



*What's this
got to do with*
HORSES?

*Light
fantasy:*
A winning
partnership
takes time
and
patience to
develop.

American riding instructor Susan Eoff compares horse riding to ballroom dancing, and comes to some inspiring conclusions about how we could improve our riding

Dancing and dressage

There are many similarities between the two classical arts of ballroom dancing and dressage.

Leading the way: An experienced lead dancer uses cues to move their partner, assess reactions and prepare for the next move.

In top ballroom dancing, the partners are joined together in a frame created by the connection of their individually maintained bodies (they are in 'self carriage'). The dance figures are created by the leader shaping his torso, which translates to slight pressure on the contact points of the follower.

These pressures give the necessary signals for the follower to stay in synchrony.

Sound familiar?

This isn't too different from the 'frame' that rider and horse create at top levels of riding, with the rider influencing the horse's movement through slight changes in body alignment and pressure from seat, legs and hands. But most riders and trainers create the influences; they are not accustomed to being on the receiving end.

Ride like a dancer

First, locate your own stiffness and resistances, such as:

- muscle tension
- heaviness in the body
- unbalanced body carriage
- physical reactions to psychological stress

To create a toned yet supple body, the rider must learn how to remove or reduce this stiffness and resistance

Strictly ballroom?

As a horse trainer, I began searching outside the horse world for information to sharpen my awareness of balance and harmony — in order to bring these qualities into my teaching. I knew that insights may come from unexpected places and help push back or remove the blinkers we all wear to some degree.

On a cruise I had a surprisingly good time experimenting with ballroom dancing and I saw how it required a partnership. So I chose ballroom dancing as my new medium for learning about riding.

When I first learnt to dance with a qualified instructor, I was taught to co-ordinate my limbs, muscle groups and weight changes, through my feet. This would enable me to stay connected (smoothly, I hoped!) to my dance partner when we moved across the dance floor.

Then, after studying ballroom dancing for a few years, I started experiencing moments of effortless unity with my dance partner — not unlike moments I recognized when I was riding.

I was gaining an insight into the rider and horse relationship: the lead dancer paralleling the rider and the partner paralleling the horse. In this case however, the difference between dancing and riding for me was playing the horse instead of the rider.

A sensitive move

My experience of being at the 'other end of the reins' has shown me that in the process of joining two living entities, we need to consider several factors.

When dancing or riding, movement won't be smooth

if either of the partnership's muscles are contracted — as this creates stiffness and rigidity. Fluidity comes from a continuous series of contractions to create power, and de-contractions to allow the energy to move.

With this in mind, the lead dancer/rider learns how to create and follow the desired contractions and de-contractions in the follower/horse, in order to execute particular moves. The leader's ability to obtain the desired results with the least resistance comes from feeling the partner's balance and readiness and then signalling accordingly.

Why is it that, when out dancing a waltz arm-to-arm, some leaders step on their follower's feet? Or ask for an impossible move before the follower's balance permits it? Is this anything like asking a horse to canter before its balance and impulsion are in position?

Insensitivity, in riding and dancing, prevents fluidity of movement. In developing sensitivity as riders we tend to focus on our partner — the horse — rather than on ourselves.

My experience with dancing suggests we shift our focus and look first at what we're doing as riders.

Homework

Try this at home:

- Stand face-to-face and hand-to-hand with a partner. Get them to close their eyes while you move your hands and arms forwards or backwards, strongly enough to move the partner's torso (and vice versa)
- Notice how the pressure changes between the ball and heel of the foot
- Feel the connection of the hands and how the



pressure changes with the weight change

- Note the changes throughout your bodies

Try this out riding:

- Notice how your legs hang from the hip sockets
- Try to release any tension from your hip to your toe
- Be aware of how your legs shape around the body of the horse, how each horse feels different and how subtle the aids can be
- Can your hands merge with the living contact of the horse's mouth?

Connecting with your horse

In early adventures with my first horse, I was often too lazy to get a halter and would hop on her in the field and hope she'd take me to the yard. She would — usually at a gallop.

Those moments gave me a taste of uninhibited unity. The challenge for me as a trainer has been putting that feeling together with the horse's obedience. I have found that as my self-awareness increases, my body becomes a better tool for communication, and thus unity, with the horse.

In developing sensitivity, we should look at the rider's use of body and mind to create a connection with the horse and at the rider's effect on the horse.

It is imperative the rider (or leader) has a supple body with independent use of the legs and hands. This allows the rider to feel the 'partner's' balance and body integrity. Then they can select the timing and type of aid needed to create or maintain a desired effect.

