

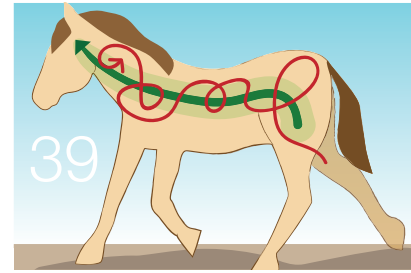
JEC ARISTOTLE BALLOU, AUTHOR OF *101 DRESSAGE EXERCISES FOR HORSE & RIDER*

55 Corrective Exercises FOR HORSES

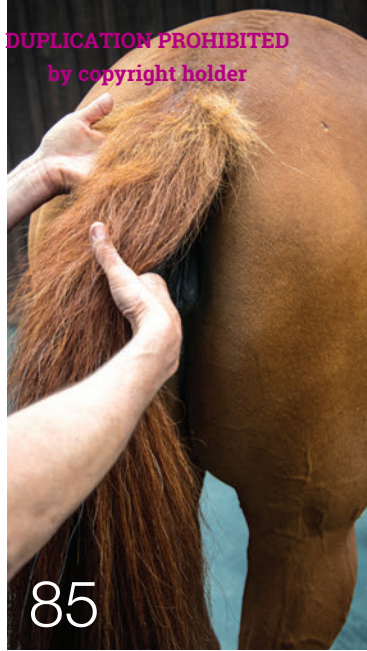


Resolving Postural Problems, Improving Movement Patterns, and Preventing Injury

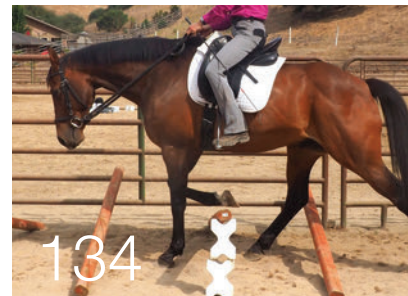
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Introduction

Have you found yourself asking what kinds of conditioning exercises might be right for your horse?

Or which ones would improve the quality and coordination of his gaits, making him a more fun and willing riding partner?

Perhaps you are trying to resolve one of the following challenges related to his posture or performance:

- Rebuilding after an injury or extended time off.
- Countering an unspecified weakness that prevents him from doing what you ask.
- Improving stiff, uncoordinated, or short-strided gaits.
- Softening a rigid or hollow topline.

- Lightening heaviness on the forehead.
- Correcting a hindquarter anomaly like locking stifles, an unstable pelvis, or a strong preference to travel one direction versus the other.

Or maybe you would just like to better determine whether:

- His resistance to work is due to physical limitation or behavioral issues.
- He is physically capable to do what you're asking.
- There is a specific source of his weakness or reason for his lack of progress.
- There is a cause for his need of frequent chiropractic adjustments or the way he often feels “not quite right.”
- There are ways you can make his gaits easier and more fun to ride.

This book offers easily digestible and applicable guidance to resolve all these issues—and more.

Every horse needs to be an athlete *first*, and only then can he comfortably and willingly work with you toward your riding and performance goals. Along the way he often needs to overcome postural habits or weaknesses, muscular imbalances, incorrect gait patterns, and other restrictions that alter his fluidity of movement. The exercises in the pages that follow give you the answers and tools to bolster his athleticism so that he *can* be the best possible riding partner.

After starting in chapter 1 where you will gain a better sense of what kinds of corrective exercises will most benefit your own horse, feel free to peruse the chapters that follow in any sequence. Many readers will gain the most from browsing through the book and playing with various exercises. The exercises do not need to be performed in a particular order unless it is indicated in the text. The benefit of each exercise is clearly marked, so you can easily find the ones that are the best fit for your horse. You can then pick and choose your favorite exercises to form routines of your own design.

For those who want a more structured takeaway from all this information, I offer sample routines and schedules in special sections between the main chapters. These examples may help you apply the knowledge you have gained.

Here is what you can expect:

Chapter 1: Corrective Exercises to Create New Patterns

This chapter introduces you to corrective exercises and helps you determine what types of exercises your horse needs and why. The exercises in this chapter are a good place to begin as they offer benefits for any horse. The chapter is followed by a special section of routines to resolve common challenges and dysfunction.

