FOR BETTER BALANCE, FORGET ABOUT YOUR HORSE'S HEADSET

(school and ride for soundness, athleticism and contentedness)

Poll level with the withers. High-headed. Behind the vertical. Peanut roller. Above the bit. In the bridle. Headset. Headset. Headset.

Why are so many riders, regardless discipline, so obsessed with the ways their horses hold their heads when working under saddle?

Pick up any horse publication, log on to any electronic forum, search the training articles of most professionals and you're bound to see any number of references to "correct" headsets and, of course, the methods used to achieve that ideal. Open any tack catalog and you'll see all kinds of gadgets that claim to create the perfect instant headset – side reins, longeing rigs, neck stretchers.

Enough already! This myth that a "frame" based on restricted movement of the head and neck equals correct or beautiful or even sound gaits puts the emphasis on doing the wrong things with the wrong parts of the body.

This horse's postural habit is to drop behind the bit, sort of wadding himself up and appearing as if he has retracted his neck back between his shoulder blades. That drops his poll well below his withers and puts him on the forehand. He is built very slightly butt-high, so here you can see he hasn't rocked back into his hindquarters. You can see how the neck "breaks" at the level of C-3, the third cervical vertebra, which is a characteristic of horses that have been held or gadgeted into a false frame.

The way a horse needs to carry his neck and head for optimum balance depends on his conformation, his training, his fitness and soundness levels, and the work he is being asked to do. Period. And "work" means not only the discipline in which the horse is being asked to perform, but also the general act of carrying a rider and the specific issues created by that rider as regards skill level, balance, suppleness, feel and intention.

Just about anything that rider does to restrict the movement of the head and neck or to force it into a fixed position can only prevent the horse from achieving true self-carriage – the lightness, suppleness and ease of movement that are supposed to be the ideal sought in any discipline.

To achieve self-carriage, the horse must be free to lift the base of his neck and his back to shift his center of balance back under the rider so he will be able to drop his hindquarters and move efficiently and easily in any direction and any gait. Self-carriage is that place of possibility from which any movement can come, from a quiet walk transition to a rollback to a canter depart to a halt. The rider's core and subtle, thoughtful supporting aids by the legs and hands determine which of these will happen, but the potential has to be there first.

This laser focus on the headset – whether it comes from laziness or ignorance or fear – obscures

the real postural work that riders and trainers need to understand and implement if they want their horses to achieve balance, strength and ease.

When your horse is carrying you, achieving biomechanically ideal movement depends on a number of factors. Can he lift the base of his neck, straightening the curve at the caudal (tail) end of his cervical spine to lengthen his neck? Does that cervical spine swing laterally far enough to counterbalance the motion of the hindquarters as they push in alternate steps?

Can he shift his weight back behind his structural center of balance, which is generally just in front of where a rider sits? Can he lift his upper thoracic spine and ribcage, creating more space to step under with his hind legs? Does his low thoracic spine swing laterally so that he can alternately “sit” over each hind limb as it reaches forward under his torso?

All of those mechanisms must be working correctly in concert to create impulsion, the back-to-front propulsion of the equine athlete. When directing this symphony of subtle movement and balance, the very last thing a rider/trainer should be concerned with is the set of the horse’s head.

Asked to lift the base of his neck and his back, the same horse still looks "behind the vertical," but note his poll is at the level of the withers and his abs are a bit engaged. He's reaching nicely forward with his shoulder and the angles of the fore and hind legs match. He still hasn't dropped his hindquarters, though, to engage any real impulsion. His neck is still shortened, though, and you can still see the "break" over the third cervical vertebra.

Unless the horse lifts his head and neck so high as to be in nose-breaking territory or mischievously ducks them so low as to indicate an imminent buck, a rider is much better off to leave the head position alone and concentrate on the body parts that really matter. Use the hands to teach and support the postural habits that create self-carriage, not to force a horse into an outline that may not work for his conformation.

Allowed to go a bit "above the vertical," the horse is able to lift the base of his neck and his poll enough to release the habitual holding at C-3 and very slightly drop his hindquarters for more power. This is the start of him learning to telescope his neck out, unwinding the old pattern of curling up and bracing the base of his neck. So, even though the second photo in the series shows the horse looking prettier, this picture actually shows more progress toward achieving correct balance and carriage.

I tell my students that if their horses can hold their heads straight up in the air while they are lifting their backs and pushing with their hindquarters, they are welcome to do so. Why? Because the mechanics that create the latter two conditions necessarily preclude the first. Can’t happen.

Don’t believe me? Prove it to yourself. Get down on all fours and lift your head up so your chin is pointing straight ahead. Notice where you back ends up. Hollow. Try to draw your belly button toward your spine and lift your back up toward the sky while keeping your head where it is. Can’t be done. Not be you. Not by your horse.

Now, try to crawl around a bit with your head up and your back hollow. Feel the weight on the joints of your “front legs?” Notice the stilted little steps? What if you tuck your chin toward your chest? Does that help any, or just make it hard to breathe and even harder to move? Notice that tucking your chin did not make you change the hollow in your back.

Instead of making changes to the head position, let's try changing the torso or, in horse terms, the barrel. From your hollow back/chin tucked posture, take a breath into your low back and, without thought for where your head ends up, spread your shoulder blades apart and tone your low belly, drawing your belly button toward your spine so your back lifts slowly and gently toward the ceiling. Keep breathing into your back and put your body into motion, crawling with your diagonal limbs working together. Do you feel less weight pushing on your wrists? Can you move more easily? Where is your head and neck and what are they doing?

