

Intrinzen Posture

Getting Started
Second Edition



Intrinzen Posture: Getting Started

Second Edition

by *Intrinzen.horse*

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Contact us through *Intrinzen.horse*

Legal Stuff

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Bottom line: horses are dangerous, and working with them is risky. Despite our best intentions, we cannot claim that following any advice in this book will keep you or your horse safe.

PART ONE

Intrinzen Philosophy



Joy and Agility in Natural Movement

Horses are born to love proud, balanced, agile movement. But life in a modern, comfortable stable comes at a cost. Without the challenge and stimulation of nature, horses begin to lose their most precious sense: *proprioception*. We have a responsibility to help restore the exuberant balance they practiced as a foal.



Intrinsically Rewarding Movements

What does a horse
most want to be?

A horse. Every
stallion, mare, and
gelding wants to be
a strong, confident,
agile horse.





Intrinsic posture reinforces and builds on what horses display when they are at their best, *showing off and playing*. By tapping into this intrinsic desire within each horse (however dormant it may have become), we can help change what was once difficult, often painful work into joyful, willing, effortful **play**.

Our guides on this journey

Everyone says, "The horse is the best teacher." We take that seriously.



Vafi



Draumur



Kommi

Hrimnir



Elfaxi

Standing Posture: Power in Stillness

Think of how horses greet one another for the first time. You see them arch their neck, puff up through their withers, stand taller and prouder. All that power and performance while simply... standing.

Typically, we develop posture through *functional movement* exercises, but exercises done standing *still* can also be challenging and deeply rewarding for a horse. More importantly, they give the horse a strong posture the horse can return to over and over during “work” to regain a stable position and posture. *They learn to half-halt themselves.*

Intrinsic posture begins with this “I’m Awesome” stance horses do naturally to better show themselves. We encourage the horse to find and then develop the strength and intrinsic desire to use their improved posture not just during “work” but in the rest of their daily life, and later we use it to help develop adaptable, agile movement in the horse.

A horse’s posture is much more than simply an exercise or behavior, **it is the essence of how the horse feels about himself** and his place in the herd. Posture has a powerful neuroendocrine impact on self-confidence*, and has the potential to reduce or eliminate many of the behavioral issues we struggle with.

* “Power Posing: Brief Nonverbal Displays Affect Neuroendocrine Levels and Risk Tolerance”
Carney DR, Cuddy AJ, Yap AJ.
Psychological Science October 2010 21: 1363-1368, first published on September 20, 2010



