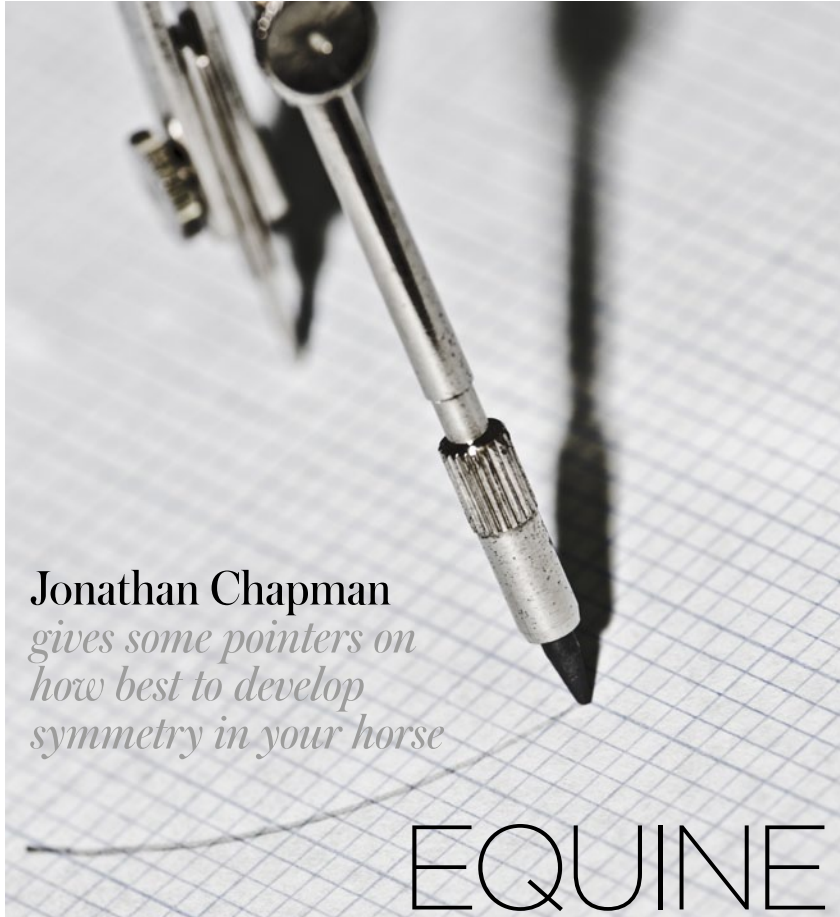




Jonathan Chapman is the Chairman of the British Eventing Safety Committee



Jonathan Chapman
*gives some pointers on
how best to develop
symmetry in your horse*

EQUINE GEOMETRY

IN MY opinion, 'soundness' in a horse is not a finite state and most horses display degrees of soundness. It does, of course, also depend on how you define soundness.

Horses are not machines and are rarely engineered perfectly. The majority of horses (just like people) display a degree of asymmetry, which can give rise to unlevel movement on one rein or another, or on different surfaces. Unlevel movement is not necessarily the same as unsoundness; it can sometimes be addressed with training to resolve the asymmetry. Indeed, one could say it is a perpetual quest for rider and trainer to develop symmetry in the horse. Some horses achieve it, some never will due to conformation, and natural asymmetry certainly does not preclude a horse from a successful career.

As a Coach and a rider I think that symmetry and self-carriage are linked to soundness over time. By definition an asymmetric horse will offload on to one front limb more than another, or push with one hind limb more than the other. This has to lead to excessive wear and tear on that limb. I also believe that the above causes most back problems in



Natural asymmetry certainly does not preclude a horse from a successful career



horses. Most horses at the lower levels can plug away with a level of asymmetry and stay 'sound' for most of their careers. It is the high performance horse, who is working at his physical limit, that is more likely to suffer with unsoundness due to asymmetry.

Over all, if we can help our horses to develop symmetry we can help them to stay sound. So what can we do to help? Here are some ideas.

