

## 3 Small Changes that Create Balanced Riding



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**Deb Brosnan**

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#### *Dedication*

*To **Koko**, The Bodhisattva Mustang ~ Without you, none of this would have been possible.*

*To **'The Cowboy'** – I never knew your name but I thank you for being the voice that lead me to this world, this life and this joy! Thank you!*

*To **Violet, Maureen, and Becca** ~ Thank you for always inspiring me to be a better teacher!*

*To **Judy & Arie, and Nikki & 'The Man'** ~ for letting me photograph and videotape you doing it right, and wrong so I could show readers what I was explaining.*

*To all the horses who worked with me side-by-side to teach people a different way. You have all been my inspiration, every day.*

*To my brilliant students. Thank you for loving horses the way you do. For always asking questions and becoming tomorrow's teachers!*

*To everyone reading this book. Thank you for understanding there is more available in riding and for making the effort to search for your own answers!*

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#### *Before You Begin*

I bet you're wondering, why am I teaching you this in a book instead of demonstrating this on a video with a student at my barn? Because learning the foundation of riding while on a horse is akin to teaching a child to walk during an earthquake. It sounds silly but true, that's what it is. If I'm trying to re-teach you something while you are on a moving horse, you are literally trying to learn to walk while the ground is moving. Your brain can only do a set number of things at a time. Even for someone as brilliant as you!

These exercises are broken out into a specific order. In a way that is going to make you understand what must come first to give you that strong, solid, balanced foundation. How one step builds on top of the other and so on. I'm also going to teach you through biomechanics. I will teach you in a way that may be completely different than how you may have every heard it before. I will explain why I teach the way I do and how that helps you find the balance in riding.

Please note that the best chair to use the first exercise is a standard classroom type chair.

- A solid back.
- No arms.
- A comfortable, but firm seat.
- 4 stationary legs



If you don't have this exact style chair, you can still use what you have available. I don't recommend sofas or cushioned seats that bring you low to the ground or impede your ability to sit correctly and bring your legs below you properly.

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Repeat the exercises and positions several times until you know the feeling; whether sitting in the chair, standing or kneeling. Whichever the practice requires. Knowing the feeling in your body will allow you to ‘find’ it again while riding in the saddle.

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## **Change 1 – Heels Down??? Not Really**

Depending on where you are learning to ride, there are different concepts of what ‘heels down’ is for riders. Now I live in the US, in the Eastern part of the US. We run the list of disciplines here. Dressage, Jumping, Huntseat, Show Hack, Saddleseat, Western: Barrel racing, Reining, Western Pleasure. No matter what you ride, the idea of ‘heels down’ is the concept of keeping your leg still, and to keep the rider from folding forward at the hip accidentally.

First secret – It’s NOT HEELS DOWN!

Take both of your feet and firmly plant them on the ground. If you are wearing a shoe/boot with a heel, take them off. You want your foot placed evenly on the ground. The reason instructors tell their students to put their heels down, is because the instructor SEES the heel raised, or lifted. Thus, the way they communicate the corrective action to you is to tell you to push (or put) your heels down. What they are asking you to do is to keep your foot flat. Parallel to the ground.

So how do you do that when you keep hearing put your heels down and I’m telling you to NOT put your heels down?

Let’s go back to focusing on your body in the chair. What you want to do, is take your awareness to your entire body right now. How are you sitting? Are you sitting forward, leaning way back? Lounging?

Be aware of this. I want you to be aware if you are slouching or overarching your back. OK, now bring yourself into an aligned posture. Balanced on the chair. Sit securely in your seat. Where are your feet? Are they sprawled forward or tucked underneath you? If you need to, move your feet, so they are flat on the floor and aligned with your knees.

Step one, lift your heels up (about 1 inch) simultaneously while leaving the balls of your feet still on the ground.

What just happened to your upper body? It shifted forward didn’t it? It brought you into a forward leaning posture. Here is an important point. When your heels are up you are going into a slight fetal position. Going into a fetal position causes your body to go into a

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feeling of dis-ease. Curling up in this way is a hard-wired fear response. A physically driven protective response to an attack.

Your body is hardwired to respond in certain ways based on how you breathe, stand or even pull your body forward.

