



PART THREE

Teaching the Core Stabilizers

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The rest of this book assumes you are using a positive reinforcement protocol that includes a bridge signal (word or click sound), and a food treat reward for every click.

If you are still working out treat-related problems, get that working well *before* starting on posture. You want the horse to associate the posture exercises with only good, happy, stress-free feelings.



When you're ready, turn the page to get started with Core Posture...

Let's look at a more experienced Core Stabilizer

The core stabilizer exercise is about the horse engaging his abdominal muscles to lift his back, raise the base of the neck (lift up through the withers), shift his weight back SLIGHTLY, and gently tuck his pelvis. That's it. But that's a *lot*. The photos below show a fully-developed, obvious weight shift, but with your horse's *first* attempts, you will reward a shift so subtle you're barely sure it happened. (Don't worry, we'll walk you through it.)

Draumur knows the posture exercises well. Here he stands ready to begin, which he's learned will mean "lift your back, tuck your pelvis, shift your weight backwards." (and, oh yes, do NOT throw your head up and back to do it!)



"Ready?"

Here Draumur is in a more advanced posture. What do you notice between this photo and the one above? How does it "feel"? What's different?



"Lift!"

Don't try to think about how he got into this position, just notice the differences.

Pretend it's not a horse, just look at the shapes

Look at a horse the way an artist looks at things — as lines, shapes, curves, and the spaces *outside* the borders of the subject (horse) as well as the space *within* the borders.

Remember, this shape is what you're working *toward*, NOT what you'll be seeing the first few weeks or months.



“Ready?”



“Lift!”

Another example

Look at these photos and without trying to think about what he's doing or how he's doing it; just look at the shapes and think about how it *feels*.

Look at the outline of the horse, but also look at the shape that is made under his belly, in between his front and rear legs. What is the shape of that space? What is different in his back? His hind legs?



“Ready?”



“Lift!”

Why is he leaning forward at the start?

Vafi has been doing this for more than two years. He *knows* (from experience, not explicit teaching) that if he is to do a bigger and deeper weight shift back, his front and hind legs must be closer together. His “normal” stance just out in the pasture is not this “camped under” (i.e. leaning out over his front legs), but when doing the posture work, he will often slide his front feet back to prepare for taking more weight on his hind legs. But in between “repetitions, he will fall forward. This falling forward is NOT ideal! But for now, and the way we are using this exercise, it’s OK.

Vafi has already slid his legs back underneath his body to prepare for the back lift. Your horse will NOT need to do that for the first few months, though he might begin doing it on his own as he becomes more advanced in the exercise.



While performing the exercise, he has shifted his weight to his hind legs so now his front legs are straight. The distance between his front and hind legs stays the same.



What do you see?

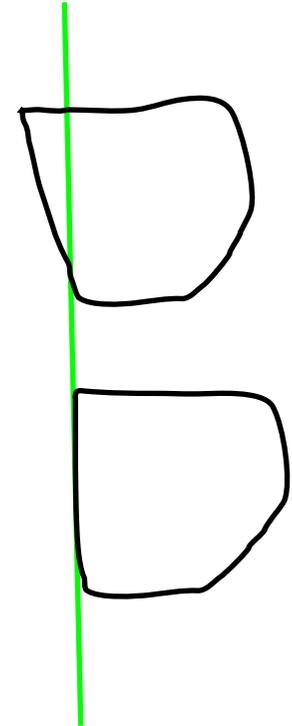


The “negative space” between the horse’s front and back legs under his body gives you information about what happens during the posture exercises.

What else do you notice?

What shapes are created above the horse? Within the horse’s body?

Again, this is a more advanced version of the core posture exercise, but studying the pictures of the horses can help you continue shaping your horse as he learns and develops strength in the exercise.



What else do you see?



Our #1 POSTURE GOAL: lift the base of the cervical spine!

For reasons we won't go into in this book, our MAIN goal for the posture exercises is that the horse is raising the “base of the neck”, which means the base of the cervical vertebrae. ALL posture *and* movement exercises we do have this as our number one focus, and helps us keep everything else heading in a positive and healthy direction. One of the best ways to KNOW the base of the cervical spine is lifting is by looking for a “poofing up”, expanding, elevation around the withers area.



