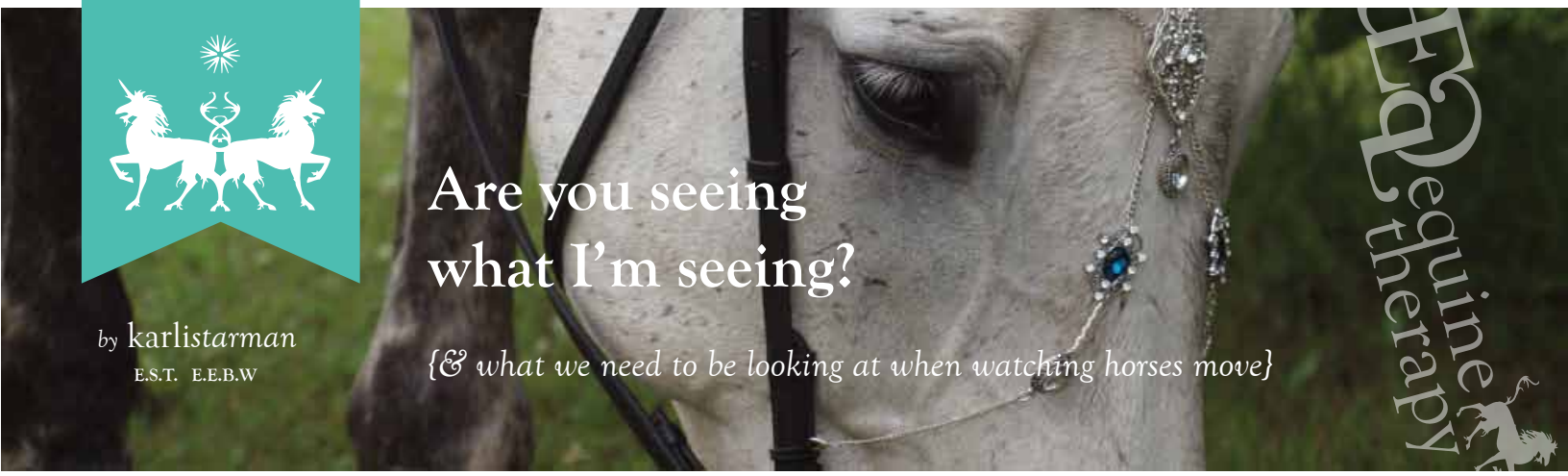

Are you seeing what I'm seeing?

{& what we need to be looking at when watching horses move}

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E.S.T. E.E.B.W

Recently, I found myself looking at dressage photos online, wondering about the sometimes extreme differences that are seen between horses, riders, trainers and even time periods. As predicated by my graphic design education and that as an equine therapist I began playing with some of the images, marking major landmarks and adding lines from front to back to indicate balance. My final configuration was to draw a line mirroring the spinal column and then copy this line and position it along the underline.

I found this configuration special because, not only are you able to see the shape of the spine, but when this line is duplicated and placed along the underline, you also see, how the shape of the spinal column affects the energy flow through the horses' body. It gives a clear visual reference to the 'wave' of energetic impulsion in the spine/body in this moment of time.

It also shows how the movement of the back governs the movement of the limbs; every action of the limbs is a function of the back and vis versa, everything the back does shows up in the limbs! **(Note: this is essential to how horses move and healthy riding.)*

The areas of tension or dysfunction show as increased or sharper curvature of the spine and also as areas of reduced space between the lines. This funnels the energy into smaller areas. These illustrations show how the wave is compressed through the wither, neck or throat latch channels, and also shows whether the energetic impulse of the wave is heading forward, upward or down to the ground.

Therefore these illustrations show how horses are on the forehand as a result of the dynamics of the spinal column, not the head and neck positioning. Something we may have heard, but maybe do not know how to look for!