Benefits of Improved Posture

Increased confidence and calmness / less spooky or anxious

Better proprioception / less stumbling

Better balance and performance in all gaits

Greater hind-end engagement / collection

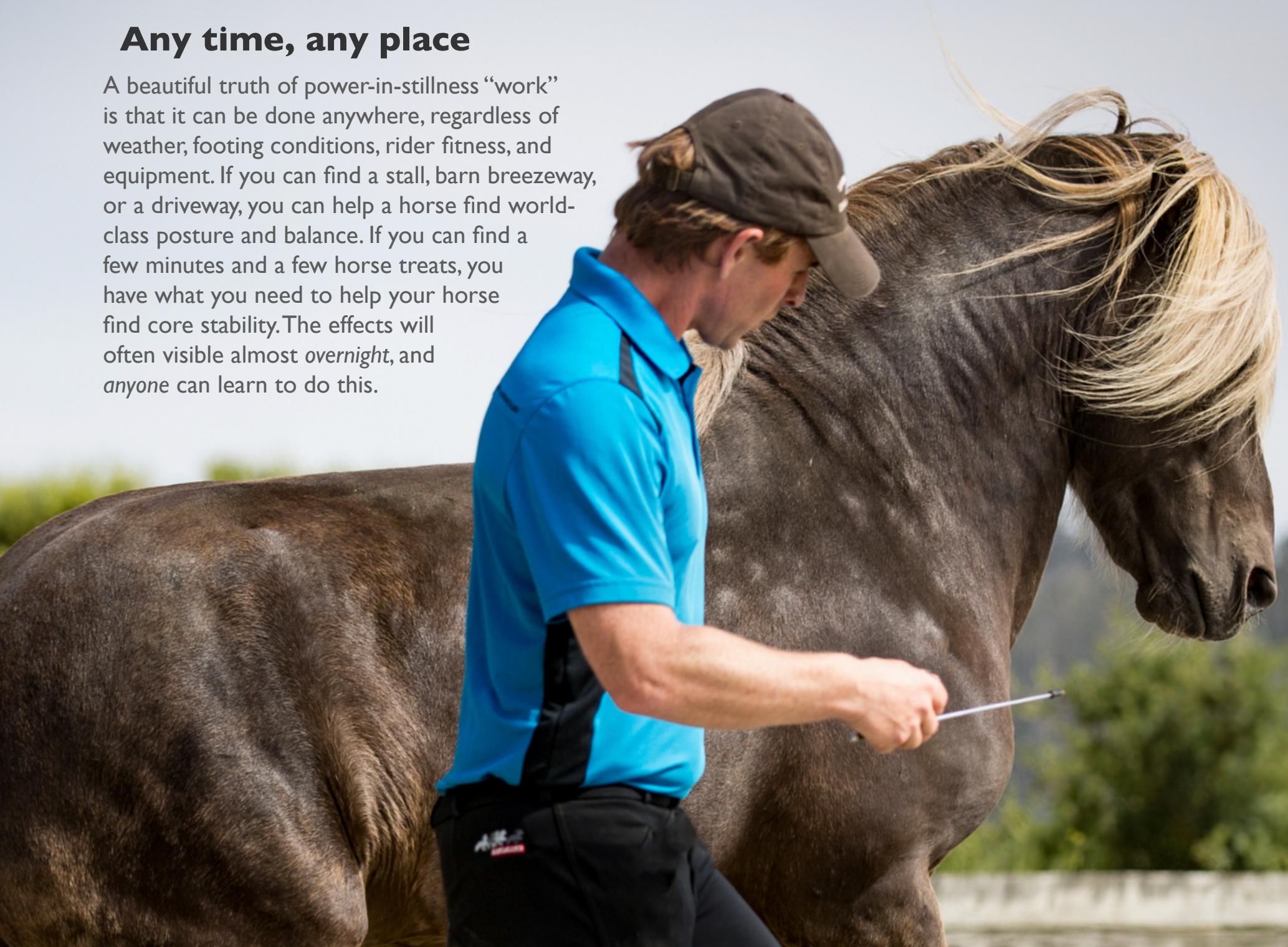
Reduced risk of injury, lameness, and stiffness

More energy and willingness / less “lazy”

Happier attitude / less “grumpy” / more playful with horses and humans

Any time, any place

A beautiful truth of power-in-stillness “work” is that it can be done anywhere, regardless of weather, footing conditions, rider fitness, and equipment. If you can find a stall, barn breezeway, or a driveway, you can help a horse find world-class posture and balance. If you can find a few minutes and a few horse treats, you have what you need to help your horse find core stability. The effects will often be visible almost overnight, and anyone can learn to do this.





Intrinsically-rewarding *functional* posture starts to show up in other gaits almost immediately. Increased willingness, collection, and expressiveness are the natural side-effect of developing powerful posture.

Expected Progress with Posture Work

Building core stability begins with what our horses most need before they can safely carry a rider — *lifting the back*. Which includes *ab* work. We used to refer to these as “crunches”, but today we use the phrase “core stabilizers” for a more accurate label.

Within 3 Weeks of Core Posture work

Most horses are now ready for more refined and physically *difficult* posture work including a little more weight shift toward the hindquarters, and the beginning stage of lifting through the withers.



