awareness and skeletal alignment. Take this quick test; how are you sitting right now? Are you sitting with both feet on the floor with your weight equally distributed over both seat bones? Are you sitting with your legs crossed, or weight on one side or the other? Are you sitting up straight or are you slumped? Is there tension in your shoulders, upper back and neck? Can you sit up straight for more than a few seconds without getting tired? Can you stand straight for more than a minute before you have to start shifting your weight side to side or need to lean on something? Start paying attention to this and see if you have a tendency to "camp" out on one side more than the other.

If you are like most, you answered yes at least once. The posture you habitually use while walking, sitting and standing is the same posture you use out of habit when riding.

If you have a tendency to sit slouched over to one side, you are going to sit that way on your horse; even when you are trying not to. The weighting of one side over the other is going to feel like a push on that side of the horse. This will make canter leads opposite the habitually weighted side easy and canter leads on the weighted side difficult. It will also cause a horse to go sideways in the direction opposite the weighted hip. This doesn't have to be pounds, mere differences in ounces can be felt by your horse. And this is just one incorrect postural habit.

If you are tighter in one hip than the other, your horse may take uneven strides with his hind legs, even appearing at times to be lame. If you think you are fairly even in your hips try this. Can you get on from the right side of the horse as easily as you can the left? If you can't, chances are you have different flexibility in each hip.

Many people have a faulty perception of where they are in space. You may think you are sitting straight, when in fact you are leaning forward. If somebody guides you to sitting straight you may feel like you've got the "gangsta lean"

going on. You may think that your head is sitting balanced on your neck, when in fact your chin is jutting out and your head is dropped back onto your shoulders.

Muscle tension can feel like “go” to the horse when what we really mean is “whoa”. We can defend these postural habits by asserting that we have inherited this posture, or that we have a bad back, or a previous injury, or even that you don’t have any bad postural habits. We can hang on to those habits or we can let go of them, become healthier and in the process, better riders providing clear guidance to our horses.

If we don’t have accurate perceptions of what we are doing in our own bodies, how can we even start to direct the horse’s movements? It’s not about more muscular effort ,but about becoming aware and balanced, letting our bones do the work rather than our muscles. This can be achieved using the Alexander Technique.

I have studied the Alexander technique for a few years now. I was driven to it because my bad back (so bad I couldn’t get a foot in the stirrup) was getting worse and I didn’t want to go to surgery. Somebody mentioned Alexander Technique and I went. I went not knowing anything about it, except it wasn’t surgery. It helped my back but more interestingly, I also shed some unattractive postural habits. Some postural habits I was aware of and figured were “just the way I am” and some I didn’t even realize until I started the Alexander work. My work with the Alexander Technique has resulted in less pain in everything I do and as a bonus, improved riding skills. Last summer I really applied what I had learned about “letting go” and was able to lower my stirrups 3 holes! Not because I wanted to, but because I needed to, once I released the tension in my hips my legs got longer.

So what is the Alexander Technique?

FM Alexander (1869-1955) was a Shakespearean actor who kept losing his voice. Medical experts of the time could not affect a cure that lasted more than a few days. So Mr. Alexander watched himself in a mirror while speaking and saw that he was using too much muscular tension while speaking and this was putting pressure on his vocal cords causing him to lose his voice. He trained himself to inhibit the muscular tension, thus freeing up his vocal cords. Expanding on that discovery he developed a hands-on teaching method that encourages the body to work more efficiently with less tension.

The process is very gentle and is more a letting go and release of tension rather than forcefully attaining “correct” posture. The basic principle is that most of us use our neck muscles to hold our head up; rather than balancing our head (which weights about 12 pounds) on the top of our spine. Using muscle to balance our head causes us neck pain, shoulder pain, and low back pain.

Then we get tense and stiff. Once we learn to balance our head over our bones, our necks become free to move, our backs can lengthen and widen, resulting in overall freer movement. You may even find that you can breathe easier and speak easier. The first step in Alexander is to become aware of your postural habits, learn to inhibit your immediate response, and then giving your body direction to perform in the way in which is most free and efficient. Once you become aware of your postural quirks you can let go of them. Less distortion and muscle tension in your body will allow you to become a more free and elegant rider giving clearer signals to your horse.

The best way to learn this technique is hands-on with a certified Alexander Instructor. There is an Alexander instructor in the Salt Lake Valley that is familiar with the needs of riders. You can reach Cathy Pollack at 801 230-7661 to discuss your particular issues and to arrange a session.

We spend a lot of time making sure our horse is working in a “correct frame”; isn’t it time we made sure we are working in a “correct frame”? Horses at liberty have beautiful movement. When we become skilled and aware riders we can maintain and direct that beautiful movement with mere ounces in our hands, seat and legs. Then it becomes a dance rather than a brawl.

If at the end of all this, your horse is still giving you “the hoof” it may be time to call an animal communicator and “get the information straight from the horse’s mouth.” Next month I’ll write about animal communicators. Fascinating stuff!