

# What Being On the Forehand Means to the Horse

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Photo Credit: NBanaszak Photography

We often talk about the ills caused by the horse moving on the forehand, and we dissect and analyze movement in an effort to understand.

The idea here isn't to cause guilt and doom and gloom; instead, we should learn all we can and take steps to avoid known problems. What does being on the forehand really mean, from the horse's perspective? Here are a few thoughts:

## 1. Lack of balance.

First and foremost, from the moment we get on the horse's back, we are messing around with the horse's balance. Horses that are naturally balanced have to negotiate movement with the weight and (dis-) equilibrium of the

rider. Horses that are naturally *unbalanced* have to negotiate gravity with not only their own tendencies toward unhealthy movement, but then also with the extra weight of the rider.

## **2. Heavy on the front feet.**

Have you ever heard a horse banging his feet heavily down on the arena footing? If you've ever wondered if that foot pounding might hurt the horse, you'd be right.

## **3. Pain in the hooves, joints and tendons of the front feet.**

Travel long enough on the forehand, and you will create a perfect recipe for eventual lameness. The front legs were not designed to carry most of the horse and rider's weight for extended periods of time.

## **4. Hollow-backed.**

A horse that is heavy on the front end often has to compensate in other parts of his body. So don't be surprised to discover that the horse has to drop his back, or become more "sway-backed." By hollowing out the "bridge" that carries the rider, the horse is counterbalancing the weight that is on the front end. This way, he doesn't actually fall head-first to the ground.

## **5. Braced neck to counteract gravity.**

Similar to having to drop the back, the horse sometimes has to drop the base of his neck and lift his head. This will help him keep going although there is a lot of weight on the front end.

## **6. Restricted hind-end action and ability.**

When the neck is dropped and the back is hollow, the hind end simply cannot support the body. There is no room for the legs to reach forward and under the body, which is where they need to be to receive the bulk of the weight.

## **7. Short strides.**

The strides shorten because the horse becomes more earth-bound. In order to maintain the forehand balance, the horse has to scramble to keep from falling forward. Both the front and hind legs shorten in stride and often speed up in tempo.

## **8. Trips and stumbles.**

Although we like to blame trips and stumbles on external problems such as foot trims, footing and tack, if you watch and analyze carefully, you might notice that the way of going of the horse is often responsible for his regular missteps and occasional falls to the knees.

## **9. Reins pulling on the mouth.**

The rider often feels the imbalance (although might not know who or how it is being caused) and therefore to help correct that awkward feeling, will take up the reins in an effort to hold *himself* up in the saddle.

## **10. Body-wide tension.**

You know the horse that seems forever off but you can't tell exactly what is wrong? It might be caused by the tension in the muscles. A horse that is heavy on the forehand needs to become tense in order to counteract the balance on the front end.

## **11. Short and shallow breath.**

When the horse is tight and tense in the body, he has more trouble breathing. If you can hear deep, strong breaths, and occasional long-winded, body-shaking snorts, then you know you are on your way to allowing the horse to move comfortably underneath you.

## **12. Mental insecurities.**

Unbalanced movement often causes mental strife as well. Horses that have to regularly counteract gravity tend to lose confidence in their riders and sometimes display irritated behaviors such as tail-swishes, pinned ears, bucks and kicks.

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If this list makes you cringe, and think that riding on the forehand is the root of all evil, you are beginning to see the point.

There's no two ways about it: being ridden on the forehand causes the horse much difficulty and possibly even physical harm. Always remember that the horse has no choice in the decisions we make as riders.

Therefore, it falls to us - the people who want to enjoy the amazing experience of riding horses - to continually work on our education, improve our skills and regularly challenge ourselves to learn how we can not only NOT cause damage with our riding, but even improve the horse's physical and mental well-being through riding.

If you want some ideas on where to begin, check out the links below. But always, always, look to your own instructor to develop your riding skills and resolve your horse training questions.