Within 8 Weeks of CONSISTENT Posture work

Most horses have developed enough core stability that the difference between their *normal/default* posture and their “core exercise” posture is less obvious. In other words, their actual posture has begun to change, not just the shape they can hold just long enough for the exercise. With 4 sessions a week, no more than 10 minutes per session, most people see a noticeable change in their horses posture and movement.

Within 3 to 4 Months of consistent, VARIED posture work

Most horses are beginning to lower their hind-quarters and actively use their improved posture in all gaits. By this point, most otherwise healthy/sound horses are now able to perform their core stabilizer posture *under a rider*, on cue, while standing. Many horses are by this point beginning to half-halt themselves in many gaits. More collection work is often possible now, and becomes easier for the horse. (Note: this is especially true if combined with other functional movement work).

Core Stabilizer /back lift

in this eBook

Satellite Core Posture

Withers Lift

Symmetrical Core Posture

Gymnastics Mat Core Posture

Dynamic Mobility

Reactive Neuromuscular Training

Note: each of the above elements has many levels of refinement. Though we always *begin* with the Core Stabilizer / back lift, all other variations can and should be incorporated as early as the horse is comfortable.

Horse SuperPowers begin with Core Stability



Despite his downhill, heavy on the forehand conformation, Draumur can do powerful, agile, proud movement today because of the posture work. These photos were taken just 5 minutes apart.

In this book we'll start on the first step of Intrinzen posture work: **core stabilizers***. Working on a horse's core posture will serve a horse for the rest of his life, and ripple across every aspect of his life from groundwork to riding to playing with his herd-mates. Even simply *starting* a core training program can sometimes be the breakthrough a horse needs to respond better to training forever.

Don't be surprised if within a few weeks of starting core posture work, you notice improved transitions, for example, even if you weren't working on them. Almost everything starts to feel easier and more fun for the horse.

Dr. Hilary Clayton, one of the leading experts in equine biomechanics, and a member of the International Equine Veterinarian Hall of Fame, has been promoting core fitness training for horses for many years. "I noticed obvious improvements in my horse's self-carriage and balance that I had not been able to achieve through conventional training." Clayton advocates the use of core strengthening exercises for horses in the same way core strengthening is recommended for humans. The Intrinzen posture exercises are a little different from—but were *inspired by*—Clayton's work on core fitness in horses.

* You might have known these as "crunches". Because the word "crunches" is misleading if people try to assume it is like the human version of crunches, we no longer use the term "crunches" for the standing posture work)

“So far our studies have found that when the horses have done core training exercises for a few weeks, they have better posture, they stand better, they’re rounder, they’re more elevated through the withers, and they perform better, especially in the collected movements.”

– Hilary M. Clayton, BVMS, PhD, McPhail Dressage Chair in Equine Sports Medicine, Michigan State University



Core posture/stability is just the *beginning* of the intrinsically rewarding journey, but the core stabilizer positions become the foundation on which all other beautiful and lively movements are developed.





Let's get started

Intrinzen Standing Posture

Some of the Exercises

Core Stabilizer Back Lift

Engage abs, slight pelvic tuck, usually mid-to-lower back lift.

Satellite Core Posture

First 6 weeks: 180° – horse lifts the back while you stand in various positions around his front and sides. After 6 weeks: 360° – horse lifts the back while you stand in *any* position around the horse including behind.

Withers Lift (withers "target")

Poofing out around the withers, lifting the base of the neck, head dropping, while human stands next to the horse with hand over the withers as a target, asking the horse to "fill my hand here".

Symmetrical Core

Better symmetry on each side, beginning first with a *slight* bend and poll flexion toward the person giving the core stabilizer cue. Quickly, the "slight lateral poll flexion" becomes a full body bend, asking for a "carrot stretch" from a core/back-lift posture.

Gymnastics Mat Core Posture

All core stabilizer / posture exercises performed on an unstable surface, to dramatically improve proprioception and overall movement function.

