Does symmetry exist?

2013 Assessment and Asymmetry Conference UK

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Photos by Helen Richmond Photography

How does symmetry - or the lack of it - impact horse and rider, their performance, comfort, and welfare? Are performances compromised by the patterns that develop as horses and riders compensate for being ‘crooked’? Is the lack of symmetry in fact a symptom to a much deeper cause?

On a freezing weekend in February, I travelled to my first Horses Inside Out Conference to find some answers to these and many other questions.

Originally started by Gillian Higgins from Horses Inside Out five years ago, to increase her own knowledge and to make scientific research available to everyone, this year’s conference had sold out months earlier. Not long after the conference began I realised why. The two-day event consisted of relentless cups of coffee and yummy cake with the most friendly and passionate equine therapists, coaches, trainers, lecturers, saddlers and farriers... I quickly realized this was going to be a very educational and lively weekend!

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Contemplating the concept of ‘normal’ and thinking about deviations from ‘normal’ horse and rider got us all thinking. Can compensatory patterns acquired in both horse and rider help identify ‘inhibitory’ performance? Or should we realize this was going to be a very educational and lively weekend!

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Science and research:

Not Just a Pretty Picture

The conference opened with Dutch scientist Dr Meike van Heel poring our consciousness by analysing modern breeding policies to produce the best equestrian athletes. In the past 25 yrs the Royal Dutch warmblood stud book (KWPN) has seen an increase in the height at the withers by 0.1cm per year in horses (n=85,000) resulting in an average increase to 165.9 cm. Large, long legged horses with relatively small heads are believed to be more optimal for the archetype of the “beautiful horse”, but has our indulgence for aesthetic looks cost the horse its soundness and durability?

Asymmetric Limb Loading

Every year 12,000 foals are born in Holland with only 3,500 admitted into studbooks, begging the question: why are so many foals not good enough?

One area of rejection is unevenness of the foot, but is an uneven hoof capsule heritable or do uneven feet develop as a result of environmental influences? Dr Van Heel studied 24 warmblood foals from birth and measured until the age of 3 years for; conformational changes, limb preference whilst grazing and the development of uneven feet.

Results identified a group of foals whose conformational foot changes in the first year correlated with asymmetric loading of the uneven foot whilst grazing and which remained at the age of 3 yrs.

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According to Andy most riders have profiling rider imbalances into 3 of their body being weak; others are tight and weak on the same side."

In a period of seven years Andy has treated 541 riders profiling rider imbalances into 3 types:
- Type 1. Weak on one side and tight on the opposite side – 80%
- Type 2. Weak on one side and tight on the same side – 12%
- Type 3 Globally weak with no tightness or restrictions – 8%

Interesting a rider’s laterality (right or left-handness) had no influence.

Is there a perfect rider shape? treat rider imbalances.

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Asymmetry & the saddle

Equipment can reduce asymmetry as well as create it.

David Kempshall, saddler and Managing Director of First Thought Equine Ltd, manufacturers of Wow™, Flair, Corrector and Equiflex, briefly demonstrated pressure mapping technology under the saddle and the potential for saddles to be fitted to an asymmetric rider and horse.

Using the patented ‘Flair’ air flocking system, David adjusted both the front and rear air bags, and back two airbags, whilst delegates evaluated in real time via a big screen, the pressure loading of cells, and the impact to horse and rider’s symmetry.

The rear bags were raised and lowered, demonstrating different balance points for the rider and the optimal longitudinal balance point for the horse/rider combination. Interestingly, the back adjustments influenced the rider more than the horse, whilst front air adjustments made a difference to the horse’s neck and shoulder.

Saddler David Kempshall demonstrated pressure mapping technology under the saddle. Using a pressure mat with the ‘Flair’ adjustable air-flocking system, delegates were able to analyse the pressure loading and the impact to the saddle. Combining a pressure mat and pressure mapping technology under the saddle, the rider could objectively evaluate the pressure loading and the impact to the saddle. The saddle, combined with the ‘Flair’ adjustable air-flocking system, demonstrated how specific exercises can improve straightness in the event horse.

