Developing a Connected PARTNERSHIP

WITH YOUR TRAIL HORSE

part four by PEGGY CUMMINGS

Are you looking to improve your balance, ease and lightness in the saddle, making the ride smoother for both you and your horse? Follow Peggy Cummings each month as she provides insights and commentary into the balance and movement of trail riders and their mounts. We invite you to submit photos for consideration for use in the column, which will appear in both Trail Blazer magazine and TrailtownUSA.com. Please send your photos to Editor@trailblazermagazine.us

Trail riders usually can't wait to "hit the trail." As we continue with this monthly column I wish to share with you pieces of information that relate to finding what I call the "pea under the mattress." What I'm getting at is that if your posture isn't balanced, nothing else works. You can take all the lessons in the world, but if you don't address the posture that is needed for horse and rider to work together, you can lose it all.

The most important thing for the horse, as he carries you up hill and down dale, is that he be able to use his spine efficiently.

Posture: The "Pea Under the Mattress"

As most horses spend their unridden time mostly on the forehand, when riding begins their weight needs to shift dynamically with every stride. This means they must be able to move from down to up, back to front, and side to side. In order to carry the rider's weight efficiently, lift his back and access the driving power of his hind legs, a horse has to be able to "telescope" his neck—lengthen it forward and down—and lift the base of the neck.

In the last few articles I have remarked about how the rider's posture affects the horse. If you are unconsciously "arched" or "slumped" even slightly, this posture restricts the horse's ability to work efficiently. Likewise if the horse is traveling head high or curled with his nose behind the vertical (overbent), his ability to move freely is severely hampered.

The most comfortable ride that will take the least amount of stress for you and your horse is when the horse is able to distribute his weight over all four feet instead of pulling himself forward with his forehand most of the time. A horse has no fixed connection linking his body to his forelimbs; instead, his forelimbs are anchored to his body by what is called the *thoracic sling*. For a horse to have freedom of movement, his base and thoracic sling have to go up and down with every stride (see illustrations). A horse on the forehand travels with his base down and this decreases the functional ability of the thoracic sling while increasing stress everywhere on his body.

This month's photos are of horses that have a lot of potential and riders that look fairly good. One horse has more freedom and suspension in his stride than the others. With a few minor tweaks in position, these teams can be going down the trail with even more freedom.

Rider One

This rider looks fairly good right here even though it is not easy to ride the posture that this horse is showing. There is apt to be a lot in the rider's hands and the sensation of a lot of out of control power needing to be contained. This horse's back cannot work efficiently. He has a lot of potential to be fabulous on the trail but in this picture his "base" is down and that puts a lot of stress on his joints. The rider could diffuse some of this hot energy by making a few minor changes.

"Thinking wide" through her knees (see "Solutions") and allowing her arches to stay more soft will allow her to be more shock-absorbing as she is trotting. Her forearms in this photo could be half an inch higher, which will keep the alignment from elbow to bit and release the brace against the rein.

If she "combs the reins" (see "Solutions") occasionally and slowly rotates her torso slightly each time she rises out of the saddle, she will diffuse the tension in the horse's neck so that he telescopes, raises his base and uses his back and hindquarters more efficiently. Notice the stress on the underside of his neck and the bracing in his left fore and right hind. It almost appears that he is pushing back more with that diagonal than he is coming forward with the other one.

Rider Two

Here is another rider who looks fairly good with a horse that is in a much better posture, although his "base" is still down. She has a nice angle from the bit to the elbow and this picture shows her in the phase of the trot where her seat is in the saddle. There is more of an appearance that she is "thinking wide" through her knees. I would also recommend that she "think wide" as she rises. Combing the reins and rotating very slightly would

