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# Alexander Technique Puts Riders In Proper Balance

By Beverly Saadeh

It's the scene that makes everyone wince — watching the jumper crash through the rails as the commentator whispers that the rider prevented the horse from using his head. For this and so many more examples, the problem is the horse not being able to freely balance and use itself as a whole. Volumes are written on the basic, crucial component of the horse's balance.

It is the rider's directions imposed on the horse that often upset this balance. What about the rider's own equilibrium, fatigue and injury compensation? How can an animal perform optimally if it is working under a continually off-kilter director? Unfortunately, most riders suffer from imbalance caused by a variety of things.

## Equilibrium For Equestrians

Bodies have been contorted to have “the look,” feet have been stuck into shoes with faulty support and one muscle group has been overworked to compensate for injury to another group. Unlike other mammals, humans will misalign and misuse their bodies and labor under pain if they perceive they are doing the right thing.

Perception, skeleton, muscles and senses all affect our balance and we are often ignorant about it or ineffectual in changing it. One can lose a thumb and still count on one hand the number of authors attending to the rider's equilibrium rather than position. The same effort placed on a horse's balance and structural use should be directed to the rider as well.

## Helping Riders Find Balance

Finally, someone is paying attention.

Holly Sweeney of Montclair, N.J. is helping people protect their orthopedic health by teaching how to rebalance the body, become more effective in the saddle and prevent injury along the way. Far from stretches and strengthening exercises, Sweeney gets down to the muscle, bone and gristle of an issue. She can tell you not only what muscles you are using right now, but how you misused them yesterday. More importantly, she can tell you what muscles you are using on your horse and if they are the right ones or the wrong ones for what you need to accomplish.

Joanne Grimm of Far Hills, N.J. can attest to that. After a recent session with Sweeney, Grimm said, “She touched my shoulders and asked if I had been doing a lifting motion with them from left to right. I couldn't believe it — I

had just stacked bales of hay the day before!” Grimm was suffering from tendonitis at the knee when she first met Sweeney, who in one push of her thumb immediately alleviated half of Grimm's pain. After that, Grimm, who keeps a string of horses in condition, started working with Sweeney on a weekly basis. The results for Grimm are that her lower back pain is gone, her leg is longer in the saddle and she feels more a

part of the horse.

## The Alexander Technique

Sweeny knows her stuff. She has a master's degree in orthopedics and biomechanics from New York University and is a certified International Alexander instructor as well as a founding member of the Yang Tai Chi Chaun Association. The degree from NYU gives her the understanding of anatomical structures and their integration, but it is the century-old modality developed by Francis Mathias Alexander that Sweeny focuses on. Telling you the names of the muscles won't get you doing the right thing, but using the mind/body elements of the Alexander Technique will.

This technique, developed by an Australian in the early 1900s, is considered an educational system of body awareness and change to permit a dynamic sense of balance. "Equestrian arts are a perfect match for the Alexander Technique because the technique is about maintaining balance and equilibrium moment to moment while engaging in activity," said Sweeney.

The Alexander Technique requires students to first identify how they are holding and using their bodies.

This adventure in sensory perception, called "table work," is a relaxing experience with guiding hands from the instructor. The student's work, while lying on a padded spa table, is to think about and feel what the body is experiencing as the instructor uses a light, comfortable touch at specific muscle, tendon and ligament junctures, while manipulating arms and legs with the minutest of movements.

Arm muscles coming to resting length suddenly take on a mind of their own, a touch on the neck creates awareness in the small of the back, a slight movement of the foot and the student finds he or she is experiencing extremely relaxed breathing. The difficulty and speed of sensory recognition depends on the student's interest and self-awareness.

## Out Of The Saddle, Onto The Floor

Once the student has started to identify and relax areas of tension, there is floor work to be done—termed dynamic movement studies. Sweeny describes how a particular part of the body is suppose to work and then helps the student stop detrimental movements and integrate correct movements into his or her posture.

Alexander used the physician's term "inhibition" when referring to the practice of stopping improper movement, and the word is used often in the motion work. Sweeney's Bedminster studio is outfitted with an array of model skeletons, balls, rolls, discs and even a saddle to aid students in mapping out their skeletal systems and engage in the dynamic movement studies. She might have a student sit in a stationary saddle while working on shoulder and arm movements used with the reins, or work with a plastic log to identify the pelvic angle.

## It All Starts In The Rider's Head

The head and how it is balanced on the spinal column is always a priority. The student gets a new view of this weighted globe and how it actually moves around. Alexander related the use of the head and neck to the use of the body as a whole. Riders with their heads bobbing, tipped forward or tipped back and down are compromising their balance and ability to effect changes not only in their own bodies but that of the horse as well.

Alexander thought of posture as a verb rather than a noun, and Sweeny is true to that philosophy: reiterating the variety of muscles all working to hold us upright and ready to move. The technique also works with one student at a time as each individual holds his or her body in a unique fashion. Changes can not be made en-masse. Sweeny's own knowledge of the human body began with her individual pain.

With an undergraduate degree in dance and graphic arts, Sweeny was preparing for New York auditions when she was sidelined with severe tendonitis in her ankle. Medical advice to take two aspirin and rest was getting her nowhere and she began investigating other therapies. That search led her to the Alexander Technique, which is well known among performing artists.

She overcame her tendonitis and went back to dancing, but realized the Alexander Technique, which focuses on inhibiting improper use of the body and setting the frame in a dynamic sense of balance, could stave off future injuries. She continued studying the technique with some of the nation's top instructors, including Marjorie Barstow, who studied directly with F.M. Alexander and became a certified instructor.

Sweeny's interest in the science behind the technique's success led her to complete a master's degree in the newly emerging field of human biomechanics. Tai Chi Chaun caught her attention as a complimentary study and she regularly goes to China to study with two masters. Today she splits her time between New York, Mont-clair and Bedminster, teaching the Alexander Technique and Tai Chi.

Sweeny has maintained a link to horses most of her adult life. Opening her studio off Lamington Road in Bedminster has allowed her to blend her two passions of the horse and movement. The serious rider who spends as much time and effort on his own balance as he does on his horse will become a more effective rider and stave off sidelining injuries. "Her stuff has a lasting effect – a solution to the problems you have, not a temporary fix," said Grimm.

More information on the Alexander Technique can be found at [www.alexandertech.org](http://www.alexandertech.org) or on Sweeny's Web site, [www.physicalliteracy.org](http://www.physicalliteracy.org). Sweeny can be contacted directly at (973)-650-4839.

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