Reactive Neuromuscular Training

Using the core posture work in a way that challenges the horse's balance, to rapidly "reset" the horse's motor control system.



Core Stabilizers



This eBook is an intro to Core Stabilizers

Core Stabilizer Back Lift

Engage abs, slight pelvic tuck, usually mid-to-lower back lift.

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Overview of Getting Started

Core Stabilizers are done in 4 steps:

1. Get the horse **ready**
2. Without pressure, **cue** the horse for “lift” or “shape”
3. **Mark** the exact moment the horse starts to shift his posture
4. **Reward** the horse with a food **treat**.

Don’t worry if you have no idea how to do any of this. We will look at the steps in detail later in this book. This is just a summary of where we’re going.



This was Elfaxi’s first week with the posture exercises



But first, a few prerequisites

Time commitment

You are ready to begin this work when you can guarantee a **minimum of 3-4 sessions per week, of 10-12 minutes per session.** Each session is short, but the frequency of sessions is crucial. And while *longer* sessions will not help (and could *hurt* progress), more frequent short sessions will produce better, faster results. If you have only 3 sessions per week, progress will be slower and more difficult for the horse, but it's still worth doing! However, once the horse has developed stability in his new posture, then 3 sessions a week is usually enough to *maintain* it.

You can also do multiple short sessions *on the same day*.

Force-free commitment

Intrinzen posture development cannot — *must not* — be done through traditional pressure-release. Regardless of personal training philosophy, posture work is unique because we want and need the horse to make permanent changes in posture and balance and functional movement, and this means we **MUST** teach the horse to do it without *any* physical manipulation. Though you might still be using pressure-release for other work, building intrinsically-rewarding postures with authentic, adaptable results requires a different approach. We are not doing this because of what we see on the outside... the horse performing in “better” posture — we are doing this for what happens within the horse’s motor control system. And this can only apply if the horse is doing it *voluntarily*.



The good news is just how little time and effort it takes to develop good posture. But it does take a commitment to frequency (minimum of 4 sessions per week, but each session can be as short as 10 minutes).

Developing *intrinsically rewarding* functional posture is virtually impossible using traditional pressure-release training.

The horse must *want* to perform the posture exercises himself, *not* to earn a release, but for the good feelings he associates with performing the exercise.



This is not about how the *horse* feels about you, or even how *you* feel about the *horse*. The secret to intrinsic motivation is how the horse feels about *himself*.

Tools

Treats

Treat rewards are **essential** for the Intrinzen posture work. We all know how to get our horses to lift their back by scratching under the belly, pressing beside the tail for “butt tucks”, etc., but **the whole point of Intrinzen posture is to have the horse do these exercises himself.** We need him to *want* to lift his back, not just lift his back to get *relief*. To make significant posture change, the horse’s “movement system” needs to organize the body and learn to balance *himself*. And that means we must use a form of learning known as **positive reinforcement** (+R).

If you know your horse is OK with treats, you’re ready to move forward with the exercise. If you do NOT want to use treats then there’s NO point continuing with this program. Patting, scratching, and other *non-food* rewards are almost *never* (according to the studies) motivating for the horse in the way that food rewards are, because **pats and scratches do not activate the brain’s “seeking” system.** They may be *nice* for your horse, but this program was designed *explicitly* around the biological/psychological impact of using food rewards.

Clicker

We need a high-precision sound to mark the specific moment in the activity when the horse is doing what we want. With pressure-release training, the *release* is the marker. With the posture work, we aren’t applying pressure, so we need a different way to mark the behavior.



You’ll need treats that you KNOW your horse likes, approximately 25 treats per posture session. Since you need 25, you’ll need to be sure your horse can healthfully, safely eat that much. Big horse cookies can be broken into small chunks, etc.

A mechanical clicker is the clearest, most precise communication for marking the exact moment at which your horse did the behavior you want.





