

Picking Out The Bones - *British Dressage Magazine September 2009*



There is a quiet revolution going on in the equestrian world. More and more riders are starting to realise that without giving attention to improvement of their own body structure, the athletic partnership that they aspire to with their horse may have its limits. Disciplines such as Pilates are now being seen to have significant benefits for the horse/rider partnership, especially in Dressage, where precision, balance, fluidity and co-ordination are so central to the finished product. Misalignment of our skeletal frame is caused by disorganised patterns of muscular tension within the body. These patterns develop over many years. They arise primarily from repetitive one-sided use of the body, accidents, and postural habits, and are often reinforced by a general raising of tension within the whole of the body due to stress. Many of these patterns are easily accessible to therapeutic education disciplines such as Pilates for their remedy, ensuring more comfort and improved position for the rider, and clear messages to the horse.

The deepest patterns, however are only accessible via actual *manual* intervention. The reasons for this are twofold:

Firstly, the individual postural muscles that maintain the deepest patterns of crookedness in the body (primarily within the central axis of the spine and pelvis) are *beneath the direction of our voluntary control*, **and** many of these muscles (for example, those between each vertebra) are truly tiny, and will be unavailable to, and overridden during even the most carefully controlled therapeutic exercise system. This means that to bring about effective re-alignment we need the focus provided by the intervention of an *external force*. Re-alignment through this kind of intervention will result in correct length, relationship and function in these muscles.

If these deepest of muscle tensions and the resulting misalignments are successfully reduced by manual therapy, the body will be naturally more balanced within its skeletal core, and the education offered by a system such as Pilates will then be far more easily received.

The second reason that intervention is crucial, is that the deepest skeletal misalignments (most often brought about by the trauma of sudden and unexpected impacts and falls) occur in joints that are spanned by ligaments *and which have NO musculature spanning the joint itself*. These joints, (termed “foundation joints” by Dr Fritz Smith, founder of Zero Balancing bodywork) include the sacro-iliac joint and the tarsal joints of the feet. Other joints (“semi-foundation joints”) have minimal small muscles spanning the joint. These include the joints between the vertebrae, and the joints between the ribs and vertebrae.

The implication of this is as follows. If these joints are misaligned by way of trauma or deep habit pattern *they are highly unlikely to return to a good working position without outside intervention*. A misaligned body can *never* relax fully. The skeleton is our mobile support system, but in a misaligned body this ceases to be fully the case. A body that is not truly aligned to the direction of gravity, with the various segments (head, thorax, pelvis, legs) in a correct vertical relationship with each other, will begin to employ *excessive levels of muscular tension* to try and provide the support that under ideal conditions would be offered by the skeleton.

Having explored the above, I can now say a little about what I consider to be the most damaging postural habit pattern in the bodies of horse riders which, if attended to and remedied, would seriously improve their health and comfort, and take their riding to a whole new level. If we are aligned, we are able to relax appropriately whilst standing or sitting, and we will quite naturally *DROP into the support offered by our bones*. If we are not aligned, we cannot utilise this support, and we will *unconsciously LIFT* within the body structure. This lift is seen in anybody who harbours deep structural misalignment. Problems will then ensue, beginning with a clutching of the feet, the onset of chronic tension in the legs and ends up with a *permanent* lifting of the ribcage and shoulders. This lift in the chest makes natural diaphragmatic breathing much less likely, and as a result, chest (accessory) breathing becomes the default breathing mechanism. The action of chest breathing eventually shortens the muscles on the front of the neck, pulling the head forward of the centre line, and making a return to a “neutral skeletal posture” less and less possible. So why does this have a significance for riders? Because the attempt by riders to create an ‘independent seat’ and sensitivity of arm use by lengthening the space between the pelvis and ribcage in their endeavours to gain control over their aids, simply adds to the disordered pattern that is *already* creating so much tension within their frame! I’m sure that both they and their trainers are baffled when in spite of all the hard work and good instruction, things just don’t seem to be coming together!

To add insult to injury, this tendency to LIFT throughout the body, away from the direction of gravity will probably become their default pattern, even when away from the horse, bringing disorganisation even to the act of walking. More seriously, chest breathing is synonymous with “stress” breathing. The chronic chest breather may feel anxious and ‘ungrounded’ even when there’s nothing to spook at. If this becomes their default position, the partnership with their horse may become a “problem” relationship.

