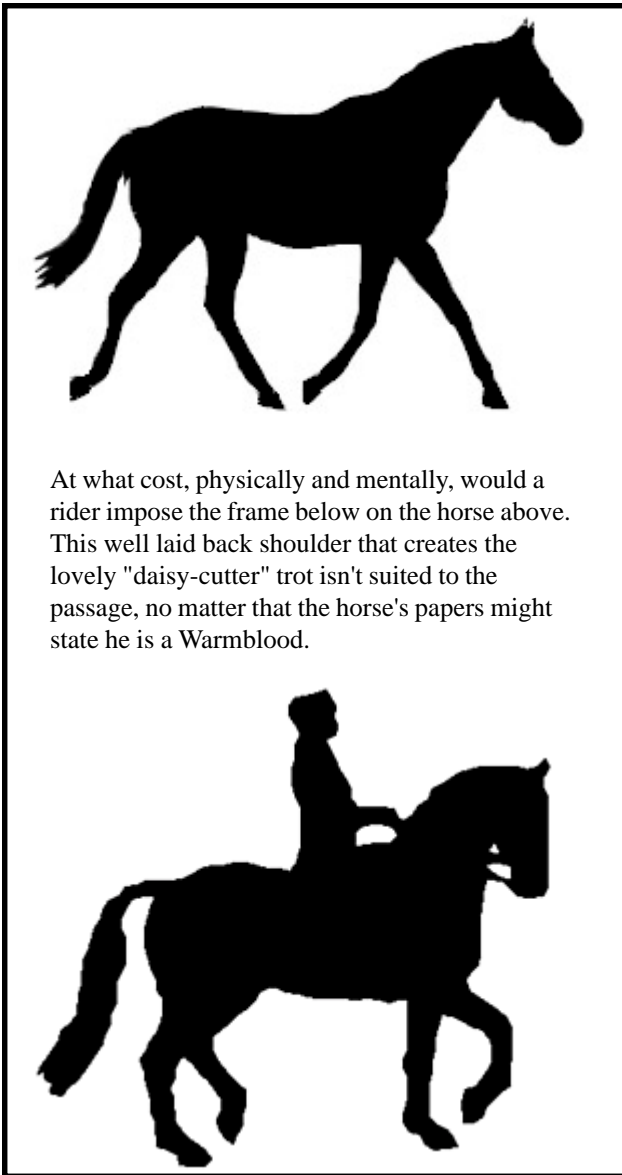




Ride Outside the Box

Trade That Artificial Frame for True Self-carriage

No matter what riding discipline you practice, you probably have spent at least some time working to put your horse in a "proper" frame. That means something different for dressage riders than it does for reiners, and isn't the same for hunters as it is for western pleasure competitors. But every discipline inevitably has its own look. That makes perfect sense if the determination of how the horse should carry himself is based on what that individual needs to do with his body to achieve the task at hand – be it cutting a cow, executing a canter pirouette or jumping an oxer.



At what cost, physically and mentally, would a rider impose the frame below on the horse above. This well laid back shoulder that creates the lovely "daisy-cutter" trot isn't suited to the passage, no matter that the horse's papers might state he is a Warmblood.

Too often, though, the concept of a correct frame has little to do with putting the horse in self-carriage. So we spend hours in lessons being coached to recognize those fleeting moments when we have "it." We longe ourselves and our horses dizzy with side reins and other head-setting paraphernalia to teach the horses to do what we think they should do. But what are we teaching the horse's muscles to do?

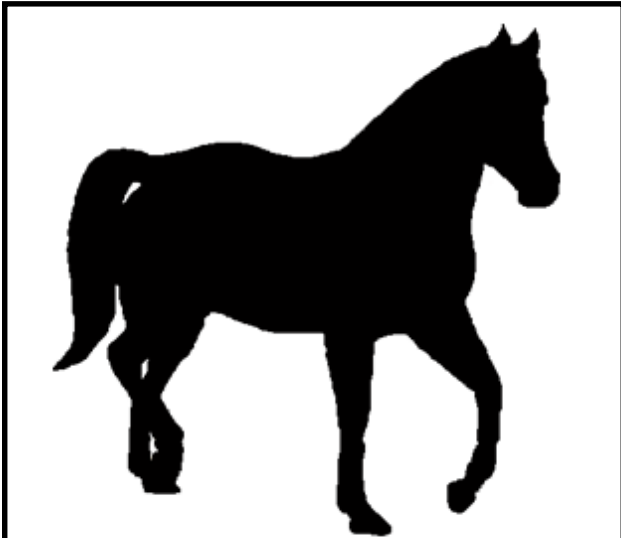
Without regard for the horse's individual conformation and movement preferences, we try to impose some artificial image of how the horse should carry himself, generally while carrying us, as well. And, not surprisingly, most of us fail most of the time to match that mental picture we brought home from the last show or the actual picture from the latest edition of our favorite horse publication. We try a different bit or buy a new saddle or get the latest miracle gadget, but still the horse persists in defaulting back to an undesirable way of holding her head or tail or an improper way of moving her feet or her back.