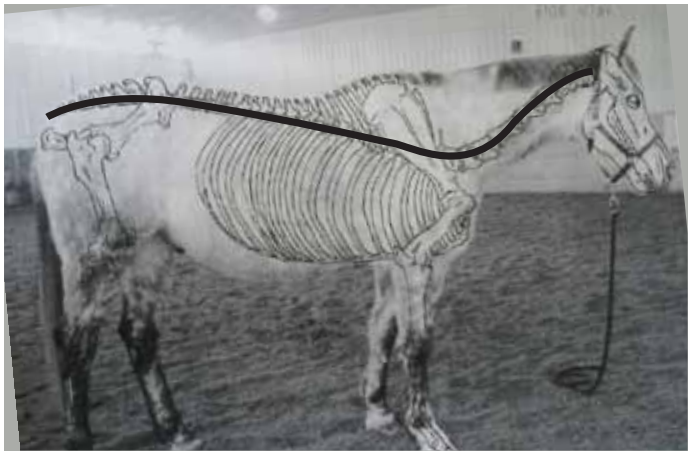
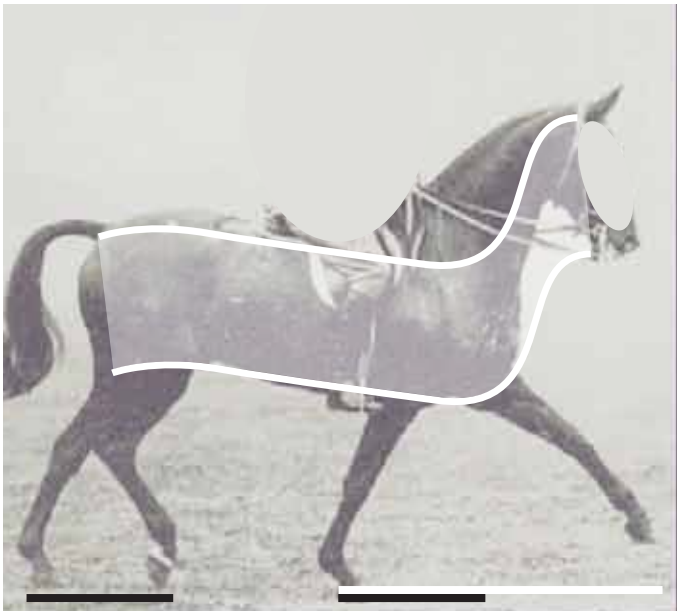


Illustration 1: *An anatomical equine model showing the drawn line to mirror the spinal column.*

Illustration 2: *A live anatomical equine model showing the drawn line to mirror the spinal column.*



Illustrated version 1: *A historical horse and rider team. In this example what do you notice about the lines representing the spine? Are the curves strongly emphasized in the neck, do the lines narrow the channel between them in any areas? Horses that are 'on the forehand' are shown by the degree of horizontal variation in the main branch of the line drawn from the tail (Ca1/2 - Sacrum) to the base of the neck (C5). It is approaching level or is it heading downward? Does it matter if the head/neck are elevated if the line is heading downward? (Hint- no amount of lift coming from the front will correct a 'line' (aka. spine) that is pushing into the ground!) What else do you see; Is the head ahead of the vertical? What does this mean for the neck carriage? Are the curves of the upper spine more open because of this? What about stride length? A step that is equal front to back is desired of horse that is working in correct posture. What do you notice here?*

Illustrated version 2: *Another classical example showing an extremely well balanced horse - all four feet are carrying the same amount of weight. This can be seen with the nearly perfect horizontal central portion of the line. What do you notice about the space between the lines (esp. in the neck region)? As compared to the first example, this horse and rider team show more length in the neck and you can see more space between the lines of the neck portion with less curvature. How is this neck set achieved? Is it as a result of allowing the energy coming up from the back? (Note: Can you see how this flow needs to come up through the shoulder/wither and out to the head and neck without being restricted by a set hand?) What do these correct spinal dynamics do for limb dynamics? Is the stride length equal now?*