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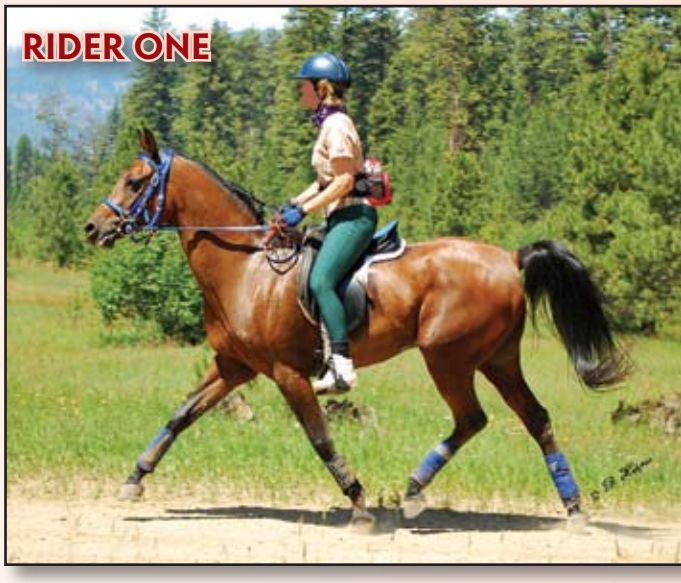

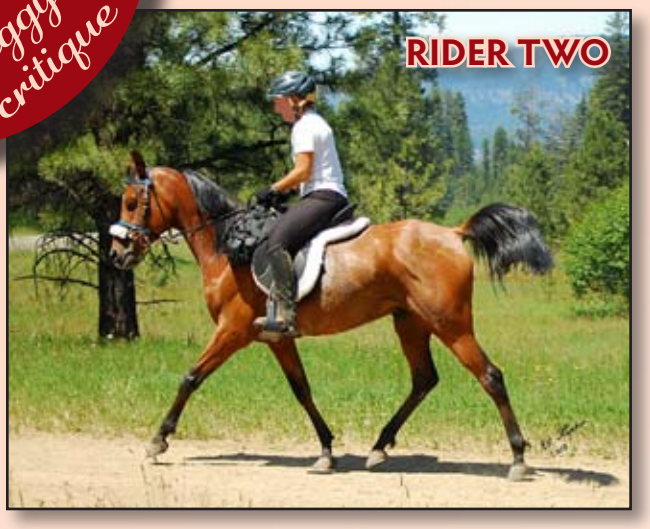

allow this horse to "come through" from behind even more. There is less stress on this horse than the previous one and if his base were up you would see more roundness and evenness in his diagonals and also a softer contour from his loins to his croup without his croup having an apparent peak.

Rider Three

This horse and rider are traveling along with more ease and synchronization. This rider is "thinking wide" through the knees and has a nice angle from bit to elbow. Her feet are level and she is absorbing the movement well. This horse is telescoping nicely as his "base" is up, his thoracic sling is free to move, allowing his back to come up and his hind end to come underneath him. It then is possible for his diagonals to be even and the overall aesthetic is soft, free and graceful with a soft contour from his loins over the croup.

I really appreciate all these riders that allow me to use their pictures so I can help you readers see and gain understanding of how horses can go more efficiently on the trail and how their riders can help them. It is possible for a horse and rider team to be more synchronized in movement more than 90 percent of the time. This is an attainable goal, providing the rider pays more attention to how her posture is in the saddle, and they also need to understand what a horse has to do in order to cover ground more efficiently.

These three riders show good basic knowledge and body use. There is always the need to maintain awareness as you are riding so that the "pea under the mattress"—your posture while you are riding—can release stress again and again. Your awareness and slight body changes make it possible for your body to diffuse the imbalances and the needs of the horse for support during stressful moments.