So, lets understand this as it pertains to you riding a horse. Doing this in a chair is one thing. But let's up the ante now.

Read this next section and then do the visualization:

Close your eyes. Now imagine yourself sitting on your horse (or the horse you take riding lessons on). Now lift your heels, leaving the ball and toes pressing in the stirrup. You will lean forward and in doing so, the horse (real or in your mind) will most likely walk away.

Your body posture triggered your brain to shift to 'How do I protect myself?!' instead of 'Oops, let me fix that.'

You are now out of balance and the horse walked forward. Physically you now understand why you feel out of balance. But why did the horse move forward while you were out of balance?

Simply put, you asked the horse to transition from standing to walking. You gave the horse pressure from both heels. You may have released tension on the bit as you leaned forward, offering the opportunity to walk forward. You lifted yourself slightly forward and off the horse's back, allowing the back to have more freedom to move. The horse correctly responded by walking forward. Even if this was not your intention, it was what you asked for.

Let's go back to 'neutral' after you do that exercise. Take a deep breath. Shake out your body. Get back to being balanced in your seat.

So, here's the secret to correcting heels up...are you ready? Make sure your legs are relaxed from the knee down through your feet.

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#### *Raise your big toe up and press the top of your toe against your shoe.*

Did you go forward when you did that? No. Did you feel a tension up your leg as you did that? A pull that goes through your heel, your ankle, and up through your calf. You may feel the stretch continue up to your upper thighs and glutes (buttocks).

Go back to neutral. Shake out your lower legs and repeat it again.

Now if you'd like to be really daring. Raise your big toe again. Now lift your heel up while keeping your big toe raised. Did your upper body move forward this time? If it did, it was minimal compared to your earlier practice.

Your calf cannot contract the same way, when your big toe is raised up.



*Figure 1 When the large toe is raised to the top of the boot, the leg naturally creates a level foot. This helps the legs and upper body maintain balance, stay in the middle of the saddle and allow the horse's back to move naturally.*

But let's look at other factors that contract your heels upward. For those who ride in English saddles; when you are riding with stirrups, many riders are using the stirrups to balance or stand on. Because the stirrups are narrow, many riders try to slide their foot too far forward in the stirrup to physically feel a sense of balance. Unfortunately, this tips the toes toward the ground creating the 'heels up' and throws the rider's body forward and out of balance.

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More often, riders are unconsciously trying to ‘grab’ the stirrup with their toes to balance or hold onto the stirrup as they ride.

Let’s demonstrate:

Check your neutral position in the chair again. Make sure that your legs are relaxed from the knee down. Now curl your toes down and together. The way you would if you were trying to grab something with your toes (like the edge of a stair).

Did you notice that your calves also contracted? Raising your heels upward.

For years, the easiest ‘fix’ to my students having difficulty with their heels contracting up has simply been to tell them to lift their big toe up so it presses gently against the top of their boot.

Heels Down = American Huntseat

I’m going to take the hotseat for a minute here. But there is something that is referred to as ‘American Huntseat’. Americans did not give it that name. The rest of the world did.

American Huntseat has a profoundly hyperextended heel down. When you compare riders: American riders’ heels are dramatically pressed down vs. the traditional European foot that remains horizontal to the ground.

To get that profound extension, a rider will create one of two scenarios:

1. The rider (English Huntseat) will now turn their toe outward, heel inward to allow the knee to stay in a bent position. This creates constant contact with the horse through the rider’s heel and lower calf. Causing the rider to lean forward as they try to create balance on the horse. To correct this, the horse becomes ‘heavy’ on the forehand.

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*Figure 2 In this photo, the excessive flexion in the rider's heel creates incorrect body position. The heel and lower calf are always against the horse and the rider does not have balanced contact in their saddle. All the weight is now carried on the horse's front end.*

2. The rider must literally push all their weight into the heel to get the stretch. When they do that, their knees straighten, pushing their seat into the back of the saddle. The pelvis is now shifted back, which causes the Ischium (most pointed piece) of the pelvis to thrust down into the back of the horse.