Illustrated version 3: *A modern example showing a similar (although not as balanced frame) with compression in the neck. What do you notice about the upper neck? What do you see in the set of the head? Is the head in front of the vertical? Do you see the increased curvature, especially in the upper region of the neck? What does this do to the space between the 2 lines in the neck region? How does this compare to the last example? What do you notice about the main branch of the line? Is it horizontal or tipping to the front end? What do you notice about the comparison of hind to front stride length? What can you notice about the lower line of the body? Are the abdominals engaged? Or does the belly sag (does it hang low behind the girth)? What about the last 2 examples?*

Sometimes there are so many things that influence our opinion when watching horse and riders that we end up relying on 'flash' rather than substance. 'Flash' can be attributed to many things - such as an atmosphere at a competition, the opinions of others , or even excitement or tension, and can give a false sense that what we are seeing is correct. By taking a moment to look behind the flashy exterior, we begin to see past the surface and decide if what we are seeing is good for the horse.

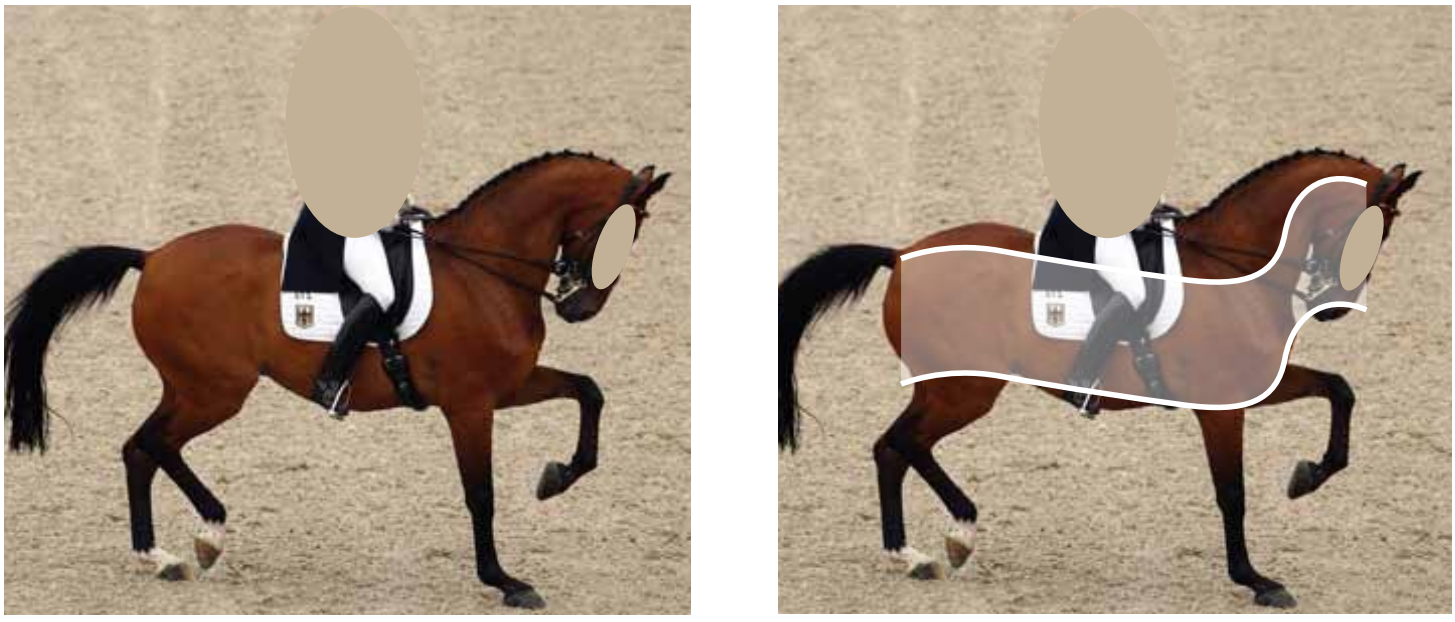
I think this is where exercises such as these excel; by taking a moment to relate what we see in the exterior of the horse to the interior we can instantly recognize what is healthy posture. Horses that are compressed and restricted cannot possibly be in good mental or physical health. For example, horses that work with constant head and neck restriction are like trying to jog with your head tied back to your shoulders and your arms limited in range of motion so you are no longer able to balance yourself. We need to look beyond the 'flash' to see healthy posture that will carry our horses ahead for sound and lengthy careers.

