

Thinking for Yourself

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Do you remember the days when you first started shoeing horses? If you were like me, balancing the hoof capsule was a fuzzy concept. Then, sometime after that, I was exposed to several dozen different theories on how the hoof should be trimmed to achieve this elusive thing we call balance.

Today, I am still not sure what most people see as balance. It's kind of like the trainer telling you this horse is a nice mover. But, as you look at him with one foot pointing north and the other pointing south, you wonder "Does he mean trueness of gait? Or is it some man-made standard of judging the way he moves?" As I tried to get a handle on what the guy at the certification, contest, or clinic was trying to explain, it got even more confusing. One theory said "Square with the long axis of the cannon bone, the next land flat, the next load flat, the next square with the long axis of the leg, and the next maybe trim to the sole plane."



It got to the point that I was afraid to ask, in fear that I was not current on the latest theories of hoof balance.

It would be nice if there was a magic tool that would show you medial-lateral, anterior-posterior, spacial, static, dynamic balance, and the list goes on and on. There are tools that help us evaluate balance; T-squares, hoof gauges, rulers, dividers and x-ray machines all work if you know what you are doing. But, if you depend on these tools all the time, on all different conformations, you will get yourself in trouble.

Some would say the above paragraph

is true. So...balance is very subjective! WRONG!!! So, if it's not subjective, what would be considered the proper way to trim a foot to achieve all the balance criteria? My answer would be "Joint congruency all the way up the leg." Joint congruency, as I perceive

it, means loading the whole joint surface equally or as it was intended to be loaded. So you say "COOL!" But, how do we achieve this wonderful condition? Well, we can use T-squares, etc., to train our eye, but, there comes a time that you say "This doesn't work on this particu-

lar leg.” Maybe take an A-P radiograph? How many times have you seen a horse standing properly when the radiograph was taken? These mechanical aids can lead us astray unless you average all the variables in. If these things do not work reliably, then, what does?

It’s probably easiest to tell you a story about my fiddle teacher when I was young. Back in those days, people were not very politically correct. They just laid it on the line for all to see. The old “Bat” said “Steve, you should learn to play a fretted instrument.” What she meant is that I didn’t have the “ear” to achieve the intonation on the fiddle. Some people just don’t have the “eye” to see balance. Trimming a hoof requires the eye of a sculptor. You have to be able to visualize what you want this three dimensional object to be in relation to the rest of the weight bearing structure.

This ability to judge balance is not an ability that cannot be taught, at least to a fair number of people. It is my opinion



that we should start working backwards on this thing called balance. If a hoof capsule is not loading correctly, it will

show you the error if you can recognize the signals. When you see a particular hoof structure that is being broken



down or distorted, it should be a clue that something isn’t right. If you don’t understand what is causing it or how to remedy the problem, find someone that does and have them help you. An example would be wall separation caused by length of hoof or the hoof capsule being the wrong shape. Hoof shape, in particular, is an area of hoof balance not often addressed. It is important we recognize changes in the hoof and accept the responsibility for causing the distortion (picture 1).

If we learn to recognize the clues the hoof is sending us and learn how to fix them, I think we are a long way into recognizing what the horse needs to be comfortable. Not some man-made theory on how it should be trimmed. If what you are doing is not working, stop doing it. But, you have to recognize the signs that something is wrong. You can’t teach experience.

When evaluating a foot before I start trimming, there are landmarks on the bottom of the foot that I recognize as normal anatomy. If one of the structures is being abused it tells me something is wrong. I then may take a look at the foot using one of several criteria that I think we all use to evaluate balance (Square with the long axis of the cannon bone, hoof/pastern axis, etc.). If I am not sure, it becomes a consensus of several methods.

The ultimate test though is joint congruency. In the field, it finally comes down to how good your eye is.

I’ve included a picture of a horse’s left hind (picture 2) that defies most ways of judging medial-lateral balance. This horse is base narrow and never has had any lameness problems unless someone tried to fix him. The only problem is if

this horse is rode in soft ground, he will brush the other hind. There is no square with anything with this leg, so, through experience I’ve found the only criteria that works is perpendicular with the long axis of the limb (the whole limb). I also trim this foot with the same height of wall all the way around the hoof above the sole plane and arrive at the same trim, both A-P and M-L as any other criteria.

The trim keeps him sound, but, does not solve the brushing problem. I address this by building a hind preventer shoe (picture 3) which keeps the day from getting boring.

My goal when trimming is to come back six weeks later and see a shoe fit like it was six weeks ago and have no cracks, flares, or distortion. Just a little longer (picture 4).