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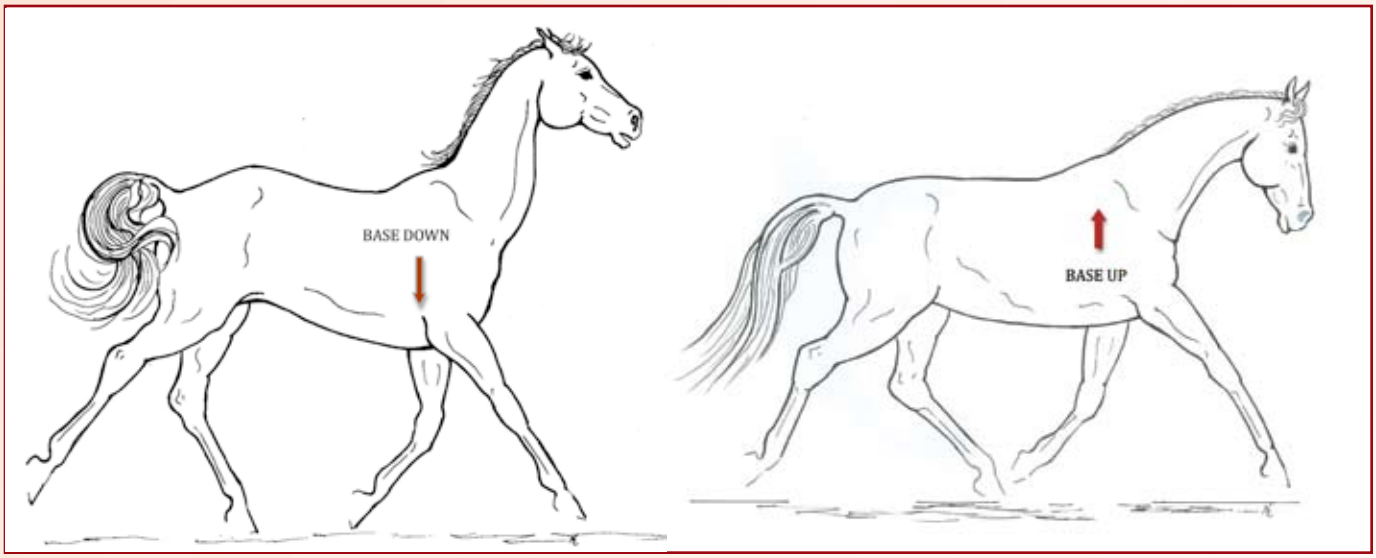

For a horse to have freedom of movement, his "base" and thoracic sling have to go up and down with every stride. In the drawing at left, the horse is base down, which inhibits his movement and compresses his spine. In the drawing at right, the horse is base up, which allows him to use his back and hindquarters more efficiently and with less fatigue.

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Solutions

"Combing the reins" is an exercise where the reins are held in one hand as the other hand reaches up and "combs" down towards the other hand in a continuous alternating motion. The index and middle fingers slide between the reins and the elbows have a soft bend—not locked. The combing motion gives a steady oscillating rhythm to the horse, encourages him to reach into contact and telescope his neck forward and down, thereby encouraging the "base" to come up. The combing action also helps the rider break up tension and holding patterns.

