

Tellington TTouch

The Balance Rein

By Robyn Hood

If you think about the most common problems a rider experiences with their horses under saddle, what comes to mind? Evading contact? Rushing? Falling on the fore-hand? Lacking engagement? Working above or behind the bit? Bucking? Head tossing? The list can be long and varied but one basic issue is often at the root of all of these problems; balance, or lack thereof.

The Tellington TTouch Method has a simple, effective yet gentle tool to help riders address many of these issues; the Balance Rein. The Balance Rein can be used with any bridle and acts like a second rein except that it lies around the base of the horse's neck instead of coming from the bridle. A light pressure at the base of the neck helps remind the horse to shift weight up and back through the withers while maintaining length through their neck. Inspired by a neck strap commonly used for beginners or riders learning to jump, the Balance rein is designed for ease of use for the rider and comfort for the horse.

How to Use the Balance Rein

The Balance Rein sits at the base of the horse's neck and is held as a second rein. The light pressure on the base of the neck helps to trigger the 'seeking reflex', a passive muscle which encourages the withers to lift and the neck to telescope from the withers to the poll. The seeking reflex is the third part in the 'ring of muscles', which must be activated to achieve engagement. This is very helpful for horses who have a tendency to brace at the base of the neck and tighten through their top line.

The Balance Rein should not be held against the horse's neck with steady contact or it may invite the horse to lean or brace more. Having one to three fingers in between the balance rein and bit rein will allow you to differentiate the use of the reins. Use the balance rein with an 'ask and release' signal in a slightly diagonal direction following the angle of the horse's shoulder, rather than a backward direction - the rebalance comes on the release not the ask. When using

the Balance Rein the rider may experiment with several combinations of rein and balance rein proportions, depending on how comfortable the horse is with contact, or not. Try using 50/50, 40/60 or 60/40 proportions of bridle rein and Balance Rein.



The Balance Rein can positively change many habits and behaviors such as;

- Working above the bit
- Leaning on the reins
- Going behind the vertical
- Rushing
- Shying
- Rushing over fences
- Evading contact
- General imbalance
- Stumbling or tripping
- Rushing downhill
- Raising head during rein back
- Rushing during lateral work
- Jigging

Riders benefit as well from the Balance Rein:

- Prevents a rider from balancing off the horse's mouth
- Keeps hands quiet and steady

Why Use the Balance Rein

Many horses are totally comfortable if you give them a loose rein but come above or behind the bit as soon as any contact is taken. Many people interpret this response as 'resistance' to contact. This is usually a physiological response rather than just a psychological response. When contact is taken that causes a backward pull, the neck shortens and tightens which then tightens the back and hindquarters- this can trigger the flight instinct and may also cause discomfort. The more a rider pulls on the reins, the more they trigger the Opposition Response, which creates more resistance in the horse, especially if they are physically on the forehand to begin with. The Balance Rein helps teach the rider to maintain her own balance, which prevents pulling on the reins and helps to 'show' the horse a posture that will be more functional and comfortable.

Sucking **behind the vertical** has become more common as many horses are ridden "deep" as has become fashionable. Unfortunately the downside to the horse can be tension in the poll, neck and pelvis and an inability to engage. Once a horse has learned to go behind the vertical it can be challenging to undo it. The balance rein is very effective for this issue as long as the rider uses a light upward, rather than steady backward pressure, on the rein.

Horses who have difficulty with **downward transitions** are often out of balance and falling forward. Pulling on the reins to ask for a downward transition will trigger the head to come up and the back to drop. The Balance Rein helps signal the horse to shift his weight off the forehand and steadies him without tightening the horse's neck and back.

Jigging can be frustrating because many horses will shorten their necks and get stronger if you use more rein. The balance rein steadies the horse from the chest, which encourages him to stretch and round the neck and usually produces an even walk and more relaxed horse.

Young horses benefit from the connection between a signal from their head, either with a Lindell or a bit, and the signal of asking from the chest with the balance rein. This is beneficial in teaching a horse to stop, lightly and in balance.