*Figure 3 When the heel is driven downward, the knee begins to straighten. The rider is pushed to the rear of the saddle. Causing the pelvic bones to push down into the horse's back and lifting the rider out of the saddle and out of balance.*

From your chair, sit in your neutral position and relax your leg. Now, flex your heels as much as you can. Pull all your toes upward, push your heels down and notice what your

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body does in response to this. Did your knees just straighten? Did you just push back in your seat? The same thing happens when you are riding.

After reviewing these potential issues that may be causing your difficulty when riding. Some physiological, some trained behaviors, please remember that your new favorite mantra is:

***BIG - TOE - UP***

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#### *Change 2 – Posting Trot – Are you over-posting?*

Riders of all ages are taught in the U.S. how to post, by first learning at a stand or walk on a horse. They are taught to stand in the stirrups and then sit back down. Then when they begin to ride the trot and attempt to do what originally worked at the halt or walk, they are thrown off balance by the bouncing, forward propulsion of the trot.

The natural response is to re-balance with their legs and hands. Which may cause the horse to increase their speed trying to avoid the discomfort.

When I begin to teach students how to ride. I teach them walk, sitting trot, canter, and then the posting trot in that order. It is by far, much easier to teach overall body balance. Then after the rider is well balanced, they can learn, and better understand posting.

The purpose of posting was originally for comfort. Back at a time when riding long distances was done on horseback, before the invention of automobiles. Posting is done with the natural movement of the horse. The movement of the horse's hips pushes the rider out of the seat with the momentum.

Ideally the biomechanics work like this.

- As the horse's back leg comes under the body the movement of the hip lifts the rider forward through the stride.
- The rider rises from the movement of the horse. The rider must control their body as it rises and returns to sitting position. All the while maintaining balance.

So how do you keep yourself from losing your balance when posting? Posting requires rider control. But it does not require the rider to 'rise' as people tend to believe.

Balanced posting is rising only 1 to 1 ½ inches above the saddle seat. Most riders who are unbalanced rise much higher than that. If a rider posts significantly higher than they should, they have put themselves out of balance and will come back to the seated position much harder on the horse's back than they should.

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*Figure 7 Balanced posting only requires rising out of the saddle 1 to 1 1/2 inches. Anything higher than that will cause the rider to become unbalanced. Using their feet and hands to rebalance themselves.*

#### **Time to learn the body mechanics and feeling of a balanced posting trot:**

The first thing you need to do for this exercise is put on a pair of jeans. The corner of the front pocket of your jeans is important to the correct placement of your hands and the balance you will learn about in this exercise.

1. Begin by kneeling on the ground with your toes pointed away from your body, don't bend them under your body.



*Figure 10 Begin by kneeling on the ground. Make sure your toes are pointed away from your body, not bent under the foot. Hips are shoulder width apart.*

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Make sure that your shoulders are hanging down directly from the sockets, be aware if you are 'rolling' or 'collapsing' your shoulders forward. Open up your chest and let your upper body line up naturally, supported through your spine.

2. Put your thumbs in your front pockets of your jeans. Keeping your shoulders and back aligned with your spine. Do not rock your shoulders and upper body forward, it will cause your hips to flex and rock your entire upper body forward by accident.



*Figure 11 To practice the balanced rising trot put your thumbs in the pockets of your jeans or other pants.*

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3. Use your thumbs to lift (pull) yourself up from the kneeling position. As you rise, push your pelvis forward and allow it to open completely. You will also feel your glutes (butt) contract to help you rise without the momentum of your upper body.



*Figure 2 Use your thumb to lift yourself up from the kneeling position. As you rise, push your pelvis forward and allow it to open. You will also feel your glutes contract to help you rise without the momentum of your upper body.*

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4. Begin sitting down slowly (but not pressing into your heels). Notice how you use your gluteal muscles and your hamstrings to sit down softly? Practice this a few times.

Rising, using your thumbs to guide you lifting from the hips, glutes and thigh muscles. Then sitting using you're your glutes and thighs to lower you back down. Remember to be aware of how this balances your upper body's position as well.

If it feels as if your hips are leading your body, or perhaps ahead of the movement of your body, you are feeling and executing the movement correctly. In fact your hips are **not** out in front of you. They are the active portion of your body in the movement. Not your upper body.