Core Stabilizer Exercise Overview



Remember, we do this in 4 steps:

1. Get the horse **ready**
2. Without pressure, **cue** the horse for “lift” (or whatever you choose)
3. **Mark** (click) the moment the horse starts to do it
4. **Reward** the horse with a food **treat**.

We will look at all these steps in detail in the next pages, but it really is that simple.



First time: start against a wall or fence

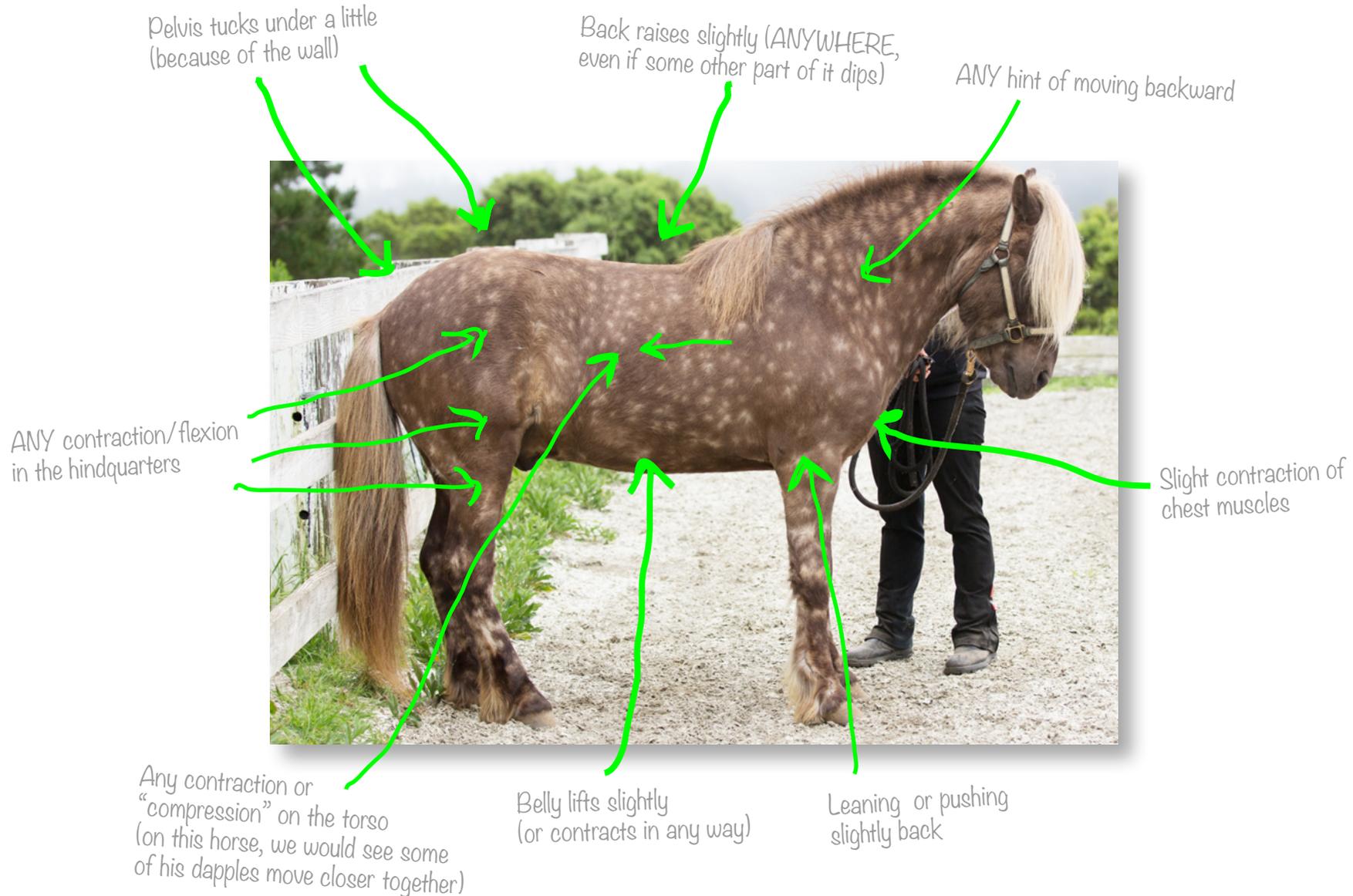
Almost ALL horses can learn to lift their back VERY quickly if you position them against a wall or fence. This is ONLY meant as a way to give them the idea so that you have something to “click”. It is NOT intended to be the way in which you keep doing the exercise!