Horses who **rush downhill** are generally out of balance. More contact on the rein may simply trigger a raised

head and dropped back. The balance rein, used with a 60/40 percent ration with the rein helps encourage more hindquarter engagement, which shows horses how to negotiate down hills.

Horses with a tendency to **pull** on the reins stop pulling in a matter of minutes with the Balance Rein. One of our practitioners was taking a jumping lesson on a horse who was known for rushing fences. After several jumps she asked the instructor if she could use a Balance Rein. As she approached the jump she was able to steady the horse using a light contact on the Balance Rein – the horse was more ratable, his head was lower and he was much steadier as he was moving less on the forehand.

Teaching a horse to **back** using the Balance Rein helps avoid a raised head and dropped back posture which sometimes happens. This shows the horse how to shift their weight up and back through their body rather than retracting and shortening the neck.

Shying horses are generally tense in the neck and back. The more the rider takes contact the worse this can be. Maintaining a light contact with the Balance Rein allows the rider to have less contact on the bit, the horse will be more relaxed and the rider can still feel safe.

The Balance Rein can help the rider avoid balancing on the horse's mouth as she is developing an independent seat.

Once a rider is comfortable using the Balance Rein it quickly becomes an indispensable piece of equipment. Whether jumping a course, going for a trail ride, or schooling a youngster, the Balance Rein helps achieve the balance and harmony all riders, regardless of discipline, strive to develop.



Photos above & right: Balance reins are made from marine rope with biothane rein. Colors available - Black, red, pink, grass green, teal, sky blue, purple, brown, tan and rainbow.





Photo above: This horse had a tendency to go behind the vertical and disengage behind.

Photo above: Adding the balance rein and he is much more engage behind and lifting through the withers and poll.

Case study - Dot

Dot is a 16.3 hh Dutch Warmblood; who had won at Medium level dressage. The current owner Sophie has owned her for 2 years; she bought Dot from the lady who was her instructor at the time. Sophie is a novice rider who had previously bought two young warmblood geldings from this lady. They were both 4 years old one was for her husband (also a novice rider) the other one was for Sophie. Both of them had very bad falls from the two horses and they were subsequently sold by the instructor at a huge financial loss to Sophie. The instructor told Sophie that an experienced horse would be better; so she sold Dot to Sophie for an enormous amount of money on the understanding that Dot would be kept at the instructor's yard at full livery and that Sophie agreed to 6 lessons a week. As Sophie had lost her confidence this seemed like a good plan and to some extent it did work. The main problem was that Dot is very forward going and bouncy for a less experienced rider. The instructor insisted that Sophie always rode with tight draw reins and most of the lessons were done on a small circle. I met Sophie when I started teaching her children; she mentioned that her arms and hands were agony because she had ridden that morning. I was surprised that she kept her horse miles away when she had such a wonderful equestrian property and I also said that Dot could be ridden without the draw reins. She was interested in finding another way to ride that was more harmonious and enjoyable and asked if she brought Dot home when the children and their next lesson if I would ride her without the draw reins which I agreed to. Dot was wonderful; not strong just tense and worried. Dot stayed at home after this session.

The first lesson I had with Sophie it was clear that she was nervous and unbalanced so I explained about the **BALANCE REIN** and rode Dot in it to show Sophie how it worked. Sophie was surprised to see Dot being ridden without very tight reins and felt nervous about being run away with. I walked beside her to begin with and just worked in walk.

Sophie had had 2 good sessions with Dot and felt much more confident so she rode first and we did some slow trot work with the **BALANCE REIN**. I did some **CATERPILLER** in walk to encourage Dot to release her neck.

By the fourth session they were working well as a team and Sophie was finally able to really enjoy Dot.



Photos: Jan Breeze riding Dot without using draw reins to show her owner that Dot wouldn't run away without them. When horses are constantly held in a frame they cannot find their own balance and self-carriage. It must have been such a relief for Dot to have the freedom of her head and neck.