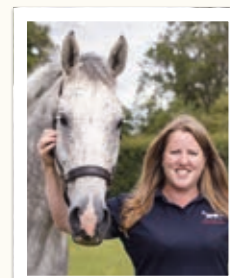




By Gillian Higgins



Gillian Higgins is an equine anatomy and biomechanics specialist, BHS senior coach, equine therapist and author. She's the founder of the popular teaching organisation, Horses Inside Out. Gillian is

most well known for her paintings on live horses, which she also uses to illustrate her books, online courses, and events, as well as real live lecture demonstrations.

Just before Christmas last year, I headed down to Lambourn to spend the evening with Kelly. I was working in the area the next day, which was a great excuse to visit and catch up with a good friend. Having not seen each other since before the pandemic, we had lots of catching up to do. It was so lovely to talk to a like-minded equestrian who's working hard to better the lives of horses.

We chatted about our own experiences with Intelligent Horsemanship and Horses Inside Out, comparing notes and funny stories, and Kelly told me that the next edition of the *IH Magazine* is all about confidence. This got us talking about confidence within business as well as riding and how the source of confidence comes from so many different areas. It's from that conversation that writing about Understanding Anatomy and Confidence came from.

As many of you know, I'm passionate about equine anatomy and biomechanics. I strive to help people learn about how horses work in an interesting and easy to understand way. At this point, you may be thinking, 'How can understanding anatomy help me to improve my riding confidence?' In my experience, there's nothing worse than riding a horse that you're not quite sure about – you're not 100% sure that he's comfortable or capable of doing the task that you're asking of him – it's this feeling of uncertainty that impacts the way you ride and your confidence.

To make sure that your horse is comfortable, it's vital to have a team of professionals around you to manage every aspect of his health, comfort and well-being. That team is made up of your farrier, vet, dentist, saddle fitter, trainer, and massage therapist. As well as this crucial team, there are things that you can do to ensure your horse is fit and healthy that will give you the confidence to know that he's comfortable.

In this feature, I share my four top tips to boost your confidence that your horse is comfortable and his muscular-skeletal system is prepared and capable of performing what you're asking of it.



Understanding anatomy can help you improve your horse's comfort and in turn your confidence in their ridden behaviour

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UNDERSTANDING ANATOMY AND CONFIDENCE

1 Regular Trot-Ups

Trotting your horse up once a week is a great habit to get into. Don't worry if you don't really know what you're looking for, make this part of your weekly routine, and you'll soon learn what's normal for your horse. Once you know what his normal is, you'll spot when something isn't right.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Ask a friend to walk your horse in a straight line away from you and back towards you. Then repeat this in trot.

It can be useful to video this on your phone or make a few notes so you can study it in more detail. As he walks and trots away and towards you, look at how his body moves and consider the following:

- How does he place each foot on the floor?
- How straight are his limbs?
- Is his tail loose and swinging from side to side?
- Does his rib cage swing evenly to the left and right?
- How does he hold his head – straight or to one side?
- How does he turn at the end of the straight lines?



It can be useful to video a trot-up on your phone so you can study it in more detail

2 Getting hands-on

There's a lot you can learn about your horse by touching him.

Make it part of your daily grooming routine to feel his legs and run your hands over his whole body. Feel for any heat, lumps, and bumps. Again, it's all about recognising what's normal for your horse. If there's heat one day that wasn't there the previous day, you'll notice it, and this helps you recognise when things aren't quite right.

Learning more about anatomy is something I'd recommend to boost your understanding. I run a Developing Palpation course for professional equine therapists, and I'm planning to do webinars and online courses for horse owners on this subject, too – keep an eye on the Horses Inside Out Academy for details.



Feel your horse's legs and run your hands over their whole body as part of your daily routine

3 Massage Your Horse's Back

The back is a common area of concern, and it's another area that you need to get to know.

Feel your horse's back every day – run the flat of your hand along his back from wither to rump – the muscles shouldn't react. Remember, you're looking to discover what's normal for your horse.

To learn more, there's a great video in the Horses Inside Out Academy (in the free tutorial video section) called Test for Sore Back Muscles (you do need to be a member of the Academy to view the video, but it's free to join). This video shows you several techniques that you can use to assess how comfortable your horse is in his back.



There is a massage tutorial on the academy website



Regular massages are important to help your horse stay comfortable in his body



Horses need to be fit to be ridden and to help keep their back strong

TIP
Knowing that your horse is fit will give you confidence and peace of mind that you're doing everything you possibly can to protect your horse's back

Regular massages from a soft tissue massage therapist are also important to help your horse stay comfortable in his body. Any ridden work puts demands on his musculoskeletal system – and this is where regular sports and remedial work from a professional therapist helps to support him in his work.

Learning some basic massage techniques is a great skill to master and something you can do in-between visits from your therapist. Regular massages are a superb way to support back comfort and improve performance. You'll also learn what your horse's back feels like normally and spot any changes early. At Horses Inside Out, we run massage day courses for horse owners – dates for 2022 are listed on our website.

4 Cardiovascular Fitness

Horses need to be fit to be ridden and to help keep their back strong. Even if you're just hacking a couple of times a week, cardiovascular fitness is still important. This is because the breathing muscles are connected into the back.

This interesting topic is something that I talked about in the online lecture-demonstration, Riding from the Anatomical Perspective – you can find it in the Horses Inside Out Academy.

When we discuss muscles of the back, many of you will recognise the name longissimus dorsi but not so many will be familiar with the dorsal serrate muscle.

The longissimus dorsi creates the main bulk of muscle in the back; it lies above the ribs and on either side of the spinous processes. As the name suggests, it's very long – starting underneath the pelvis at the sacrum and runs all the way through to the fourth cervical vertebrae. This is a large gymnastic muscle responsible for big movements. Whenever the horse extends his hip joint and pushes himself forward, this muscle is recruited.

The dorsal serrate muscle, however, is very thin, and it attaches from the ribs just to the side of

the longissimus dorsi and then comes up to the tops of the spinous processes. The left and right sides are connected by fascia over the spine. This muscle is quite a special one because its fibres go across the main bulky muscles of the back, which lie parallel to the spine. Its main function is to help lift the ribs in inspiration.

As soon as you sit on your horse, you change his posture, and adding this additional weight to his back causes it to go into extension; how much depends on the amount of weight added and the strength of the back muscles.

It's also worth noting that the panels of the saddle sit on top of the rib cage, so when you add the weight of the rider, the ribs are pressed down, stretching the dorsal serrate muscle in the process.

We want to support the rib cage and ensure that the dorsal serrate muscle going across the back is as strong as possible, and the best way to achieve this is to increase your horse's breathing rate regularly. This is why cardiovascular fitness is so important – whatever discipline you do. Those breathing muscles will give better support to his back and promote better posture. I always say fitness is an important aspect of protecting the body and keeping it healthy. Also, knowing that your horse is fit gives you confidence and peace of mind that you're doing everything you possibly can to protect your horse's back.

FIND OUT MORE...

So, this has been a slightly different article on anatomy related to confidence, but I hope you found some of these points interesting.

If you would like to learn more, please do check out the Horses Inside Out Academy, where you'll find lots of educational opportunities.

• www.horsesinsideout.com/academy