*Figure 11 Begin sitting down slowly (but not pressing into your heels). Notice how you use your glutes to sit down softly? Practice this a few times. Rise using your thumbs to guide you lifting from the hips, glutes and thigh muscles. Then sitting using you're your glutes and thighs to lower you back down. Remember to be aware of how this balances your upper body's position as well.*

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#### *Change 3 - Using Your Head When Turning*

I have many students who have to re-learn their turns when riding. They tend to stiffen and only use their eyes to look ahead. They keep their necks stiff and unmoving. At the last minute relying on their rein to turn the horse instead of preparing far ahead of that moment. Turning your head is actually communicating with the horse the entire time. Without the need for overusing your reins.

If you are riding on a straight line. LOOK to the end of the straight line. If you are about 2/3<sup>rd</sup>s to 3/4<sup>th</sup>s through riding your straight line. Begin to look where you will be turning and turn your head to see the next step in the ride. Whether you are preparing to turn a corner, do a turn on a serpentine, cross the diagonal and so forth. See the ride in your mind, while you are turning your head and looking where you are going to go.

When you use your head to look to the next move, you are simultaneously using your shoulders (which follow your head as it turns), subsequently this move turns your waist and then brings your hips and legs correctly into alignment for the turn. That movement that may seem irrelevant to you, actually allows the horse to physically bend itself correctly...in balance...with you.

It also allows you to put your weight to the inside of the turn which is critical for the horse (and YOU) to maintain your balance during turns.



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#### *What's Next?*

The list above are the most common issues I work with. Simple changes can bring big rewards in your riding. But that is far from a complete list.

The exercises listed above are steps you can take slowly. One section at a time. Practice, apply, master and move on to another lesson. This PDF was created to help riders re-learn certain riding techniques or understand the actual biomechanics and body memory required to maintain balance when riding.

I teach clinics and private 1:1 training throughout the year. I spend most of my time in the US and Canada but I am happy to travel to clients around the world. Yes, a single rider and horse are always worth my travel time!

If you would like to find out more information how you can ride with me, join my mailing list for monthly updates and helpful tips, or to find out where clinics will be held in your area (or how to set up a clinic with me), you can email me at [deb@wholisticriding.com](mailto:deb@wholisticriding.com)

Or

Text me (remember to introduce yourself with your name, what you would like information about (specifically), and any other pertinent information – at:

**(USA International code +1) 978-496-8773.**

Remember it takes time to unlearn habits, and time to learn correct habits. Your horse will make changes as you adjust your riding. It may take time for your horse to trust that this is your new constant in riding. But let them have the time to learn that this shift is permanent. You may be surprised how quickly you see positive changes in your horse!

***Changing Their World by Expanding Ours™***

## *The Origin of this Book & Wholistic Riding*

At the age of five I began riding horses at a local facility.

I was placed on a horse in a group lesson with as many as 10 people ages 5-70 and we all learned the same ‘lessons’ together (including jumping which at five years old, I had no interest in).

I became a master at falling off without killing myself. Down I came. Not just once, but over and over and over. My fear of riding became overwhelming and paralyzing.

My early experiences set me on a path to understand HOW to ride. For me, no matter how hard I tried to ride, something was missing. As I grew older, my head and my heart fought against each other. I loved horses, they were (and are) a part of who I am. My head feared riding horses while my heart needed to be with them. That is when I learned to connect with horses from the ground. On the ground I was fearless, I had my own legs under me and I learned to work with horses, play with horses and WATCH horses.

After a 10-year absence from horses, my heart brought me to a sweet little mustang mare named Koko. She was an alpha mare, smart, full of fire with a heart of gold. Queen of troublemaking and fence jumping (not in that order) at the rescue I found her at. I fell in love with her and she adopted me into her family and healed my heart.

There is a saying “When the student is ready the master will appear.” Everyone told me that I was in trouble getting a wild mustang. Everyone had a story of the demise of someone who adopted a wild mustang. I held fast to adopting Koko, we had connected and I knew in my heart I was right.