If you're lifting from your core, the back of your neck has elongated and your head dropped, probably a bit below the highest point of your back. As you sought a comfortable posture for crawling, your neck found the right arrangement to allow it to move your head side to side for balance. Simply stated, your head and neck found the optimum posture to aid in balance and ease of movement. And it happened without any pushing, pulling, holding, restraining or otherwise forcing your head into any position. The very same thing can – and should – happen for your horse.

THE DEFINITION OF "ON THE BIT"

"This expression, if you like it or not, fixes the attention of riders, trainers and judges on the head carriage and frame in front as the symbol and hallmark and primary objective of Dressage and training. Instead, the frame in front should express the engagement and throughness from behind and the rider in harmony with the horse on the aids; the frame in front should not be the result of hanging on the reins. It is well expressed in the German Federation statement that the horse seeks the contact and the rider provides it, not the other way around, since pulling the horse into a vertical head position has nothing to do with collection. On the contrary, it prevents engagement and develops nothing but an insensitive, unresponsive horse on the forehand and does not allow for an expressive movement in self-carriage."

~ Dr. Max Gahwyler and Bettina Drummond for The Eclectic Horseman

If you work to get the spine swinging, the back lifting and the hind end engaged, your horse will show you where the best carrying position is for his head and neck. Finding that ideal position requires a process, a progression of training and conditioning. Balance is not something you can program into your horse in one ride or longeing session. And because there's no magic formula to create balance and connection, the process includes thought, experimentation and learning by the rider.

That's not to say you're starting out blind. There are all kinds of techniques educated, aware riders use to help horses learn to carry themselves and their riders with lightness and ease. And good trainers must have a broad range of these techniques in their toolboxes because what works with one horse definitely doesn't work with all. The most important tool of all, though is simply time. Balance and connection don't happen overnight, for horses or for riders.

The truth is, it can take years to develop the ability to feel the horse connect into your hands. The number of subtle requests your body needs to articulate – and allow to happen – makes balancing a horse "in the bridle" or "on the bit" a challenging skill to master.

It's that time investment that gets people, and horses, into trouble. It just seems so much quicker and easier to pull on the reins or apply a gadget to put the head in a position that, to an untrained eye anyway, looks like correct carriage – at least the version practiced by the winning horses in whatever discipline you choose.

Remember, though, anything that prevents a horse from using his head and neck as a sort of rudder for balance compromises his ability to balance and re-balance in motion to account for changes of direction and gait, shifts in a rider's position or variety in the terrain.

At best, pulling the head and neck into any position creates a false frame – an empty outline without the substance to move the horse correctly from back to front. At worst, it's abusive and creates long-term structural and behavior problems.

Both horses and their riders might benefit if we eliminated all terminology that seems to emphasize the mouth and head when we're talking about how to position a horse for light, fluid, engaged movement. Instead of striving to drive a horse "into the bridle" to achieve a "correct headset," we might change our focus to helping the horse achieve self-carriage.

The problem, from both a business standpoint and from the perspective of a culture that prizes instant gratification, is the time is takes to get there. How long depends on many factors: the horse's conformation, his personality, how he was handled and started as a youngster. Has his previous training given him the time and tools to find his own optimum carriage so he becomes used to feeling comfortable and balanced under his rider? Or has his body – his skeletal foundation – been forced and punished into a frame that prevents his muscles and joints and connective tissue from working together to move his bones freely and easily?

The focus on frames and headsets and the proliferation of training gadgets that promise to produce them quickly short-circuits the process that should help the horse find his own natural headset. And the problem seems to exist both in the high-dollar competitive barns of elite trainers and in the backyard stables of well-meaning amateurs.

Achieving the balance and strengthening the correct muscles for advanced work in any discipline requires a progression of training and conditioning thoughtfully customized for each individual horse. For some horses, finding and implementing an effective program takes a lot of time. Years, in fact.

And that doesn't work in a world where performance horses need to be winning ribbons and prize money at two to justify the cost of their training and upkeep. Or where every weekend warrior with a DVD player can see what a highly trained horse looks like and try to mimic the end result without understanding the means by which it was achieved.

There's also a whole lot of nonsense being perpetuated by professionals who should know better. I wonder whether they really, truly don't understand basic biomechanics or whether they're intentionally creating just enough fear in the minds of their students to keep them coming back for more lessons and clinics.

For example, this from a well-known Western clinician: "… whenever a horse's poll gets above the level of the saddle horn, your control of him is compromised." Yep. Those Spanish Riding School stallions working in their high-school posture are pretty out of control in the quadrille.

No wonder so many riders are confused. These professionals would do better to teach their students the rudiments of conformation analysis and functional anatomy so they could either choose horses that can do the job the riders want or match the discipline they ride to their horses' inherent strengths.

Why? Because no matter how obsessed riders and trainers are with headsets, putting a horse's head in a specific position does not and cannot create the posture needed for balanced impulsion. Simply put: holding the horse's head down or his nose in does not activate the muscles that lift the back and engage the hindquarters. So all the angst about the horse's headset

misses the point and prevents so many horses from finding a comfortable, effective and efficient partnership with their riders.

(article written by Stacey Kollman http://www.deserthorseinc.com/headset.html , photos below added by Susan Tomasini www.TomasiniTrainingCenter.com)

Nicely balanced, natural frames and headsets (encourages soundness, athletisism and a content horse)






Forced frames, unnatural headsets, unbalanced, on the forehand (leads to unsoundness, poor athletics and troubled horses)