

Yoga and Riding

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The practice of yoga has existed for thousands of years. There is archaeological evidence of it in India as far back as 3300 BC. Yoga is a series of postures or asanas, often named for animals, coordinated with deep breathing that helps to develop balance, strength and suppleness. It is a low-impact form of exercise that can be adapted for anyone.

Yoga also helps you understand self-awareness. The class that I take always starts with breathing and looking inward, being in the moment. This aspect of yoga helps you learn to focus on what you are doing-how you are breathing and what your body is doing. It allows you to be mindful both mentally and physically.

One of the many benefits of yoga is the development of body mechanics. You learn how your skeleton supports you and how your muscles allow you to move in different ways. The various poses are done standing, seated, lying down, and inverted. There are balances, bends, and twists- sometimes all at once. You learn to do different things with different parts of your body at the same time. Sound like riding?

The benefits for riding are obvious. To be empathetic, effective riders we need to know what we are doing with our bodies before we can start to tell our horses what to do with theirs. Learning body awareness helps us realize what we are doing with our bodies. How often do we tell our horses something we don't mean to or send them conflicting messages? Think of the rider on a runaway horse yelling "Whoa!" with their legs clamped on the horse telling him to go faster. Body awareness helps us understand how to use our bodies so we can use our aids correctly.

One of the most important things yoga helps to develop is balance. Through different poses we can understand the alignment of our spines, balancing our heads, finding the place where our bodies support themselves with the least effort. When we are balanced our horse can carry us more easily and be in balance himself. Think of how it feels when you are carrying a heavy bag on one shoulder. That's how the horse feels when his rider is out of balance.

A simple yoga pose to begin feeling balance is the Mountain Pose or Tadasana:

- Stand with your feet side by side with the base of your big toes touching. Lift your toes and spread them and put them back down. Feel your whole foot on the floor. Find your bubbling spring.
- Lift your inner ankles. Lift your knee caps and your inner thighs. Firm your outer calves and thighs to the bone.
- Level your pelvis. Lift your abdomen and bring your tail bone forward. Press your thighs back. Drop your sacrum.
- Lengthen your spine up through your head and out through your tail bone. Lift the center of your sternum. Let your collar bones widen. Find your shoulder blades and let them slide down your back. Let your arms hang by your sides with your palms facing your body.
- Balance your head on top of your spine with your chin parallel to the ground. Lengthen the back of your neck. Have soft eyes with your gaze level. Relax your tongue and your throat.
- The back of your head, your shoulder blades and your sacrum should be in a line. Breathe deeply and slowly, allowing your ribs to expand and filling your lungs.

In this simple pose we find all the basics of Centered Riding. If you start with Tadasana and bend your knees and your elbows, you have a balanced riding position. The various standing poses in yoga help you with grounding. Seated poses help find your center. Balance poses (they are ultimately all balance poses) use building blocks, sometimes in very interesting ways. Soft eyes are necessary to maintain

poses Hard eyes produce the same negative effect they do in riding. And of course breathing is central to yoga and time is spent concentrating on it, as well as its importance in each of the poses.

I've been practicing yoga for thirty years and have found it a wonderful complement to riding. There is so much of yoga in Centered Riding. I often hear my yoga teacher and Centered Riding teacher saying the same thing. I bring a lot of yoga to my own teaching.

Yoga, like riding, is a lifelong pursuit. There is always something new to discover Another time for your horse to say "It's about time you figured that out!" The best way to practice yoga is to find an educated, experienced and enthusiastic teacher. (Just like riding.) So ask your friends and visit different classes until you find the teacher that "speaks to you". Have fun!



Photos: (Above left) - Tory with Zeb demonstrates "Tadasana." (Above right) When Tory bends her knees and elbows, she is in riding position.

Photo at beginning of article: Kayleigh on Taylor completes the progression of Tadasana to mounted rider.