Then the voice of reason found me in the form of a cowboy from out west, who told me not to listen to everyone else. He had firsthand experience with mustangs and a deep appreciation for them. “Just bring her home and put her in a pasture with other horses then sit and watch her. Learn every move, every sound, every posture she makes and then see what the other horses do. Learn her language first. ***Then*** ask her to learn yours.”

The words that drive me even today came from an amazing person whose name I never knew but forever changed my path.

I took Koko home and applied the cowboy’s advice. It worked. I would play with her the way I played as a teen with my favorite lesson horse. She was different than the rest and I learned how to apply ‘her language’ to the domestic horses I taught riding lessons with. Learning from Koko, my perception of how I would teach lessons was forever changed. Through her I saw all horses differently.

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I would see the lesson horse 'act up' in lessons and instead of blaming the horses I would first ask: 'What are they trying to tell us? What do they need my student to change when they act this way?' I would watch my students ride, I would go home and read books on human physiology, equine physiology, horseback riding, etc. I would apply what I thought was the correction to the way the horse was being ridden and it would work (or not). I learned that I had a knack for figuring out the movement of horses and humans. I could see where the break in the fluidity was coming from and understood how to correct it.

Through most of my teaching career, I also searched for answers by riding with different instructors.

In each lesson, ultimately, my old childhood fears would well up at some level. I would fall back into my old ways of pull-with-my-hands and grab-with-my-legs, sometimes I would fall. Other times I would find the nugget of gold and cherish it as I used it to help others. I would go home and pat my little 'untrained' mustang on the head, brush her, tack her up, try to reproduce what I had learned and inevitably she would tell me what a total idiot I was.

What was I doing WRONG???

I rode with my last human instructor who was very good for me in many ways and who I am still very grateful for having had the opportunity to ride with. He took me past my paralyzing fear and taught me that I was a far better rider than I ever thought I was.

I rode off the track thoroughbreds, horses that would bolt if you even touched a hair on their side with your boot (I'm not kidding). I panicked, I froze, I fell and I got back on and did it right (sort of). Finally I stayed on. I jumped the big jumps successfully, I understood jumping and the biomechanics of it. I could now jump and ride with speed and accuracy.

I would hear people say, 'I would have NEVER been able to ride through that!' as the horse was spooking, refusing, etc. I would be thinking, 'What did I just do that was so great?' But what I had gained in riding, I had lost in my connection to the horses themselves. Including Koko who went there to train. I had shut down my heart.

Ultimately, I had to leave. My students and some students' parents told me that I was losing what made me special. I started to lose my connection with the horses I loved.

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My students and their parents explained that in fact, the way *I taught* was the reason they rode with me. After years of trying to work everything out in my own head and ride with instructors that seemed to ride beautifully, I was now faced with a choice. Follow the path I was going down or choose a different path that I had never encountered before.

I decided to take a lesson with Koko and our trainer then make my decision. Koko and I rarely rode together any longer. The sweet obedient Koko that another student rode turned into a spitfire as soon as I got on her that day. She acted up, acted out and I laughed for the sheer joy of riding my 'tiny terror'. We were cantering around the ring and the last thing I remember my trainer saying is 'WHY is she not listening?!'

You see, she was listening. She was listening to my heart. I wanted to be together with my little mustang. I wanted to ride her and feel that fire in her again. That connection that we had together was everything. There, I found my answer.

Koko and I moved on and went to a new facility. We added on to our herd and Bunny the thoroughbred joined us on Thanksgiving Day, 2007. Bunny was an opposite to Koko and a tremendous teacher as well. I finally decided to *feel* my way through riding instead of hearing the instructors' voices in my head (including my own). That was the day I found my path.

Through Koko I found the beauty behind the mechanics, finding my rhythm with her would take me everywhere I wanted to go. Through Bunny I found humility and began to understand the kindness and patience horses have as they teach us.

I learned to teach my students how to communicate with their horses on the ground and under saddle. Every day when I see a smile grow on my students' faces as they realize they are executing what they thought was an impossible goal, makes it all worthwhile.

Come with me to learn how easy it is to connect with your horse. Ride beautifully. Succeed competitively, and learn the path to Wholistic Riding.

*I am not the teacher; I am simply the interpreter between horse and rider.*

*- Deb Brosnan 2012*