Since we don't use *pressure* to get the horse to do the exercise, we can't use a *release* to tell him he did the right thing. We need a crisp, clear **sound** to mark the exact, precise moment at which the horse did the behavior we want more of. In this photo, I am holding a clicker that is taped on to a presentation pointer.



Horses at play show their willing ability for “advanced”, physically hard postures. Intrinsic is about developing that which the horse *already loves* and is capable of *doing*, using the same intrinsic motivation context in which these behaviors naturally emerge — *play*.





Kommi willingly offers playful big show-off movements because they are intrinsically rewarding. We use positive reinforcement (as opposed to pressure-release) because it is the only form of training that can offer the horse autonomy, and autonomy is a requirement for intrinsic motivation.

[To learn about the science of intrinsic motivation and autonomy, see *The Handbook of Self-Determination Research*, or *The Oxford Handbook of Human Motivation*.]

Goal: *intrinsic motivation*

Requirement for intrinsic motivation: *autonomy**

Requirement for autonomy: *positive reinforcement training*

We use positive reinforcement training (+R) because it is the only approach that gives the horse *autonomy*, and autonomy is *required for intrinsic motivation*.

*Autonomy is typically defined to mean “self-governing, independent”, and is associated with freedom of choice and lack of coercion.

Autonomy does not always mean “liberty”

Most of the exercises we do are *first* taught to the horse at “liberty”, meaning the horse is completely free to walk away. No ropes of any kind. But while liberty plays a key role in the Intrinzen exercises, it’s not necessarily a requirement for autonomy.

We want the horse to feel that he has a choice.

We want the horse to feel that he will *never* be made to do a particular exercise, especially one he finds physically hard or painful. When the horse is at liberty (and allowed to walk away), we help guarantee he won’t feel pressured or threatened into doing painful movement.

But once the horse has developed trust and understanding of force-free training, and knows he won’t be forced to respond, then work on-line (in halter, cavesson, bridle, neck rope, etc.) can still feel autonomous to the horse. We typically spend much of the first six weeks with a horse doing mostly liberty work, slowly adding more online work after that.

The point is not whether the horse is on a line or completely free, **it's about whether he feels he has a choice.**



Draumur is experienced enough with Intrinzen work to know he will *never* be forced into doing an exercise.

Steinar is NOT carrying a whip, and the dog leash he is using as a lead line has never been used to hit Draumur, so Draumur feels no implicit threat, no background warning of “do what I ask OR ELSE.” The line is kept slack, and Draumur has already learned he can say “no” at any time, and that if he stops (or decides to change gaits), he will not be “corrected”.

If your horse already knows the clicker and you're training with positive reinforcement using treats, you're ready to start the exercises.

If you are *not* training your horse with positive reinforcement using treats and a marker/bridge signal (like the clicker), *read the next section*.

Most horses need only a few intro-to-clicker-and-treats sessions to become familiar enough with the clicker to start on core posture.

Using treats with a horse is obviously a serious commitment. But **treats are a prerequisite for this posture work!** Don't start these exercises until your horse understands a clicker and treats.

If you're tempted to start the exercises and just use pressure/release instead of a clicker and treats, please don't.

Intrinsically rewarding posture and authentic movements are that which the horse finds motivating for its own sake, and that cannot happen unless/until the horse *chooses* to do them and becomes a full participant in seeking more challenging and difficult versions of these exercises.

Intrinzen is about inspiring the horse to find his own better balance and strength. That cannot be done unless the horse has the chance to develop himself *without force*.

But there's a much more important reason for NOT using force: movement science!

Movements that are achieved using force/pressure/release do NOT have the same impact on the horse's motor control system! A horse might APPEAR to be doing a movement that looks "correct", but what is happening in the horse's brain and nervous system are NOT the same as doing it *without manipulation*. Movement achieved with manipulation is NOT functional in a way that





Wherever your journey takes you, we are honored you spent time exploring the possibility of intrinsically rewarding posture and movement.

Have fun with your amazing horse.