By looking at the spinal column we can see through the flashy exterior. The dynamics (or position) of the spinal column dictate the movement you will see in the limbs of the horse. This is why matched diagonal pairs in the trot are essential to good dressage (or any riding) not because of an aesthetic, but because of what it represents in the core of the horse. The same goes for matching stride length, it too represents a functioning topline.

These illustrations show amazingly well how a shortened or compressed neck shuts off the wave of energy coming up from the back and gives it nowhere to go. This results in a tight funnel of energy that is often maintained through a restrictive hand. These illustrations are a visual reference as to why the principle of a long elevated neck, extending out from the body, with a head in front of the vertical is a principle of correct biomechanics and correct dressage!

As well, an area that is often overlooked, is highlighted. This is the underline/abdominals and it is as important as the topline for correct posture. When the back hallows the belly sags and it can be seen in the illustrations when the belly hangs below the lower line. *(Hint: look at Illustration 5)*

Illustrated version 4: *A horse and rider team showing compression in the front through a set hand - see how this instantly manifests into a tight shoulder, wither and stuck lower neck (cervical spine). What do you notice about how the lines increase in curvature and become closer to one another? Since this energy is being stopped by the hand, the energy is forced downward into the ground via the forehand: these back dynamics of tension show up as incorrect limb dynamics, in this case the over extended forelimb (aka. toe flick). What do you notice in this example about the main branch of the line? How close to horizontal it is? What does this do to the body balance? Would you call this horse on the forehand, even though the head and neck are elevated? How does this manifest into front vs. rear stride length comparison?*



Illustrated version 5: *Although this is only showing a moment in time, this examples is a overtly incorrect example; shown only for contrast; including tipped pelvis, dropped belly, hallow frame, broken line of the neck and head behind the vertical. What about these differences can you see? Are they about the limbs or head set by themselves? Or are they all results of an incorrect spinal dynamics? Note the exaggerated kinks in the lines and areas of decreased space between them! Is this horse on the forehand? Compare this example to the second illustration. Can you see how hallow the back is and how this causes the belly to sag even though the head, neck and knees are elevated!?*

Illustrated version 6: *A horse and rider showing a stretch in the beginning of training. The spinal curves are opened and postural restrictions are released over time. They are literally 'working out the kinks' and developing the first stages of rhythm and relaxation. The horse is clearly on the forehand at this point in training, but this is not the finished product. Additionally, the full step of the horse can be reached in this frame (unlike when the spine is compressed and in tension) and he/she learns to step up and through - the true meaning of 'swing' opening the door to the development of rhythm. As the horse develops the musculature to move in a correct posture, the energy created by the back limbs is able to be transferred forward through the entire spinal column (aka back/topline) and power the entire horse. This posture is the fundamental goal of all biomechanically sound riding.*

Study the examples (and all the horses you meet) and make up your mind as to what you see! Don't take mine, (or anyones' word for it), when you pay attention to the horses' you can hear what they have to say about it.

They always have been and always will be the ultimate teachers & will repay you mightily for your efforts.

♡ Karli

References:

Bennett, D. *Principles of Conformation Analysis Volume I, II, III*. Boulder CO: 1988.

Pattillo, D. *Equinology Course Manual 100,200*. CA: 1995.

I have not heavily cited this article, as much of my learning has come from the following masters/teachers in person or online as often happens in the horse industry. Please check them out for a great wealth of information: Kerry Ridgeway, Will Faeber, Manolo Mendez, Dave Collins, and Equinology.

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