

Alice Trindle Presents:

Developing a Willing Partnership

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Alice Trindle was born on a ranch in eastern Oregon, the only daughter in a family of five brothers. She learned to ride behind the back of the saddle holding on to her brother's belt loops. In the past 15 years Alice has continued her relationship with horses, and had the opportunity to study with several true horsemen such as Tom Dorrance, Ray Hunt, Dennis Reis, and Bettina Drummond. She conducts clinics in Oregon, Washington, California, and Idaho, and offers multi-day horsemanship retreats at her ranch in eastern Oregon.
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Posture – Riding for Self-Carriage

Clinic #6 in a series of ten

Posture – Riding for Self-Carriage

Balanced and fluid movements in both the horse and the human is a harmonious picture that we all strive to achieve no matter what equine discipline we pursue. Watching a cutting horse smoothly following every move of the cow, or seeing a beautifully executed half-pass are both examples of an exquisite dance between horse and rider. The art of developing this seemingly effortless communication requires a mental, emotional, physical, and I believe spiritual connection that demands a disciplined pursuit by both dance partners... by both horse and rider. As we advance in our horsemanship journey, it is important that we take on the responsibility of developing good posture in order to fully create and enhance self-carriage in the horse.

As I relayed in Clinic #5, regarding Work-in-Hand, I grew up on a cattle ranch in eastern Oregon. Most of my childhood riding consisted of gathering cows off of mountain or sagebrush allotments, or sorting replacements heifers from steers in the corral. Our horses did the job that was asked, and as I reflect back upon it now, I realize they did the job in spite of my poor position and posture in the saddle! I was mostly a passenger and more often than I care to remember, in my mind when something went wrong it was the horse's fault – not mine.

In more recent times, I have realized I was not taking responsibility for my role in effecting the outcomes I was desiring with my horse. As I have had the opportunity to watch and listen to several true horsemen, I am beginning to recognize the importance of good posture to achieve this harmonious picture. I have watched the seat and legs of Dennis Reis as he effortlessly half-passes his horse across the arena. I have seen Bettina Drummond ride a Lusitano bull-fighting horse in a dance to music that brought tears to my eyes. I have watched as Buck Brannaman throw a back-hand loop to miraculously catch a steer without abruptness to either cow or to his horse. In all these examples, the riders were responsible for their posture in helping to make the picture perfect. They were at the right place, at the correct time, to allow the horse to do his job... effortlessly.

Here are some "Posture Basics" that have worked well for me and for the types of jobs I ask of my horses. These may vary given your body type, injuries you may have incurred, the type and size of horse you ride, and the jobs you wish to accomplish.

Sit Up and Breathe!

In this series of clinics we have continually referred to our “Horseman’s Protocol”...

- Become Present
- Think & Visualize
- Focus, which Prepares your Posture
- Allow & Reward

As with every exercise or transition we have discussed previously, the first preparation is to go through the elements of the pre-flight check list above.

Once mounted, take a deep breath, and imagine that you are drawing the air in through your belly-button. Practice the feeling of pilates by engaging your core muscles and pulling stomach in towards your backbone. (An excellent reference is: Betsy Steiner’s Equilates program. Check it out at www.equilates.com)

Next, I visualize myself long and lean, with legs that could touch the ground. (Coming from a person who is barely five feet tall... this is a huge visualization!) I see myself stacking my core blocks UP first (i.e. Long legs, up to my hips, up through my ribcage, arm pits to shoulders, neck to head). As I breath out, I feel my stomach muscles into my backbone, and see my shoulders roll slightly forward, then settle back and down, as if there were weights attached to the shoulder blades. The arms are relaxed, with a slight bend in the elbow, and my hands might be positioned so I could lightly hold a small soccer ball. At this point, if someone were looking at the positioning from my side, they would see a straight line from my ear, down through the hip, to the my heel. The idea is to be relaxed and yet balanced so that your skeletal and muscular structure can stabilize your body, while you remain relaxed in your seat to move with the horse. Nobody said it was easy!

Note the line from ear to hip to heels, in a relaxed yet prepared position.



In English or Western tack, the basic posture should remain the same.