Chapter 2: Tuning Up Postural Muscles

In chapter 2 you will learn strategies for what I call “pre-hab,” in other words, *keeping* your horse fit, comfortable, and sound. The routines after this chapter are specific to diagnosing dysfunctional movement.

Chapter 3: Simple Bodywork to Break Bad Habits

At some point during a horse’s career, he will likely find himself in a schedule of bodywork for maintenance or therapy and/or during a period of downtime. This chapter shows you how to approach bodywork therapies, and most importantly, follow them up with the appropriate corrective exercises. Plus, you will learn how to progress your horse’s physical condition even during periods of downtime.

After this chapter I provide routines for following up bodywork with exercise.

Chapter 4: Getting the Most from Groundwork

Learn how to make the most of times when you need, or prefer, to work with your horse from the ground rather than from the saddle. This is followed by routines for horses that are following restricted schedules due to rehab requirements.

Chapter 5: Exercises and Tips to Follow Every Day

Here you will find my non-negotiable and fail-proof rules for keeping any riding horse happy and performing well.

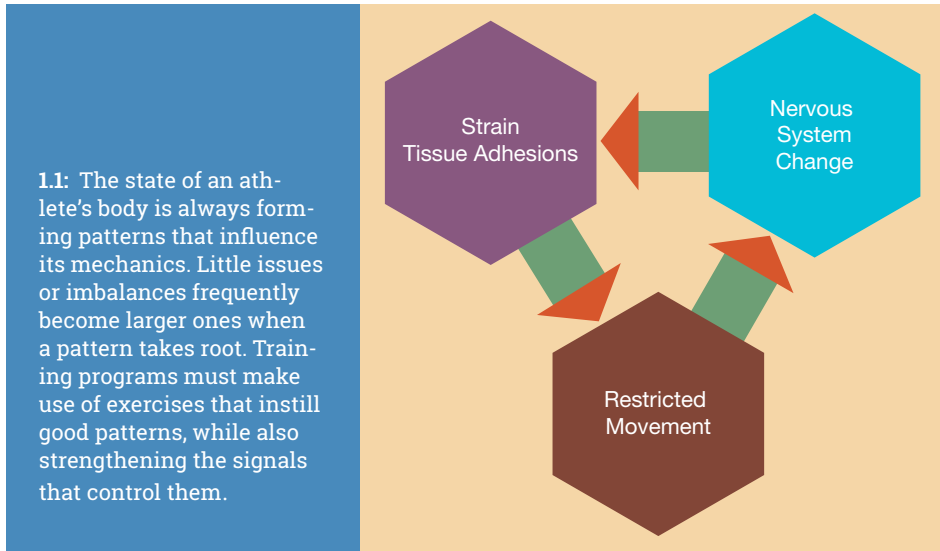
Following this chapter, I have offered recommended exercise routines for specific kinds of horses: gaited, senior, and youngsters.

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Corrective Exercises to Create New Patterns

Why We Need Corrective Exercises

Skilled riding is often all it takes to improve a horse's athleticism, performance, and overall well-being. But just as often, even good dressage-based training programs fail to fully root out the habits and patterns that prevent many horses from reaching optimal movement and correctness of their gaits. Anything from a poorly fitting saddle to inconsistent exercise schedules to an injury or stress, or past postural imbalances can create compromises. These quickly become deeper impediments to a horse's movement mechanics that persist even with good, regular riding schedules.



The body's way of taking care of itself during physical imbalances is to put up defenses. These defenses take the form of muscular spasms, adhesions, tightened muscles, restricted joint motions, and signals to and from the central nervous system to move differently.

Curing these defenses is not as simple as giving the horse a period of rest, though that can seem like a sensible solution. Adhesions and spasms, for instance, do not go away on their own after aggravating sources have been eliminated. They require outside manipulation as well as correct signals from the body to clear out. Putting a horse out in the field for a few months with the hope that everything will clear up rarely fixes the underlying problems.

Therapies like chiropractic care and massage are generally successful in releasing areas of immobility so the horse is *able* to move optimally. They free up areas of tension and compromised mobility that the body will not release by itself. However, they only set the stage; they do not by themselves *create* healthy movement. For that, the horse must be taken through exercises that habituate correct new patterns (fig. 1.1). Physical motions are governed by an underlying wiring that will still store faulty signals until these signals are reprogrammed.

This is where *corrective exercises* like the ones in this book come in.