1. As stress-free as possible, position the horse against a wall or fence, not quite touching it.
2. Allow the horse to relax for a few moments just standing there.
3. As calmly and lightly as possible, *suggest but WITHOUT CUEING FOR BACK-UP* that the horse sort of “think” about backing up. Experiment with your body language, gestures, and position until you find the most subtle thing you can do. This must be with the absolute *least* pressure you can apply to get the horse to *think* about moving back.
4. As the horse starts to shift his weight back, he will feel the wall and *automatically* do some form of back lift. When a horse bumps into the wall, their pelvis will tuck slightly and their back will lift. It will not be AT ALL in the kind of posture you want, but it is a start.



Reward (click/treat) for ANYTHING!

At first, look for anything that suggests the horse is at least *thinking* about shifting his weight a little back. It does not have to be an actual back lift OR weight shift at first! Remember, we're at step one of *shaping*. Click for any one of these things (or anything else you feel is a start toward shifting back).



NOTHING you click for will be “wrong”

The first couple of days of the posture exercise, Click Click Click. Click even if you think you *imagined* the slightest near-imperceptible shift. Remember, we’re just at the *very first step* of a behavior we’re going to spend *months* shaping and refining. And it all starts with just the tiniest weight shift back, or lifting of the back (which happens as a result of contracting the abdominal muscles).

You are at *least 3* or more months away from actively trying to get the horse to lower his haunches in a transition out of the posture exercise, so don’t ask for or expect any lowering of the hindquarters, but of course if it happens CLICK!

Things to NOT worry about in the very *beginning*:

- ***Don’t worry about head and neck position the first few days!*** Don’t even look there. It doesn’t matter. In fact it won’t matter at first. We’re looking at the body -- what is happening in the torso -- NOT the head/neck.
- ***Don’t worry at first about feet position.*** If the horse is standing square, a more *advanced* version of posture is typically easier for him, but it will probably be *many* weeks. Many many many before you will start actively shaping his stance, and we personally almost never DO ask the horse to “square up” though it might be appropriate for some.
- ***Don’t worry at first if the horse is crooked.*** Again, it will be a few weeks before you will start actively shaping this posture to be more symmetrical. For now, it doesn’t matter how bent/crooked/uneven his posture is in this first stage.
- Anything else the horse does with the exception of you OR the horse feeling unsafe.

WARNING: if your horse is not comfortable with his hindquarters close to a wall, deal with that first!

If the horse is in any way stressed or anxious about having his hind legs near a barrier, then postpone working on the posture and focus on teaching him to be relaxed and comfortable against a wall, or at least out in the open but with something behind him to help stop him from thinking he is supposed to keep backing up. The whole point of the posture exercises will be lost if the horse is tense about the position he's in when doing them.

Things to try if your horse is anxious about the wall:

1. **Find a different location** where the horse IS more comfortable against a wall. Most horses are much more comfortable if the wall is one they're already used to being against, which is typically their own shelter or stall.
2. **Stand further away from the horse and off to the side.** It may not be the wall the horse is anxious about, but the fact that he feels trapped by a person in front of him. Many horses relax against the wall if the person is not blocking their escape path.
3. If that does not help, take the horse in a more open space but put something behind his legs that is a barrier but not a full wall. This could be anything from a ground pole to a pool noodle held behind the top of his tail. You just need *something* to cause the horse to slightly shift his weight back but without taking a full step backward.

If none of those work, then use +R to get your horse to be relaxed and calm and happy just standing with his rear near a wall. The core exercises *can* be started in open space, without any barrier, and many people do it this way, but it's often more complicated and difficult to get started this way. By far the *easiest* way to start with back lift is against a wall. (But don't worry about it if you need to do it differently!)

What to focus on the first week

- *Reward the slightest try.*
- **ABSOLUTE MINIMUM PRESSURE!**
- *Use body language or other hints to suggest a weight shift back, but that is NOT your normal cue for “back”.*
- **Do NOT under any circumstances use a stick, whip, or consistent pressure on a lead rope to ask for the backup. (and try not to “cluck”)**



Keep the reinforcement rate *VERY* high and be *VERY* generous. If you even think the horse is thinking about shifting his weight a fraction of a millimeter, click/treat. Every attempt he makes during the first few sessions will be largely accidental, as a side-effect of hitting the wall behind him, not an actual attempt to lift his back.

