

Horses Inside Out Conference 2013

Day 1 at The Ramada Hotel, Grantham.

Lecture 2

A Physiotherapists approach to Rider Asymmetry Part 1

Andy Thomas

At the end of the lecture, Andy Thomas shared with us this example. I've included it at the start, as I think it's quite inspiring!

In 2009, a dressage rider questioned why her half pass scores to the left were consistently 2 marks lower than those for her half pass right. A physiotherapy assessment showed her right side muscles were weak and tight, preventing her right hip from opening, and therefore blocking the horses movement. A rehab and treatment programme commenced, the rider taking on board suggestions for exercises and subsequently seeing a notable improvement. The attention to detail paid off, when that rider, Great Britain's very own Charlotte Dujardin won Gold at London 2012.

Knowing that you're listening to someone who helps the very top riders in the UK certainly helped wake me up from the slightly snoozy state I'd fallen in to, sat in a comfy hotel on a Saturday morning after an early start. Hopefully I've got all the key points jotted down!

Andy introduced himself and briefly explained his work and his role within the GB Equestrian team. As the lead practitioner in human sports science and medicine for the WCP (World class programmes), he travels extensively with the British teams for all disciplines, helping to ensure the riders are in the best physical condition possible before they go in to a competition. He also works with the talent spotted up and coming riders, giving them every opportunity to be successful in their goal of reaching the top.

For more information on the World Class Programme, please see here:

http://www.bef.co.uk/The_World_Class_Programme/World_Class_Development.html

Catching our Attention

The initial slides put up showed a pair of long riding boots, and a pair of gloves, both well worn and belonging to a professional rider. Seeing the uneven wear on these pieces of kit made it very clear the extent to which our dominant / weaker side must affect the horse we ride.

The grip on the palm and fingers on one glove had been rubbed away extensively, and likewise the inside of one boot was considerably more 'battered' than the other!

Qualities Required by a Rider

Andrew explained the key physical qualities required by a rider. I was reminded of the old saying "When we sit on a horse, we are doing it good or we are doing it harm, there is no in-between!"

Andrew highlighted the following skills required by a rider, to allow any horse to go to the best of its ability.

*Agility

*Balance *and* Mobility

*Control *and* Flexibility

*Strength *and* Suppleness

Obviously the degree to which we develop all of these will depend on our end goal. Someone wishing to only hack around the roads in walk will not inhibit their horse by not being as supple as the person wishing to ride canter circles. Regardless of our intentions however, we can all make our horses lives easier, and therefore our riding more enjoyable by considering the following.

How do we achieve these skills?

The majority of riders, *at all levels*, have imbalances' and weaknesses. The top riders are more successful at controlling these, therefore having less of a negative impact on the horse's performance.

In his role as a human physiotherapist, Andy assesses each individual rider, looking at the ease with which they can adjust position and absorb the movement of the horse. The exercises he uses will be specific to that rider and the problems they have.

Imbalances in muscles can be split in to three main types. Studying 541 riders, the following statistics have been collected.

Type 1 Weak muscles on one side, tight on the other. (80% of studied riders)

Type 2 Weak and tight muscles on the same side. (12% of studied riders)

Type 3 Weak muscles, with no tightness or restrictions. (3% studied riders)

Andy explained various patterns in riders. Using the pictures he'd shown at the start, he explained a rider who is weak in their lateral stabilising muscles on one side will often take a stronger grip with the opposite hand, in order to give more stability – remember this is dealing with GB riders, not leisure riders, which really highlights how aware we need to be of our posture if we want our horses to go correctly!

One of the most interesting comments he made was that in athletes, he would always look to the feet for imbalances. In riders, he looks to the pelvis. He also stressed the importance of being able to isolate and correctly move the pelvis in order to absorb the movement of the horse and to develop a truly independent seat.

With all riders he uses either a balance ball or a wobble chair, to help riders develop core stability and independent use of muscle groups.

When to Start?

The riders worked with on the WCP squads are often beginning their physiotherapist assessments at 17 /18 years old, by which time these imbalances are already developed.

Andy explained that when he works with younger riders they have a lesser degree of imbalance – he explained the most symmetrical, balanced people we see are toddlers. As children grow up they will do more and more with their dominant side. This makes it difficult to remain symmetrical (or as close as possible to being symmetrical!) on the horse. If a coach has insufficient understanding of the muscles a rider should be using, students will unknowingly use the wrong areas to achieve what their coach is asking for. This may look correct to a less knowledgeable eye, but will start to have repercussions, and limit progress.

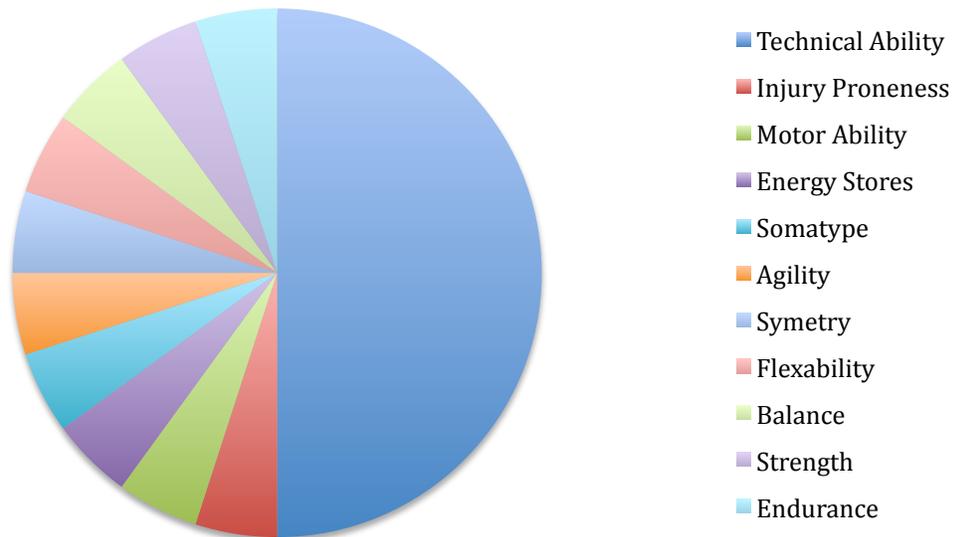
I thought how often we come across that – the rider being told to sit up straight, or put their heels down – nearly always a correction only of the symptom, never of the cause.

He stressed the importance of the fundamentals being the steppingstones, for riders aged 6 – 11 years, and then encouraging the use of core muscles, especially once a growth spurt kicks in, as at this point they are apt to be less co-ordinated.

He stressed, however that it is **never too late**, and explained he see's his role as giving the coach the most coachable rider.

Loved this snazzy little number – the section on the right comes down to the technical ability of the rider (and obviously, horse power, so can be split up again in to lots of little sections!) But the **other 50%**, on the left hand side, are all factors we ***can control and improve*** by working on rider fitness.

Factors Contributing to Rider Success



His final words from the first lecture were:

We now have some excellent role models – riders are really switching on to the fact that they are athletes, just as much as the horse

For me, the information I gained here confirmed the importance of working as part of a team. No amount of corrections by me to a rider will have any long term impact if they actually need a specialist, such as a physiotherapist, to allow their muscles to do as required.