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Dressage: The Basics of Grand Prix

Adam Kemp, a Fellow of the British Horse Society and successful dressage rider and coach, gave an enlightening and humorous display of training symmetry in his system of training for dressage. Little ‘gems’ ensured a captive audience; “starting and stopping was the whole test in London; educating your young horse to ‘go’ and ‘stay’ is teaching him Grand Prix”.

Adam then explained with rider Matt the FEI Training scale and how to interpret symmetry; “the scales are not a list, just a set of words, you need them all in order to go correctly.”

Jumping: Whose Responsibility?

Caroline Moore, another Fellow of the BHS, successful dressage rider and British Eventing National under-18 coach explained her coaching philosophy, demonstrating how specific exercises can improve straightness in the event horse.

According to Caroline there are three key areas of training:

1. Obstacle
2. Power
3. Softness

...and 3 areas of responsibility:

1. Rider:
   a) Horses balance
   b) self balance
   c) correct approach

2. Horse:
   a) Obedience
   b) Think hoof/brain coordination
   c) Jump

3. Training the horse for Responsibility

Caroline demonstrated how a line of fences without ground rails with different distances between them (bounces, one and two strides) helped the horses assess the question. The complexity of the question resulted in horses slowing and reacting with more care, which gradually became more difficult as riders were asked to hold their line both left and right of centre.

Educating Your Horse’s Eye to Read the Question

Caroline demonstrated how a line of fences without ground rails with different distances between them demonstrated the scales are not a list, just a set of words, you need them all in order to go correctly.

Exercise: To help riders take responsibility for straightness try using guiding rails followed by a small narrow fence. Riders are unable to abandon straightness after take-off.

Use the Approach to Set up the Landing

Leg-yield on the approach to a narrow fence across the arena to set up the landing balance. This teaches the rider to manoeuvre the withers to create the desired new balance for the landing, essential for the event rider dealing with technical cross country lines.

Improving your jumping with dressage boards

Caroline demonstrated with two U18 event riders, the importance and value pole work has in training your horse to stay on your line.

Using dressage boards and poles with different distances between them (2 ½ feet to 3½ feet) in trot, riders developed awareness for stride length and tempo. This raised the horses withers and developed more hind leg flexion.

Which Side of Centre?

A small grid was then jumped on a straight line with riders holding their line either left or right of centre. This targeted straightness and more lift through the withers.

By building the grid up on the centre of the arena, delegates observed where the horses natural balance wanted to fall.

Conference wrap up: It’s the small things

This year’s Horses Inside Out conference facilitated many discussions, long after the presentations, which really impressed me. A high level and knowledge of equitation welfare was demonstrated by professionals who truly ‘care for’ and not just ‘about’ our home friends, even in conditions of -2 degrees at Arena UK!

Perhaps like me you also feel inspired to make lots of little changes in your coaching and training. “It’s not about changing one thing by 100% its about changing 100 things by 1% that makes a difference” Sir Clive Woodward.

The Back and Beyond

The next Horses Inside Out conference will take place on 22nd and 23rd February 2014 and is already shaping up as another not to be missed date on my calendar!

Under the title: “The Equine Back and Beyond” it will be hosted by the Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester, UK. Some of the confirmed speakers include Animal Health Trust’s Dr Sue Dyson, Neuroanatomist Dr Andrews Hemmings, and Sports and Remedial Therapist Gillian Higgins. The programme will be of great interest to all riders, trainers, therapists, saddlers, farriers and vets.

For further details visit: www.horsesinsideout.com or contact info@horsesinsideout.com. You can also stay in touch via Facebook and Twitter.

Caroline Moore

FBHS explained her coaching philosophy, demonstrating how specific exercises can improve straightness in the event horse.

For example using dressage boards, pole work, and jumping grids.