LOW pressure!! Keep it relaxed and slow.

Try to be **HERE** if you can



Standing in front of the horse can create too much pressure (for some horses)



The ideal position for is with you beside the horse, facing forward, with your body near where it would be if you were riding. You want to be within arm's length of touching the horse on the withers, as soon as possible. For some horses, they won't understand what you're asking for unless you are near the front and suggesting back-up, but you should not have to be in this position more than one or two sessions (though if your horse is not stressed by you being in front, don't worry about it if it takes longer for you to be able to do it from a different position).



Help the horse to feel that this is the BEST exercise EVER. This means complete slack in the lead rope, no sticks or whips, and nothing the horse interprets as pressure. Remember, the goal is a back lift, not an actual back-up, so we're looking for the tiniest weight shift back for the first clicks.

Key focus points for the first week

- **Reward the slightest try.** That could mean the instant the horse is even THINKING about backing up toward the wall, and that means when his chest muscles start to flex, even if you never saw him move back! Positive reinforcement often works even if the horse is simply *thinking* about the behavior but hasn't fully committed to doing it. Train yourself to see the earliest shift.
- **NO FORCE NO MATTER WHAT!** Whatever tiny amount of pressure you're using to "suggest" the back-up, it's almost certainly too much. If the horse is in a halter and lead rope, KEEP THE ROPE SLACK. Remember, we don't *want* the horse to actually back up. We don't want to *stress* the horse into thinking you want him to back up when he feels the wall. What we *want* is just the tiniest hint of a *back lift*. The back-up-into-the-wall is the simplest way to help him get started. In other words, it's just to give you something to click for.
- **Use body language or other hints for backup that are NOT your normal back-up cue.** Try to just suggest it with body language if you can. (Later you'll add a voice-cue, and we won't need to use the wall).
- **Do NOT under any circumstances use a stick, whip, or pressure the horse with a lead rope to ask for the backup.** Remember, this only works if the horse is not just able to do it on his own, but highly motivated to do it on his own. Soon (and forever) we want the horse to think that *doing this is like THE GREATEST THING EVER*. It should be the one exercise your horse associates ONLY with goodness, awesomeness, treats, and your happy expressions. You can use a hand near their chest or — if absolutely necessary — *touch* their chest, but remember, force-free. You must not add pressure if the horse doesn't respond.



Zen Posture

Help the horse find a calm, focused state for posture. Think of this like meditation or yoga, *not weight lifting*. If you keep the core posture as a “sacred space” for the horse, this will become the most rewarding activity your horse does. Soon, you’ll be able to use this to help your horse regain focus and balance, especially when riding. Your mindset matters.

Things that might happen

Your horse's first attempts won't look ANYTHING like the ones in this book. It takes time to shape their early attempts. Nothing your horse does at this stage is wrong. *Nothing.*

- ***The horse might overdo it and REALLY push back into the wall.*** (Be ready for this possibility, and be sure it's a strong wall). If this happens, the back lift will be BIG, so — assuming your wall is OK — *celebrate* the BIG attempts.
- ***The horse might keep trying to turn sideways instead of shifting back.*** He might think, "Surely you don't mean for me to back into a wall! That makes no sense, so I will yield my hindquarters instead." This is VERY common, and an appropriate response for a horse. He just thinks he's misunderstanding your request. If this happens, try putting the horse with his back toward a corner, and ask with even less pressure.
- ***The horse might feel the wall and then try to step forward.*** Allow this! Remember, this must always be a stress-free exercise with zero force. Be patient, experiment with your "suggestion" cues, and be quicker to click. Even if your horse did not yet lean back, try clicking before he steps forward. Never correct him for anything he tries to do here.



It will NOT look like THIS! Draumur had been doing this for close to a year when this photo was taken. It takes TIME to shape it.

You might get the most ridiculous strange looking hump back version with his head in the air or you might get one so subtle you aren't sure anything happened. NOTHING they do at this stage is wrong. It's all just how it begins.

In the beginning: make this the *only* “work” in a session

Don't ask or click for *anything* else during at least your first week of clicker sessions for this. You *can* do up to three of these sessions per day. You *can* do other activities with the horse in a *separate* session, but keep the “core stabilizer” sessions special and protected.

