

Building Blocks - The Fourth Basic of Centered Riding

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I call the last of the Four Basics “building blocks.” Building blocks are another way of describing balance. If the various parts of the body are balanced correctly – one above the other, you will reduce the amount of muscle tension or strain used to keep the body upright, thereby saving your body’s energy for other uses. Building blocks tie in very closely with the other three of the Four Basics, in fact, it is difficult to learn and master unless all four are practiced together.

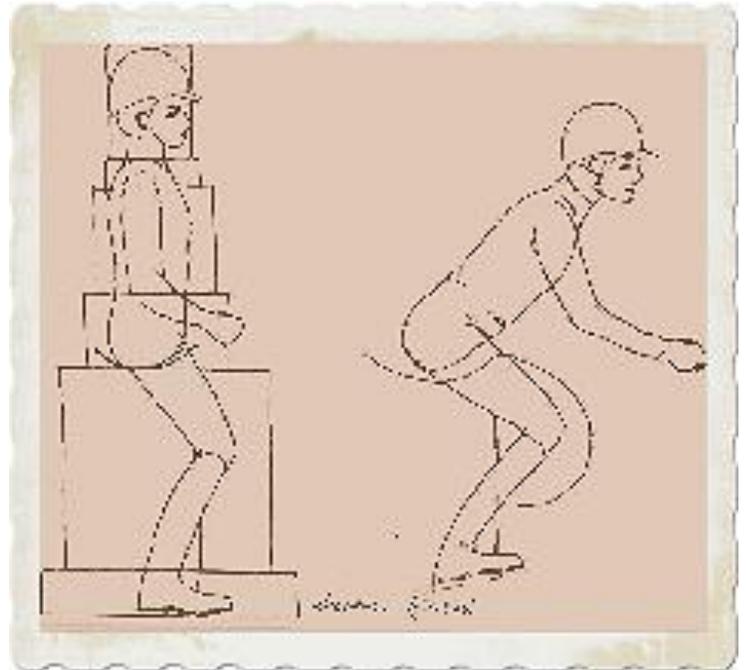
Imagine, if you will, a child stacking wooden blocks and you will quickly remember that if they are not carefully balanced one above the other, they will become unstable and possibly even fall down in a heap. When riding, it is also important, that your building blocks are balanced correctly.

What are the building blocks that are used for riding? You may not always need all of the blocks, as we will later explain, but here are the five important building blocks. The bottom (and largest) building block is your legs and feet. Next is your pelvis, then rib cage, your shoulders are next, and the last building block is your head and neck. Viewing the body sideways, the correct line up of building blocks for flat work will allow for a plumb line to be dropped from your ear through the tip of the shoulder, hip joint and ankle. Just before it passes through your hip joint, you will find it going straight through your center. Just as your center must be over your feet when standing on the ground, the same is true in any correct riding position. However, you don’t always need all five of the building blocks. For example, in a jumping position or when galloping, you only need to line up two – your center and your feet. The mass of your hips stays behind the plumb line to offset the weight of your forward-reaching head and shoulders.

In addition to a body that is balanced from head to toe, the other two essentials of building blocks are properly adjusted stirrups and a correctly balanced saddle. The proper length of your stirrups will depend upon the conformation of you, the rider, your horse and the type of saddle you use. Balance and efficiency in the use of your legs is the key. When your legs are in the correct position, your feet should rest lightly but flat in the stirrups. In my book “Centered Riding,” I give some pointers to determining the proper length of stirrups.

The second essential ingredient for proper use of building blocks is your saddle. Many saddles are designed so that proper balance is impossible due to the conformation of your horse. This is why you see so many saddles boosted up behind with foam rubber pads or cushions. The lowest part of the saddle must be in the middle close to the pommel of the saddle. If our saddle is too far back, there is no way you can ride in good building-block form.

In Chapter 3 of my book, I give some exercises you can do using all four basics to check yourself to see if your building blocks are truly correct and that you are riding in balance. By performing these exercises, you will notice the affect you have on your horse and how being balanced is easier on your horse.



The results of the proper use of building blocks are consistent balance with your horse's movements and fluid and comfortable motion of your horse. The rapid, high-headed horse who has been trying to catch up to his rider's head and shoulders in order to avoid the bumps on his back that result when your center is behind will gradually relax; his strides will become slower and longer; his head will go down and his back will come up. The lethargic horse will begin to move forward more freely, with longer strides, and become more alert. You and your horse will feel more fluid as you come into balance with each other and become a "horse-person" team, rather than just a person on a horse.

Drawing by Susan Harris, Level IV Clinician from Cortland, New York.