Pilates or Yoga for Horses

And yet for all their success in curing balance and gait dysfunction, the real value of corrective exercises far exceeds this role alone. Their necessity for supporting equine athletes at the top of their performance cannot be overstated. Without joint and postural stability, for instance, an athlete cannot develop strength and power correctly. During regular riding and training, numerous factors make it difficult to target areas of the body that store the mechanisms for stability and symmetry the way corrective exercises do. These maneuvers access muscle fibers responsible for fine-tuned, well-coordinated movements while educating and strengthening the neuromuscular system beyond the adaptations gained from gymnastic work. For this reason, therapists sometimes refer to them as Pilates or Yoga for horses. This is an accurate way to view them.

If you regularly train good patterns in the horse's body map, he can keep performing with ease for a long sound life. This simple practice also allows you to consider alternatives to joint injections, buckets of supplements, endless chiropractic appointments, career-ending physical limitations, and a surprising number of behavioral problems.

Understanding Fascia

A body-wide cloth of fibrous collagen called *fascia* envelops muscles, nerves, veins, and organs individually, and also connects them all together to form a network. This gauze-like web of tissue determines, in large measure, how a body is able to move. When this tissue becomes disorganized, strained, or dehydrated, its ability to glide across surrounding tissues is impaired. Eventually, this leads to a diminished range of motion in muscles and joints. The fascia adapts to this restricted pattern and spreads it throughout the horse's entire system. Thus begins a cycle of restriction begetting more restriction.

Common reasons for fascia tissue losing its glide or pliability include: localized strain, a poorly fitting saddle, injury or inflammation, repetitive movements, and emotional stress. Good muscle function depends on pliability of the fascia, not just for force effort but also for sensory input. The sensory nerves that communicate information

fit tip

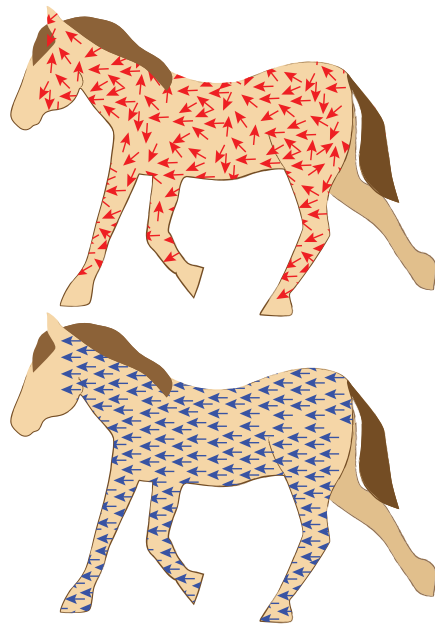
In human medicine, sensory and proprioceptive education has been instrumental in reducing the need for surgical intervention to repair joints in 50 percent of cases. It is logical to extend these findings to horses as well.

back and forth between muscles and the central nervous system reside in fascia. If and when the fascia is altered, these signals about joint position and muscle coordination falter (fig. 1.2).

A hydrated and well-trained fascia network plays an enormous role in fitness. Its significance reminds us to not think about training muscles individually, because in reality that is not possible. Through fascia, the horse's system is interconnected. It is analogous to a T-shirt hanging from a branch. If one part of the T-shirt snags, it will pull on and disturb the alignment of threads farther away from the actual snag. The physical shape of the T-shirt will change and continue to lose form over time.

Exercises that focus too repetitively on the same range or plane of motion can cause the fascia to become excessively sticky and thick, limiting tissue glide. On the contrary, exercises that stimulate proprioceptive adaptations like ground poles, varied surfaces, and alternating forces of effort help improve fascia (see What Is Proprioception? on p. 71). This translates to balance and stability in the body. Therapists call this optimum state a system-wide engagement of the nervous and muscular systems.

1.2: When disruptions occur to the health and pliability of the fascia, muscle patterns are negatively altered. If left unaddressed, these can lead to lasting imbalances. A horse will be unable to transmit energy forward from the hindquarters without restriction or resistance (red arrows). Stretches and corrective exercises provide an organizing force (blue arrows) that can realign fibers and movement patterns.



Why Ground Poles?