For at *least* the first week, or ideally the first few *months*, you want to think “we are in core mode and **ONLY** core mode.” If you are not able to do multiple sessions per day with your horse, then at least allow for a short break between doing standing posture and doing *other* things with your horse. You want the horse to feel a clear “space” around the core posture.

The way you treat core posture *now*, determines how powerful this become for you in the future. If you choose to go further with the Intrinsic exercises, the core stabilizer become a foundation not just as an exercise, but as a physical and emotional anchor for the horse. This will become a highly rewarding state you can draw on to instantly recover the horse's calm focus, and — most importantly — for the horse to reclaim his stable spinal position — whether working on the ground or riding.

Keep the core posture as a separate, special session. If you can't make it your *only* exercise for the session, at least give the horse a break before moving to other activities. You want the horse to associate core posture **ONLY** with things the horse already finds relaxing and pleasant. You *can* include patting, scratching, and brushing *if* the horse currently enjoys them.



Moving away from the wall

Most horses can start to do the back lift *without* the wall within a couple of weeks or 4 to 10 sessions. Some take longer, and it's *no worry* if your horse needs more time. The ease with which the horse transitions from a wall to open space depends a lot on how solid they are with the exercise.

You're ready to move away from the wall when your horse does it *without* trying to back up. You'll know when the horse is super solid on doing the core posture "pose" because he'll just start doing it as soon as he thinks you might ask. Or even as soon as he sees you, in hopes that you *will* ask.



The first goal is "open space" posture. The first step is moving them away from the support of the wall, though you might need something else behind the horse like a ground pole or your hand above his tail (assuming the horse lets you stand near his tail when doing this). The horse must never perceive your hand (or an object -- like a pool noodle over the top of his tail) as forceful pressure. Holding something behind his tail should simply be a reminder clue to the horse that you're doing posture, not backing up.

Putting posture/pose on its own cue

Once the horse has started reliably doing this on your super light suggestion (whatever it is that gets him to shift his weight slightly back toward the wall), you want to introduce a voice cue. **Make it a cue you don't use for anything else.**

We typically use “shape” or “lift”.

The best time to introduce the cue is when you are *virtually certain* the horse is about to do the behavior. Say the cue either *just* before or *as* he does it, then *immediately click*. The sooner you introduce a *voice* cue, the sooner you can get the horse to stop associating the posture exercise with back-up (which will become even more important later).

You should also use your own consistent body language as a cue, by leaning back and bending your knees to sort of help “draw” the horse backward with you. You want to do this body language cue only when you are beside the horse and facing the same direction. For more advanced and refined versions, we may add other body language cues, for example to ask the horse to flex slightly at the poll in one direction.

(Note: we ourselves — Steinar and Kathy — do not put a very high priority on CUES. How you choose to use the posture exercises and cues is of course a personal choice.)



Steinar's body language cue here is subtle (slight shifting his own weight back), but Steinar is also using his hand on the top of Vafi's tail, not as pressure but as a body awareness reminder.

Refining the Posture

Once your horse is reliably doing the back-lift you can begin refining it. This might begin after roughly 10 sessions (but that's just a guideline, every horse is different and there's no wrong move here). Your goal (not a requirement) is to be working through these refinements during the first three to four months.

Though the refinement exercises are not covered in this eBook, you don't need to be in an Intrinzen course in order to work on this yourself. *There is nothing in our programs you cannot work through on your own if you understand the goals.*

On the next page, we've included a quick *intro* to the Satellite Posture, and you can make tremendous progress just by working on *that* for the next 12 weeks.

NOT detailed in this eBook.

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 standing next to the horse with hand over the withers as asking the horse to "fill my hand here" target.

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

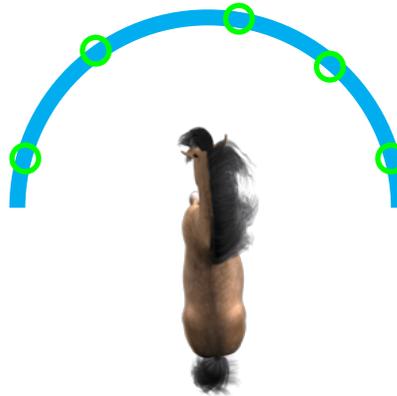
Using the core posture work in a way that challenges the horse's balance, to rapidly "reset" the horse's motor control system.