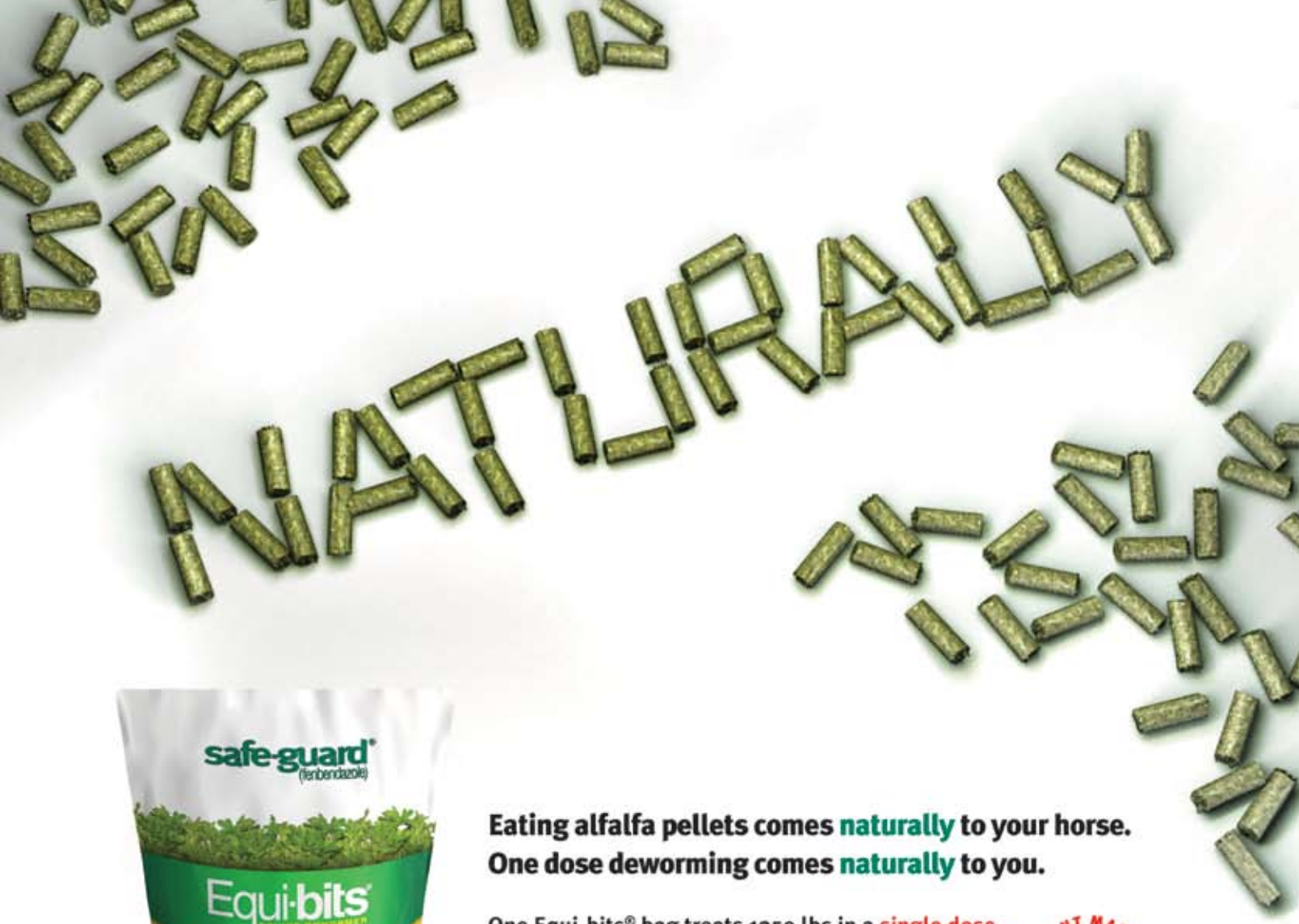
Rotating your torso is a helpful way to release tension in horse and rider. Imagine a shelf in front of your hands holding a very large clock that is laying flat on the table. When you look at 12 o'clock you are facing forward. As you post out of the saddle, rotate your upper body towards 10 o'clock (left). This should take about three or four posts (or strides if you are sitting the trot or riding a gaited horse). Then rotate back to the middle and proceed in the other direction towards 2 o'clock and then back through the middle and so on.

Changing rotation helps get a horse off the forehand and allows you to stay off his mouth. Stay soft in your lower back and "think wide" through the knees to resist squeezing with your thighs. The feet need to be placed on the stirrups behind the ball of the foot, which is easy in western and endurance stirrups because they are often wider.

"Think wide" through the knees is a way of overriding the tendency to squeeze with the thighs and push the heels down, both of which dampen their ability to be shock absorbers. It is the best way to stay secure in the saddle when a horse bolts or spooks. When your thighs let go and "think" open the calf is lightly resting on the horse's side; with your foot level in the stirrup your reaction during sudden movement is automatically stabilizing. This is not a big, visible change. It is more about allowing your legs to hang down from your hips so all the bones and joints from your hips to your feet are free to move and provide shock absorption and stability.

Peggy Cummings aboard Liberale, a 14-year-old Lusitano stallion. Photo by Melanie Powell (www.shybuckstudios.com)

Peggy Cummings is the creator and founder of Connected Riding and Connected Groundwork, an approach to riding and handling horses that gives both horse and human more freedom, confidence and lightness in any situation. For further information, visit Peggy at her website: www.connectedriding.com



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