Schooling horses over ground poles, whether in hand or from the saddle, which we'll do in many exercises in this book, can cure numerous gait irregularities or movement compromised by tension, crookedness, and weak muscle patterns. Because they require the horse to take designated stride lengths in sequence, they install good clear rhythm in all gaits. As the horse traverses over poles, he learns to push equally from both hind legs, correcting imbalances in the effort of his hind limbs. Pole work contributes to straightness and symmetry through his core and mobilizes the spinal joints.

The postural adjustments needed for crossing poles recruit the horse's interconnected abdominal muscle group, thoracic sling, and gluteal chain. Schooling different arrangements of poles helps re-pattern existing habits within each gait, and leads to the creation of new signals from the nervous system.

- As a general rule, *walking* over raised poles improves core stability, joint flexion, and intervertebral joint spacing. It assists horses recovering from sacroiliac pain, back injury, or disrupted muscle use from stiffness. Walking over poles contributes to the horse's looseness and range of motion.
- *Trotting* over poles plays more of a strengthening role. It develops strength in the larger back muscles that effect limb movement plus utilization of quadriceps, pelvic stability, and stronger spinal stabilizing muscles. As these muscles are recruited, it can lead to a release of stored tension from the extensor muscle chain, which is a common culprit of horses that tend to be chronically hollow in their topline.
- *Cantering* over poles tones the thoracic sling, loosens the shoulders as the body rocks between forehand and hindquarters, and lifts the back. It can greatly improve flexion and extension of the back, which allows it to lift and carry the rider better. It is believed to deliver the most mobilization of the lumbosacral joint, which enables the horse to engage his hind limbs.

Setting up ground poles can seem like an arduous task, which leads many riders to avoid it, but with some creativity, it does not need to be. First of all, to promote your own consistency using poles, I recommend buying six to eight poles that are easy to move around and set up. This way you are far more likely to use them. If you try instead to use heavy or excessively long poles, you are far less likely to use them

regularly. Unless you jump on a regular basis, I suggest using something else besides jump poles. You do not need anything fancy, but just something that is easy enough to use that you will do so consistently.

fit tip

When soft tissue is healing, the new tissue needs to be educated on its job. The overall process of getting a soft-tissue injury successfully back to competition involves 25 percent treatment and 75 percent rehabilitation process.

One of my favorite options is to use 4-inch by 4-inch red-wood or cedar posts that are flat on one side—easily found in the landscape section of your local hardware store. I like them because they are sturdy but lightweight. They lie flat without rolling around and are easy to set up. In my travels, I have seen riders using other types of lightweight poles or creative variations.

To summarize: do not forego ground pole work because you think you might not have the ideal supplies. Look around and use what you have handy.

EXERCISE 1:

Raised Pole Fan with Alternating Strides

PURPOSE: Increases symmetry, stride awareness, and body control.

Switch between the extensor and flexor muscle chains with the footwork required in this pole arrangement for increased symmetry body-wide. It targets the thoracic sling, stifle muscles, and pelvic stability. It is not uncommon for horses to trip or bang the poles the first time through this routine until they make the proprioceptive improvements to go through cleanly. This deceptively difficult exercise does wonders for the horse's stride awareness and control.



1.3 A: Sara tests Diamante's coordination and balance by asking him to bend tightly through his body and step carefully between the raised ends of poles.

1.3 B: Sara then rides a slightly larger circle that crosses the outer edge of poles, asking Diamante to extend his stride in the wider spaces.



1. With the inside edge of the poles raised to a height of 12–16 inches, set up four to six poles in a fan shape as shown. Space the raised inside ends of the poles approximately 1 foot apart; set the wider ends 4½ feet apart.
2. Begin by riding around the narrow end of poles at the walk. Ask your horse to take just a single step between each pole (fig. 1.3 A).
3. Maintain a clear bend to the inside by applying light pressure with your inside leg.
4. Circle around to cross the poles again, but now move over to the wider end of the pole fan (fig. 1.3 B).
5. Ask for two steps between each set of poles while maintaining inside bend. Really ask your horse to extend his strides as you cross this end of the poles.
6. Circle around again, but now go back to the raised, narrow end, and be sure to get just a single step between each pole.
7. Continue circling over the poles, alternating which end you cross over and the number of steps between each pole as described above.

This exercise should feel like taking the horse back and forth from a finely controlled collected walk to a big extended walk. It will highlight any instability in his pelvis, though, so do not be surprised if he struggles with the footwork.