Refinements: Satellite Posture

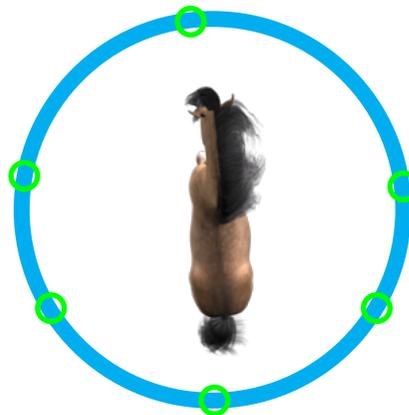
Your goal is to stand along any point on the 180° (first 6 weeks) or 360° curve around your horse, and be able to have your horse reliably do a back-lift. As soon as possible, you want to be doing this with no halter, rope, or other physical connection to the horse.

Moving into these positions will help build your horse's symmetry and confidence. Experiment with widening the circle and shrinking the circle. How close can you get? Can you touch the horse? How far away can you get? Is it the same on both sides?

First 6 weeks: 180°



After 6 weeks: 360°



Can you ask the horse to lift from all the way back here behind his tail?

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Experiment with the Satellite Core Posture

Try different positions and distances. The more important role for you is to observe differences in the horse at each position. While the goal is to have the horse feel the same (and perform the exercise in the same way) regardless of where you are, chances are your horse will feel very differently depending on where you are.

Bigger Radius



Narrow



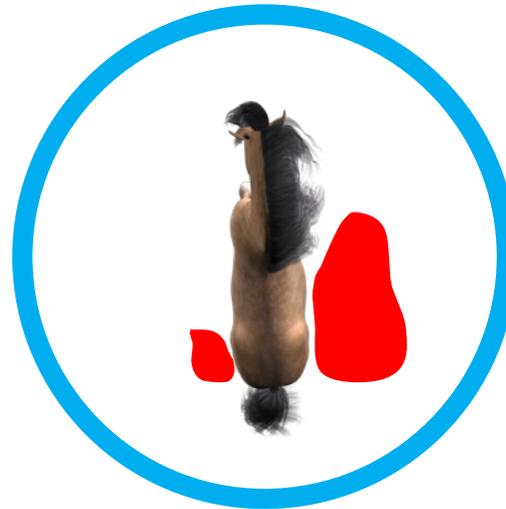
Does the horse perform the exercise in the same way no matter which position you are in?

Remember: NO STRESS!!

If at any point the horse feels uncomfortable, never push it. Back away, take a deep breath, and find the spot where the horse does feel comfortable. This does *not* mean, however, that you should *always* avoid the places he doesn't want you in. It means continuously experimenting and sensitively, slowly increasing the zones in which you can be without causing your horse discomfort.

Are there some places your horse does NOT want you to be?

Are there some places where the posture is different, or his behavior after the click is different?



Most horses will NOT behave or feel the same from every position!

All horses have natural asymmetry (the horse equivalent of our right-or-left-handedness) but you might still be surprised by how this impacts his ability or willingness to perform the posture exercises, depending not on *his* posture or position, but on *yours*.

A crucial part of our goal with the posture is to help the horse be more even and balanced on both sides, but that takes time and different exercises (our favorite is to use a combination of back-lift PLUS a target to ask the horse for a big lateral bend). For now, the most important role is simply to observe the horse from every position, and slowly try to help him feel more comfortable. But remember, the posture is always always always the one exercise we want the horse to never associate with pressure or stress or discomfort. So at this stage,



The goal for YOUR position is to (eventually) be at the BACK of the horse when you cue. This lets you influence the hind-end of the horse and prepare for the more advanced work, but also puts you in the ideal place for doing halt-to-canter (or other gaits) transitions. This can take time for some horses to feel comfortable with. Be patient, and be sensitive and respectful of the horse's signals. If he swishes his tail or lifts his foot, move forward to a position where he doesn't feel pressured, and give him more time.

EPILOGUE

What comes next?