Lengthening to Find a Deep Seat

It is elementary to think that by pushing down with our feet and legs, or sitting heavy on the horse, that we are indeed “deepening my seat.” But this simply is NOT the case. There are a couple of quick exercises you can try to help better understand what your body postures are telling the horse:

While mounted, try placing your left hand under your left buttocks and feel for your left seat bone. Now try several experiments: First, try pushing your left leg and foot down on the stirrup. Next try sitting heavy. Third, test what happens when you collapse your left ribcage or lean to the left. Last, give a trial run of the lengthening process described in the previous paragraph – stack your blocks ups, settle your shoulders, sit-up and BREATHE. Can you feel the difference in how your seat bone is effecting your hand? This is a great empathy exercise to help us experience what the dowels, which are our seat bones, are doing to the horse’s back! I find that I have contact and a deep seat when I am in that “lengthened-up” position, and quite balanced for whatever movement may be coming my way. (A excellent reference is: An article by Wendy Murdoch – Lengthening, part 4, How to have a deep seat 2/2002 issue of The Trail Less Traveled).

Stomach- Hips-Ribcage & Shoulder Connection

No matter what discipline you pursue with your horse, I think we can all agree that we need to position our body and use our aids in a way that does not inhibit his movement. As we next talk about this circular connection of balance and movement from hips to hands, or hindquarters to bit, I am mostly

thinking about my posture on relatively flat ground, with the horse moving forward, or sideways on the diagonal. Other jobs, such as jumping, roping, or cantering uphill may require an adjustment to your posture and balance.

From the preparation of lengthening your body and finding a deep seat, as described above, let's move forward at the walk. I want to keep a relaxed feeling in the small of my back and stomach that allows my hips to push or scoop forward to my hands. Here's where most of us go "Human!" We start thinking about bringing our hands to hips, which causes us to get tight in the shoulders, and maybe even forces us to brace against the bit, while leaning back. This isn't good! Here's what I envision to help me feel the power coming from the hindquarters, pushing my hips forward to my hands, and my hands receiving the energy:

Picture your horse as a sailboat on smooth water. Feel a big gust of wind coming up behind, as you hang on to the lines of the sail rather like a wimp! What happens? The wind fills the sail, but because there is no "feel" on the lines, the energy escapes around the edges and the boat goes mindlessly in various directions. Next, picture the same sailboat, but this time as the wind comes up you decide to not be a wimp, and you forcefully pull on the lines of the sail. Leaning back into the energy and pushing with your legs, you try to control the movement of the boat. What happens? One, you get VERY tired, and secondly you over-trim the sail and do not capture the energy at all. Finally, picture the sailboat, and as the wind comes up from behind, you are going to caress, hold, and "feel" through the lines. You might even drop your center of mass down slightly and put a bend in your knees, allowing your hips to come to your hands. You end-up "holding" the energy, trimming the sail, and with only slight changes in your weight, shoulders, and hands, you can direct the boat.

I also use the boat analogy in another visualization. I try to see my body and shoulders as the mast of the ship. In most circumstances, I keep my shoulders parallel to the ground, and my body perpendicular to the horse. For empathy training, try accomplishing some simple circles at the walk by tipping your shoulders as if they were airplane wings. Then try keeping you shoulders level, but lean back or lean forward. You'll end up finding the balance point, where the hip and shoulder come forward, but do not dip from side to side.



Don't be afraid to experiment with your posture and balances. The horse will tell you what works and what does not!

Horseman's Eyes

How many eyes does a horseman have? Well, two are pretty easy to pick out, but I know a number of people who can not see, and yet they still ride quite well. Could it be that they are using other body parts to "focus" or "feel" for the energy, which then prepares their posture and communicates to the horse?

I think that aspiring horseman should have 13 eyes:

- The two eyes we normally think of in our eye sockets
- One in my belly button
- Two on the front of my shoulders
- Two at the end of my knuckles, looking out over my little finger
- Two on the outside of my foot, near the little toe
- One in the middle of the small of my back
- The two eyes of my horse
- And last, but not least, my "Mind's Eye"

Have some fun with your "Horseman's Eyes" the next time you go out to ride. Start by preparing your body and posture as we have been discussing. Focus with your "Horseman's Eyes". First, see the transition you'd like to make in your mind's eye. Look where you want to go with your two real eyes. Next, put your belly button eye to task, which will probably also engage your shoulder eyes. I'll bet that's all the focusing you'll have to do to communicate to your horse! Keep in mind that the eye in the middle of your back is really important for backing up and it also helps me on my haunches-in and half-pass work.

Posture... It should be a never ending subject in horsemanship development, and yet it is rarely discussed in many western-type clinics I have attended. Personally, I think it is critical to my understanding of the horse. If I'd like him to perform with good attitude and flowing movements, then I had better be willing to strive for the same in my body and mind. Try sitting-up, breathing, and ride your horse like you are proud and honored to be aboard. TNT