1) WE CAN TRAIN A HORSE CORRECTLY FROM THE START

- Lunging without the rider is a good way to identify asymmetry and also a good therapy for it, but note that this is only the case if the lunging is done correctly. I see a lot of bad lunging, especially in lorry parks at Events. No control, no balance, no benefit! It is worth taking lessons to make sure your lunging technique brings out the best in your horse.
- Lunging a horse before you ride it will help develop flexibility and therefore straightness, as well as warming up the muscles before you mount.
- When schooling your horse make sure they carry their head and neck straight, and that you don't spend your whole sessions on the track with the horse's quarters swinging in - a very common fault.
- Ride into the corners of the school on both reins. If you don't the horse does not bend properly and does not learn to use its hind leg to engage.
- Ride with purpose and a plan. When I see people drifting around the school it infuriates me, it's pointless and potentially dangerous. Pick up a contact and ride definite shapes. Small circles

PHOTO CREDIT XXXXXX



left and right, a little leg yield out of the circle. Teaching the horse to yield to pressure, i.e. flex right or left to pressure in one side of its mouth from the rein, move away from the pressure from the leg. This yielding to pressure is the foundation of how we communicate with horses when riding and is so often not understood by the horse or the rider!

- The leg yield itself is an under-used exercise. Again, ridden correctly it brings massive benefits to a horse's flexibility and consequently helps develop symmetry.

- Try riding on squares. Start with a 10m square in walk with quarter pirouettes at the corners, progress to trotting 15m squares, and finish cantering 20m squares. Technically you can't pirouette in trot unless you can piaffe, which the majority of Event horses don't do, but you can turn the horse off the outside leg in trot. This exercise has the benefit of teaching the rider not to pull on the inside rein to turn, but to use the outside aids instead. It also stops a horse falling onto the outside shoulder, teaches it to sit on its inside hind leg and improves straightness. Overall it leads to better self-carriage.

- When doing trot work on the road, make sure you regularly change the diagonal that you sit on. Most riders and horses have a favoured diagonal because it's more comfortable, but it's important that you sit on the uncomfortable one as well to even the horse up.

- Try to use gallops where you can go right-handed and left-handed. If your gallops are right-handed make sure that you gallop up on the left lead too, but it's better to find one where you can go right- and left-handed.

- Teach your horse to go in self-carriage and to balance over its own four legs, and not use the rein as a crutch. This applies to galloping just as much as flatwork.

2) WE CAN MAKE SURE OUR EQUIPMENT IS A HELP NOT A HINDRANCE

- Saddles need checking regularly, at least every six months, to ensure the flocking is even and the tree hasn't



Teach your horse to go in self-carriage and to balance over its own four legs

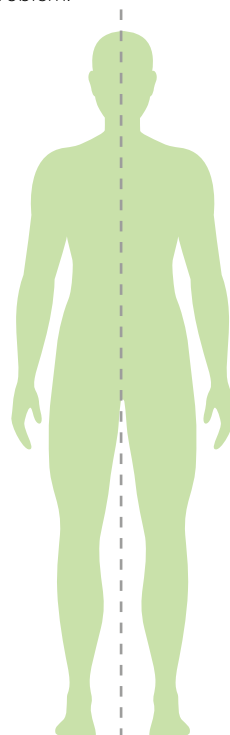


twisted or broken.

- Make sure your bit and noseband are level. I often see people come in to lessons with the horse's bit uneven in the mouth. How can the horse take an even contact and carry its head straight if the bit is not level?

- Make sure your stirrups are even. Hole number 12 one side is not always the same as hole number 12 on the other. Look in a mirror or get someone to check for you.

My staff think I suffer from OCD because I check every bit of tack before I ride and everything has to be perfect. But I would rather take the time and know I am not saddling the horse with a problem.



3) WE CAN THINK ABOUT OUR SYMMETRY AS A RIDER

How many times have you followed a rider down the road and looked at where they are sitting? Off to the right, collapsed left hip, the horse cannot help but develop asymmetry. Ask your Coach to critique your position. The problem is, bad posture becomes habitual and feels normal, while good posture feels abnormal. Get a friend to video you - the camera doesn't lie. It is also a good idea to visit your physiotherapist and pay for some 'torture' to straighten you out. Ask them to set you some exercises to maintain the new posture. Good posture on a horse starts on the ground, so be strict with yourself in your everyday movements, how you sit on a chair, how you walk, and so on.

If you can find the time, sign up for some pilates or buy yourself a swiss ball. Develop your core strength and stability because, just as with a horse, it's that core strength and stability that enables self-carriage and balance and is more likely to keep you sound.

These are all things we can do every day to help ourselves and our horses. In addition a good instructor will be able to help you with exercises that are specific to you and your horse to help you gain balance and symmetry.

Remember that when you see a really class rider and horse partnership in any discipline, what you are witnessing is two athletes in their own self-carriage. When this is achieved communication can be clear and harmony displayed. And the horse has the best chance of maintaining symmetry and soundness. 🐾