After observing all of the above during many years of bodywork practice, I had come to the conclusion that riding horses was obviously incredibly bad for the human body! Most of the riders that I treated were showing this particular pattern alongside a huge degree of disorganisation in their structure, resulting in pain, and poor health on many levels. *I was then baffled when I treated those professionals and ‘naturally talented’ riders with dazzling scores, whose bodies seemed to be organised and relaxed, creating an amazing partnership with their steed. I was confused. I had convinced myself that their balanced and relaxed structure must be down to good luck or fluke, but now it’s all starting to make sense. Those ‘talented’ riders were NOT carrying any deep structural misalignments within their bodies, and so quite naturally were doing what human bodies should do (either whilst on two legs or astride four) – they were utilising their skeleton as support, thus creating a deep level of relaxation within their deep postural muscles. Their breathing was natural (diaphragmatic) and so the riding position necessary for creating an independent seat did not compromise their already well-poised structure. They could ride well simply by virtue of the fact that they had the ability stand well on their own two feet. In other words, they had good self-carriage!* As a martial artist of thirty years experience, I reflect on the words of the greatest teacher I have ever had the good fortune to study with. First day, first class, we lined up and he said...
“I may find it very difficult to impart to you the martial arts knowledge that I have, as I observe that the majority of you can’t stand up very well at all...”
I always carry in my mind his maxim, (which is a pointer toward how to attain success in any chosen field). It goes like this...

STANCE FIRST - POSTURE NEXT - TECHNIQUE LAST

This little bit of wisdom suggests that if we don't get the bottom end right (foundations/roots/feet/legs/pelvis), then *anything* that we produce at the other end (performance/branches/arms/head) will *always* be compromised and dysfunctional.

Back then to my group of mysterious 'talented professionals'. Their horses, as you can imagine, are very appreciative of their rider's natural self-carriage. Having a rider on his back who carries herself well with all of the fluidity and sensitivity that she brings to the partnership, gives *him* the opportunity and space to just deal with what he is being asked to do, and consequently he will be free to improve his own structure and performance - win win!

So, my conclusion is that the new generation of horse horse riders who are investing so much time and resource into the awareness and training of their own muscular system as a way of improving both their own riding performance and their horses' welfare, need to dig *even deeper* within themselves if they are to to achieve their aim - right down to bone level in fact.

The skeleton needs our attention - and it needs intervention, in order to reduce deep structural misalignment. The rising popularity of skeletally-based therapy systems pays testament to our growing awareness of these needs. Zero Balancing bodywork is focussed specifically toward enhancing the function of foundation joints, and the interventions formulated by John McTimoney for humans and horses have been proved by many to be highly effective in promoting skeletal alignment. By heeding the silent cry for help being sent to us by our skeleton, and unburdening ourselves of misalignments deep within our core, we can start to enjoy a vast improvement in both our two- and four legged activities!

What we also require is an ongoing education - a cultural shift in *awareness* towards utilisation of the skeleton as a *primary* basis for support and movement. Cultivation of this principle is at the core of Chinese martial art/health education systems such as Tai Chi. I sometimes feel that our exercise culture in the West has become overly focussed on the 'strengthening' and control of muscles, and the appearance of 'good posture' and correct form. By giving up a little of that excessive control, and 'letting go' into our skeleton, we may come to trust the support offered by bone, allow the natural movement of joints, and give ourselves the chance to experience the remarkable feeling of lightness and grace that is the natural product of the fantastic innate elasticity of our bodies.

A life centred around trusting your bones, feeling the full support offered by the skeleton (and ultimately the full support of the floor!) is a million miles away from life in a body armoured by chronic muscular tension. It feels safe, it feels peaceful, and it feels comfortable. It offers you space to give full attention to all the goodies and problems that life has to offer. And it allows your horse to respond to you in a way that you wouldn't believe.

The journey toward reclaiming your skeleton for the good of yourself, your horse, and your time together, is definitely not a day trip. It demands patience, awareness, persistence of intent, and ultimately a degree of surrender to what is in reality our greatest ally, and traditionally the rider's worst nightmare - **GRAVITY!**