

Longe Away Tension

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Stiffness in the saddle is one of the biggest hidden handicaps to good riding — not the obvious stiffness that shows itself through muscular pains in the neck, arms or legs, but rather an underlying tension that often goes unrecognized. Webster's dictionary defines stiff as "lacking in suppleness and responsiveness." That's a perfect description for our purposes. If the rider's body is not supple enough to communicate properly with the horse, then it can lead to a reduction in performance. Think you're exempt? Many regular riders are blissfully unaware of this situation. After all, their horses seem to do all they ask of them, and when they dismount their muscles don't ache all over — so where's the stiffness?

One of the best ways to find out if you have any hidden stiffness is by doing some simple exercises on the longe line. Plus, this longeing work will start to fix any problems that show up. Even beginner riders should be able to cope with most of these exercises at the walk, but as confidence builds, try to do more of them at the trot. This will emphasize weaknesses, so it is a good way to check your progress.

Before starting, it's wise to remove the stirrups and tie a knot in the reins near the withers, or twist them around each other under the horse's neck so they cannot become entangled. If side-reins are being used, you can just remove the regular reins altogether.

Less experienced riders, and others who welcome a little added security, might like to use a neck strap. You can easily make one from a spare stirrup leather by simply buckling it around the horse's neck near the withers. Use a thick rubber band to keep the loose end in place. Another alternative to the neck strap is to place a couple of fingers under the front arch of the saddle's pommel whenever your balance feels threatened.

Also, when working on the longe, always be sure to make regular changes of direction. When things are going well it is very easy to get stuck on one rein, but the aim should be to change direction every 10 minutes. Otherwise you and your horse could develop the muscles more on one side than on the other and become off balance.

Before trying these exercises read these tips >>

Exercise One

Take your horse to a small enclosed area, such as a round pen, to work. As your helper has the horse walk around on the longeing circle, just let your body relax in the saddle without collapsing it, and think "loose." Shrug your shoulders, arms dangling down at your sides, and pretend your legs are dead, so they just hang limp with the toes pointing downward. If you haven't done this before, it will feel strange and totally opposite to all you've been taught about riding correctly. But don't let this inhibit you; it is merely a means to an end.

After you're completely nice and loose at the walk, try a circuit or two at the trot. If a moment of doubt comes along or you start to lose your balance, grab the neck strap or put two fingers under the pommel, but try not to tense your body. Don't rush; if you can't relax at the trot, go back to a walk until you feel more secure.

Exercise Two

A lot of body tension can come from the neck. You'll see people riding with a rigid chin, and it may even be pointing forward. When that's the case it's almost certain the rest of the body will be stiff and lacking in flexibility.

To free the neck area, start by raising the shoulders right up toward the ears and letting them flop down. Do this a few times, then rotate the shoulders forward and backward, letting them hang loose again afterward. Keeping your upper body square and your head up, slowly turn your chin toward one shoulder. Don't force it; just go until you feel resistance, then slowly turn your chin back toward the other shoulder. Do this four or five times, then bring your head back to the central position and rotate it clockwise and counterclockwise, imagining that the chin is drawing a slow circle.

At this stage, if you're starting to feel more soft and relaxed in comparison to your riding off the longe, it's a sure sign

you've found some stiffness. With practice you can reduce it even further, and in the long run, eliminate it.

Before doing the next set of exercises, you should return to the normal riding position. That doesn't mean tensing up and losing that lovely feeling you've now acquired. It does mean sitting deep in the saddle and keeping your upper body and arms relaxed, but this time disregarding the legs as being "dead." Raise your toes as if the stirrups were in place, keeping the legs long and the ankle joints flexible.

Exercise Three

Simple arm movements are some of the easiest exercises to do on the longe and they are also great in helping novice riders build confidence. Raise one arm straight up, then rotate it backward in one fluid movement so the fingers describe a big circle. When the arm is upright and about to come down, try not to stick it out sideways too far or turn the body off a square axis. It's not easy and the arm will have to wander off-track a bit on the down stroke, but do your best. As the arm comes down toward your waist, think of sitting deep in the saddle without making any conscious effort to press the seat down. After three or four rotations, change arms and repeat the exercise. If you're feeling secure in the saddle, you may like to get a little more ambitious and rotate both arms together. This can really loosen up tight shoulders.

Exercise Four

Another alternative is to put your fingertips on the end of your shoulder with the elbow sticking out sideways. Now pretend a piece of chalk is fixed onto the elbow, and draw an imaginary circle by rotating the elbow clockwise a few times, then counterclockwise. Like the previous exercise, try one arm at a time and then both together.

Exercise Five

This one is particularly beneficial to the waist and torso. Raise your arms and hold them outward like airplane wings. Keep your arms out to the sides and turn your body from the waist so one arm eventually points to the horse's head and the other to the tail. Then steadily turn your body 180 degrees in the opposite direction until the hand that was pointing toward the tail is now pointing toward the head. While the torso is rotating, the pelvis and seat should stay in the riding position, keeping square with the horse. If that's too easy and you want something more demanding, try the next exercise.

Exercise Six

Assuming the horse is traveling on the left rein (counterclockwise), push your left arm out in front with the fingers extended and without tipping forward, and then bring your arm down to lightly rest the hand on the horse's mane. Now in one steady movement, keeping your eyes on that hand, raise the arm up and bring it to the side and around, so the hand ends up on the croup just above the horse's tail. Don't worry if your waist doesn't keep quite square in the saddle — it's a long way around. You're almost guaranteed to find some muscles in your waist and neck you didn't know about. Now try it the opposite way. When you get good at doing this, aim to go even further around, so your hand rests on the top of your mount's opposite hindquarter rather than his croup.

Exercise Seven

These next exercises are good for freeing muscle tension in the pelvis and legs. Try bringing each leg, one at a time, outward about 6 inches from the saddle, holding it straight there for a moment, then drawing it back so it's almost vertical from the hip. This can also be beneficial for everyday riding straight after mounting, especially if the previous hours have been spent driving or sitting at a desk. Just take your feet out of the stirrups and do it a few times.

Exercise Eight

Bring one knee up to the pommel, like a jockey, and keeping it high, move it outward and then back down to the correct leg position. Again, make this movement steady and unhurried — and alternate the legs. Then try it with both legs at the same time. Don't lean forward and hunch up like jockeys do — keep your upper body vertical and balanced. When both knees are held out to the side, the only contact with the saddle should be your seat bones. If you avoid swaying or tipping forward, you have a good seat and balance.

Horses hate stiff riders, and here's an easy way to see it. Toward the end of your longe session, when your body is feeling really loose and relaxed, suddenly tense it up and watch the horse's reaction. Just damp your buttocks together, stiffen your legs, and make your upper body and neck rigid as you walk or trot around.

You'll probably find that within a few strides the horse will slow down and maybe even halt, but he'll certainly lose the lovely fluid stride he had moments before. Whatever happens, he's sure to wonder what on earth is going on. Many riders who've tried this little experiment have been amazed at their horse's reaction. They never realized how their own body stiffness could make such an impact on their horses. However, once they were aware of the problem, and more importantly, did something about it, their performance improved dramatically. To ride a supple and well-balanced horse is one of life's great pleasures, but never forget there are two sides to a partnership. For the horse, one of life's great

pleasures is carrying a supple and well-balanced rider.

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