What is that "default" place the horse keeps returning to? Could it be a version of the horse's natural carriage, the way the prey animal's musculoskeletal system wants to be arranged to ensure if a predator does attack, the horse has at least a chance of getting away? Could it be the most biomechanically correct way for that horse to stand or trot or jump, the arrangement of the bones and the overlaying soft tissue in a way that burns the least energy because it requires the fewest possible muscles working to accomplish the task? The way the horse would choose to hold himself performing a given task at liberty?

We would save ourselves hours of frustration and our horses hours of discomfort if we could broaden our definition of a correct frame to a set of general parameters instead of an absolute measure. Then horses of differing conforma-

tion could successfully compete in many events without being crammed and jammed into those little boxes riders call "frames." The result: more sound, happy horses doing more and lasting longer for their equally happy riders.

Does your horse move better at liberty than he does with you on his back? For most people, the answer is a somewhat sheepish affirmative. We give up some of that freedom to the constraints of the saddle -- no matter what kind -- and a bit more to the fact that the horse must adjust to riders' collections of postural habits and compensations. We



Imagine forcing the horse above who shows such lovely elevation in the trot into the frame below just because she is of stock-horse bloodlines. Look at her structure, not her papers, to best choose her job.



can do our best to mitigate these constraints by finding a well-fitting saddle and working on our postures on the ground, in our cars, sitting at our desks at work. We can minimize the effects of carrying another being by taking responsibility for our fitness and straightness and awareness. We can learn to allow the movement instead of making it happen. And we will be greatly rewarded by sharing the lovely lightness and willing self-carriage our horses exhibit when they're just hanging out in their own bodies, doing what horses do.

As far as a horse's carriage goes, function must follow form. The horse can only do as much as his bones and muscles will allow. He might try to conform to a rider's demand that he hold himself in a way that caused him effectively to work against himself, but artificial posture is not sustainable. Either the body or the mind revolts in the end. To avoid creating horses unsound of body or mind, knowing what muscle groups we're actually working becomes key. Developing an eye that sees past tack and gadgets and really perceives what is happening under the skin takes time and concentration and study, but saves horses and humans from much unnecessary pain and frustration.

Watch the horse moving in all kinds of situations and start to notice consistencies. For example, how does the horse perform a simple walk-to-halt transition on level ground? On a slight incline? On a slight decline? When bending right, or left? When a pole is added before the halt or before the walk transition? Does this change if you're leading the horse lightly connected to the halter's noseband? Or if you've got the horse on a longe line attached under the chin, or on the side? If you ride a halt by bracing your back or you sit softly deep and stretch back your elbows? Can you get out of the way of the horse's body and allow him to show you what position allows him to be more straight and balanced?

It's All About the Bones

Forcing a horse whose neck is set on his shoulders a bit high to work with his poll even with or lower than his withers causes unnecessary stress on the spine and tends to restrict movement of the horse's shoulders, leaving him heavier than necessary on the forehand. That increases concussion on the front limbs, increasing the potential damage to joints in the shoulder, knee, fetlock and foot. Relax the hold enough to let that horse carry his head at a comfortable and biomechanically more efficient angle and the potential for damage is averted. The horse can respond better to light aids, provide a more comfortable ride and create a lovely picture of lightness and ease of movement.

Many disciplines prize poll flexion that leaves the front of the horse's head perpendicular to the ground. Anything less than 90 degrees is overflexed; anything more isn't sufficiently submissive to the bit. That position might be the perfect carriage for a certain percentage of horses. For others, it's at best uncomfortable and at worst impossible based simply on conformation. The distance between the wing of the atlas (the first cervical vertebra) and the cheekbone determines, in part, how comfortably a horse can comply with this headset. If you can get three or four fingers widthwise in the space, your horse can tuck his chin close to his chest without bony structures impinging. However, there might still be restriction of the horse's breathing. If the measure is one or two fingers width, the horse will feel the atlas and cheekbones impinge and will be unlikely to breathe freely. If the horse is tracking up and pushing from behind, swinging freely through the spine, striding smoothly with his shoulders and willingly heeding his rider's subtle aids, what difference does a few degrees of headset make, anyway?

Many other aspects of the arbitrary pictures so many riders and trainers try to create and judges reward fail to take into account any of the realities of individual horses' skeletal structure. Yes, some horses are conformationally better suited to certain disciplines. No Shetland pony will likely become a successful grand prix jumper. But the little Quarter Horse Threes and Sevens did. And dressage pioneers Hilda Gurney and Lendon Gray have for decades competed successfully on a variety of breeds, notably the former's Thoroughbred Olympic mount Keen and the latter's Connemara cross pony Seldom Seen. When did specialization become the ultimate goal? Well schooled and conditioned horses of any breed should be able to perform a variety of tasks. Those foundation Quarter horses who were so catty working cattle were also a pleasure to ride at walk, trot and lope in the showing.

Is a Quarter Horse performing his best, most correct extended trot achieving less than a Warmblood doing the same movement to his best ability? Why is the fact that the Warmblood is likely to cover more ground so important? Sure, to the untrained eye the Warmblood's achievement might appear more impressive. But to the educated horse-woman, the Quarter Horse's effort should be equally prized. Is it so farfetched to think we could expect judges, trainers and riders to develop the knowledge to determine whether an individual horse is performing to his or her own best ability based on biomechanical considerations? That would eliminate the artificially imposed frame, replacing it with self-carriage for happier, sounder and much more versatile horses. *Stacey Kollman*

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