

NEW
SERIES
PART 3

Striking the balance

Give your horse the freedom to find his own balance and he'll work calmly, confidently and more freely, says Michael Peace

About Michael

Michael Peace uses his unique 'Think Equus' philosophy to help horses and riders of all levels to achieve their ultimate goals.

He advises riders: "Forget about dressage and looking tidy on your horse to start with. You can refine your aids later once the basics are in place."



Our models

Wiggy is a six-year-old mare who's only been backed a few months. She's been used as a broodmare – and has had two healthy foals – but now it's hoped she will have a successful dressage career. She is owned by Simon and Nicky Thayer, but in this feature she is being ridden by Horse&Rider's Editor, Nicky Moffatt. Her owner, Nicky Thayer tells us: "She is a really sweet mare and well bred, too, just very green."



Top tip
Forget about collection with a young or green horse – that comes later, once he's in balance.

Mares who have had foals are generally wiser and more mature than ones who haven't, and that's due to the fact they have had to take responsibility for something very important. I believe this can make them easier to train, too, because having been exposed to more experiences in life, the riding process is quite trivial for them in comparison. Wiggy is a perfect example of this theory. She's very trainable and has a lovely attitude to her work, and her owner, Nicky, told me she hasn't put a foot wrong from day one!

When a foal is born, he learns to stand up very quickly, then he learns to run around without falling over. Once he can do this, he has learnt to balance himself. However, just when he thinks he's got it sorted, along comes a rider, and the horse has to learn to balance

"Just when a young horse has learnt to **balance**, along comes a rider – then he **has to learn to balance** all over again"



Top tip
The more tense a horse feels, the more he'll want to speed up, so give him the freedom to slow down.

Lots of half-halts were making Wiggly shorter in her neck and back, when at this stage we really want her to stretch longer

himself all over again – this time to carry a rider on-board.

Note I said that the horse has to learn to balance himself. This is really important to remember, because if you try to interfere too much, you will prevent your horse from being able to balance himself. This can lead to early schooling – or even physical – issues, such as leaning more heavily on the reins, tightness in the neck or back, a reluctance to move forward, or more seriously, napping or rearing if the horse feels he's got nowhere else to go.

Wiggly is a very forward-going horse who has big movement, and Nicky said that in canter you almost feel like the mare is bucking because she has such a powerful hind-end action. The temptation for Nicky was to try to slow her down and help to balance

her by making lots of half-halts. However, this was only making the mare tighter in her neck and back, which gave her a much shorter outline. She'd learnt that when Nicky picked up the reins, she could drop behind the contact, when instead we want her to take the rein contact forward and down at this stage, and find her own balance.

Half-halts – my thoughts

Half-halts are my pet hate! I don't like them because they slow the horse physically but not mentally. If you do this, the brain over-compensates and gets faster, making the horse more tense. I prefer to slow the horse down mentally by giving him freedom to move. That way his brain stays calmer and he'll start to slow himself physically. See page 39 to find out how.

Attention!

Young horses – like children – will, generally speaking, have a shorter attention span than older horses. As Wiggly started to lose concentration, I made some changes of rein and worked on turns for a while. This was a whole new lesson for her, and it helped me to get her attention back. My advice is to keep training sessions short, but frequent, with young horses. Short to avoid the horse getting bored, and frequent so that he doesn't forget what he learned the day before.



Take the rein

I asked Wiggly to walk on a loose rein, encouraging her to stretch down (below left), but when I asked her to trot, she tensed up and shortened (below right). This is because she was anticipating the rider taking up a shorter contact, so I needed to give her more room to go up or down the paces. I offered her a longer rein to work forward into, and then rather than give a trot aid, I let Wiggly find her own way into trot, encouraging her with subtle body movements. This helped her to stay calm through the transition (right).

You may be thinking, 'that's all very well, but if I give my horse the rein, he charges off and loses balance', in



which case, don't worry, you're not alone. The more you hold on to a horse, the more he'll hold on to you and rely on you to balance him. One of you has to let go to avoid a life-long battle, so make it you. If your horse charges off, gently redirect his thinking into a new direction which will slow his mind down and, therefore his body, too.

If you have trust, it will work. Often, the horse is so relieved to have extra freedom that he starts to balance himself right away!

“One of you has to let go, so if you want to avoid a life-long battle, make it you”

A good turn

Another important part of any horse's early education is to teach him lateral bend and what each rein aid means. On a circle or through a turn, for example, I ask the horse to bend by lifting my inside rein. If the horse overbends and starts to fall out through the outside shoulder, I raise the outside rein to bring that shoulder back in line.

The opposite applies if your horse falls in on a circle – ie, onto his inside shoulder. In this case, lift and open the outside rein away from his neck to bring him out. Don't be scared to move the reins, and be clear with your signals. The important thing to remember is that as soon as you get your horse back on line, you must allow him to go forward again.



Lifting the inside rein asks the horse to turn

Striking the **balance****Top tip**

Even if you only get one or two steps where your horse is relaxed at first, it's a start. You can build on it.

**Break the habit**

In canter, it is even harder to 'let go', especially on a big-moving and forward-going horse like Wiggy. However, it's really important that you do and actually, it can feel quite liberating. Nicky tried this on Wiggy, and although she found it hard to resist the temptation to half-halt, there were some relaxed moments. It's a combination of having enough trust to let go and breaking old habits.

It really doesn't take long to get good results using this way of training, and your horse will thoroughly appreciate you allowing him the extra freedom. Plus, letting your horse take responsibility for himself will do wonders for his confidence, too.



"It doesn't take long to get good results using this way of training"

Letting go

Wiggy started to get the hang of seeking the rein contact forward in the upward transitions, and with Nicky back on-board, I explained a few things to watch out for...

- First, if you're going to give your horse more rein, make sure you give it. Never give the rein and then change your mind halfway through, otherwise your horse won't learn to trust you.

- Pick a nice moment to make your upward transitions – ie, when your horse is nice and soft and accepting the rein contact.

- Horses are less tense when they have more freedom, whereas when we get tense in the saddle, we tend to hold on more, which causes the horse to speed up. We actually need to do the opposite.

- Think of this type of training as staying out of your horse's way a bit more. The more you interfere with what he's doing, the less responsible and less confident he will become.

- Don't worry about teaching your horse to make downward transitions



'Let go' of your horse and allow him to find his own balance

at this stage of his training. If your horse resists the contact, then just ignore it. Good downward transitions will fall into place once the horse's balance is better, so let them happen naturally.

- Your long-term aim when schooling any horse is to make your aids a form of communication – you never want to get to the stage where you are trying to physically manoeuvre the horse yourself.