If you can, take a few

"All those endless movements we make with the horse are comparable to a pair of dancers training their own bodies to move with control in 'self carriage', and together"

minutes to watch a group of dancers. You don't have to be an expert to see which couples move as one and which move as opponents. A smooth leader often uses cues — learned through training or experience — to move the partner, and is invisibly making mental assessment of the reactions in preparation for the next move.

Preparation is key

Similarly, riders need to take the time to prepare an exercise well, to incorporate position and energy and to allow the reaction to take place. This gives the horse an opportunity to get it right — for each step, each jump and each transition.

Asking the horse for a movement when it is not physically possible due to lack of preparation, often results in the rider using force and rigidity to make up for the difference. Think what such dancing would look like. To quote Nuno Oliveira, a Classical Riding Master of the 20th century: "Without grace one cannot practise fine riding; without finesse, one cannot imagine art. Harshness and force are attributes of mediocre riders who never wish to be true."



Dancers and riders need to learn how to align their body and maintain the alignment in motion. If we

Four tips to help you stay balanced:

- Use a mirror, video or another person to check your body alignment
- Look for level lines through the shoulders and hips, plus a centred head position

Getting the balance right

consider the body as a stack of building blocks, we need to keep three

- Make sure the 'blocks' are in balance whatever the direction of your movement. When we are in 'self carriage', our arms and legs can be in any position — up, down or out to the side — without changing the

blocks (head, rib cage, and pelvis) lined up over our feet (as dancers) or the

- connection of our three blocks
 - Feel how places in your body tighten as you move too far forward or backwards from the point of balance
- Ask yourself these questions:**

horse's (as riders) in order to maintain balance. We must also keep our centre lowered and relaxed.

- Is there a pattern to which muscles contract when you lose your balance?
- Which areas contract when you are nervous?
- How does tension in these areas affect your balance?

Focused riding: In developing sensitivity as riders we must first look to ourselves and not to the horse.



It takes two: A rider needs sensitivity of body and mind in order to 'connect' with their horse.

"The harmonious relationship of two living creatures is a result of co-operation, education and trust"

new and old moves to work on balance, precision of the footwork and alignment with each other — and I now know the importance of presenting new moves to the horse with calmness and clarity in walk.

In dancing, as in riding, the first attempts at a new exercise may be successful when the movement is set up well. However, it is the repetition which reinforces the movement, so it can be recalled, at will that is, through muscle memory.

Follow my leader

All of those endless movements we make with the horse — circles, across the diagonal, down the centre line; the half-halts, halts, and transitions — are comparable to a pair of dancers training their own bodies to move with control in 'self carriage', together.

As a rider, be aware of the partner's role. This is difficult since the partner must be ready and balanced to take a step in any direction and at any moment, without heaviness or intentions of leading.

When you are sensitive to the partner's role, then consider how responsive the horse is to the rider and how the horse must learn which pressures to respond to (the rider's aids) and which pressures to disregard (the contact with tack and equipment).

When a move isn't executed as desired, has the partner understood the cues or chosen to disregard the leader's requests? Only consider intentional disobedience as the last — not the first — possible cause of disharmony. Once again, before acting toward the partner, the sensitive leader needs to check his or her own body integrity, evaluate how the movement was prepared and directed, and, finally, look to the partner.

On the right foot

If I had a riding school I'd consider starting the first day of instruction with a dance class — allowing each person to lead and follow — to give pupils a basic idea of the harmony and balance necessary between a horse and rider.

Dancing and riding may be two of the few instances where one partner follows the other, but this does not mean the partner becomes subservient. Educating a horse does not mean taking its spirit away. The harmonious relationship of two living creatures is a result of co-operation, education and trust — a partnership developed with time and patience.



Striking up a partnership: (Left and below) Instructor Susan Eoff enjoys riding and dancing, and has discovered interesting similarities between the two activities.



Success at last

Only when you at last develop sensitivity to harmony and balance, should you look to the horse (or follower) for the cause of your problems if things aren't going to plan.

When a partner follows new dance steps, they have an opportunity to feel what it must be like for a horse to respond to new cues.

As a new move begins, mentally the partner may feel confusion and uncertainty. But, when the move has been well set up

and signalled by the leader, the partner's legs seem to magically make the steps — magically because, like the mind, the muscles are also unfamiliar with the moves; they as yet have no muscle memory.

Being tangoed

As I began to walk or step my way through the waltz, tango or other dances, I needed to make each step slowly, precisely and repeatedly. Even partners who've danced together for a long time walk through