Lessons learned from the first edition: Keep the head and neck position **VARIABLE!**

Almost all horses will try, naturally, to use their head and neck to “help” with the exercise. While we do NOT want to actively try to shape or “pose” the head and neck into ANY one position, we DO want to keep the horse’s head and neck from over-working during posture exercises. Remember, what we *reinforce* is what we get MORE of, and we can accidentally “bake in” a specific head and neck position if we keep clicking while the head/neck is in the same position. We’ve seen people have trouble with two head and neck issues: 1. the head and neck are too curled in toward the chest and 2. the horse throws his head back and up to help shift his weight back. The “fix” for virtually ALL head and neck issues is ALSO what makes the posture work far more effective more quickly: the ability to ask the horse to put his head and neck in *different* positions, *but especially with a lateral bend!*

The simplest way to help the horse use more of his core stabilizers is to STOP him from over-using his head and neck to “help”. Asking the horse to look to the *side* will prevent nearly all problems with the horse “curling/ crunching” too much OR throwing his head UP. But the key is VARIABILITY.





Asking the horse to look toward you while doing the core stability postures is the easiest way to help the horse use more of his core, and avoid problems of the horse his head and neck too much in OR lifting his head and neck too high. But the key to ALL posture and movement work is to have high **variability** in head and neck position. By NOT over-reinforcing the *same* head/neck position, and asking instead for many variations, we help the horse build more adaptable core stability, avoid problems in the head and neck, and help the horse more easily transfer the *standing* posture into healthy posture in *movement*.

Crucial warning for those using +R only for posture

If you do **not** want to make a commitment to going all-in on +R, then you won't want or need any further support from Intrinzen. We do hope you continue shaping the posture exercises into whatever you and your horse want it to be, and we urge you to follow just one rule for as long as you continue working on this with this horse:

Never mix the back-lift (using +R) with ANY other form of work where you are using escalating/enforced -R.

The worst thing you could do with this is ask the horse to do this standing posture in any context in which you might ALSO ask the horse for any behavior you intend to enforce, or where he might be punished for a behavior you don't want. In other words, if you are going to ask the horse for behaviors which are *not optional*, then **never** do the core stabilizer back-lift in that same context.

While it's *never* a good idea to mix +R and enforced -R together in the same training session, most horses *can* understand clear, distinct training **modes**. If you are not going all-in on +R, then keep +R within a clear, distinct, protected boundary that the horse recognizes as "clicker mode." In this mode, he understands that it is safe to *offer* behaviors even if you did not explicitly ask for them, and he knows that offering behavior will never be punished in this mode. He also knows that in *this* mode, but not the others, there's a good chance he'll earn a reward. When you are out riding, or doing your "normal" -R work, make it clear to the horse that you are in a very different mode — the mode where he does NOT have a choice and is NOT expected to offer behaviors you didn't request. The best way to do this is have a separate location that you use exclusively for +R/clicker mode, then the horse doesn't have to look for any other clues as to which mode he's in. If the horse isn't sure that he's in +R mode, he'll likely hold back from offering behaviors.

+R lets us shape big, high-performance behaviors like fancy trot and canter “rear-o-ette” ONLY because the horse feels safe *offering* big, expressive, not-yet-trained movements. It would be unfair and harmful to the horse if sometimes we *reward* him for offering behaviors and then other times we *punish* him for a wrong behavior.



Next steps on the Intrinsic path

If you *do* choose to continue with doing other activities in the way that WE do, these are the foundation activities we use. We no longer offer a step-by-step PROGRAM on how to do what we do. Instead, we believe people who truly want to try this should learn the science behind *why* we do what we do, and then they can make their own choices on if, how, what, to implement with their own horse. We are using the newest research in *movement* science, combined with *motivation* science that goes far beyond “positive reinforcement”. We believe the superpower for horses lives in the intersection of movement and motivation science. We currently are running an experimental learning project (Project Proprius), and enrollment will probably open again for this in late 2017.



Panther Walk



Advanced Posture



Canter (transitions, “rear-o-ette”)



Expressive Trot



Coil and Spring



Intrinsic Riding

And one more thing...

Let your horse inspire **you** to continue
working on **your** posture and core fitness.



A close-up profile of a horse's head, facing left. The horse has a dark brown coat and a very thick, long, light brown mane that falls over its forehead and eyes. The background is a plain, light blue-grey color.

If you're reading this book it means you are already seeking new ways to help your horse become even more of what your horse most wants to be: an amazing, agile, awesome, confident, badass, horse.



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.