



## Feet and Balance Sally Swift Notes (2)

The rope for a tightrope walker is almost 3 inches wide and flat. Even so the tightrope walker must be careful to place the median line of his foot along his supporting rope. The lengthwise balance of the foot, from side to side, is not in the apparent middle. Trace a line from between your big and second toes to about 1/4 inch inside the middle of your heel and you will find the lengthwise balance of your foot.

Trace another line across your foot 1/4 to 1/2 inch behind the base of your little toe, which is just behind your metatarsal joints, and you will find the point of front and back balance.

Where these two lines cross, just behind the metatarsal joints, is a soft, central, receptive part of the foot. In acupuncture it is called the Bubbling Spring point. In my martial arts class, we were encouraged to receive energy up into our bodies from the ground through the Bubbling Spring. This sensation can happen also from the stirrup.

The following practice is helpful sometimes for the first lesson, but often has more meaning at a later time. With feet out of the stirrups, hold student's lower leg at the appropriate angle, foot somewhat back so the lower leg is slanted back, knee in front of the stirrup leather. The knee then can bend easily. Face the horse's tail and put middle fingers of both hands under the Bubbling Spring. Move the foot up and down gently in the diagonal direction of the lower leg, a little forward and up, not just straight up and down. Have the student note how far up in his body he can feel the effect of this motion. They will feel it at least through the hip joint and many people feel it to the neck.

Then, standing in the same way, place your fingers under the metatarsal joint of the student's foot, which is the normal place to carry the stirrup. Using the same direction and pressure as before, move the foot. For you the movement will feel dead as if blocked between knee and ankle. The student feels this too. The knee and hip joint jiggle but will not flex as before. The student will easily feel the difference between the pressure causing the jiggle and the free flexion of the first movement.

Put the student's foot in the stirrup with the outside edge of the stirrup about at the base of the little toe and the tread of the stirrup at right angles to the horse's body. This is diagonally across the rider's foot and goes right under the Bubbling Spring. Let the knee be in front of the stirrup leather, the ankle be behind the stirrup leather, with the lower leg slanted somewhat back, bringing the lower leg on the horse's side 2 or 3 inches behind the girth. The touch of the foot on the stirrup tread should be even all across, not more on the inside or the outside. Too much pressure on the outside is the most common.

To acquire the level foot, rest your hands softly over the front of the foot and around the back of the heel. Ask the rider to play tunes on the piano using each individual toe, soft tunes, not bangy ones. Show them how with your fingers on their thigh. Then put your hands around the ankle, one hand around the front, the other around the back, low down so your fingers cover the two sides of the talus bone. This is a rounded bone in the foot that supports the tibia and fibula of the lower leg and distributes the weight in all directions through the many bones of the foot. This is a balancing bone for the whole body. Just holding your hands there to bring the rider's awareness to it will allow the bone very subtly to slide into place. You will feel it happen of itself with no pressure from you. It can also help, without stirrups, to softly support the whole foot from underneath and around the sides and slowly tip the foot so the toe goes up and the heel down and visa versa. A little is enough.

Don't force it. Then tip it sideways both ways, again with no force, just suggesting with your supportive hands and traveling with it. Do this a few times in each direction. These exercises will almost always result in a soft foot and ankle, with toes spread all over the stirrup tread and the rider feeling as if his foot were resting softly on the level ground.

With the foot in the stirrup, finish by slapping the sole of the foot. Use alternate hands with one of your hands always under the stirrup and the other hand under the toes or instep and heel. Keep traveling back and forth always with a hand under the stirrup - double time for the Bubbling Spring. This makes the foot tingle and gives the rider a wonderful connection to the ground.

It also eases the shock (for some people) of riding with the stirrup further back than they may be used to carrying it. If the student finds it strange and awkward, urge them to bear with it while they go out and ride for maybe 10 minutes. Almost always, by that time they love the results - freer bodies, ankles, knees and hips, better balance, easy to keep legs under in the correct place, quieter lower legs. The horse, too, tends to round up under the rider and move more freely forward.

People with a very high instep may find it difficult if not impossible to ride the foot flat on their. They tip sideways onto the little toes which is both unsightly and uncomfortable, and can stress the knee joints. I am told that a very high instep can be corrected to a more normal position which will also lessen the tendency to shin splints.

Even to the uneducated eye, holding the stirrups under the balance point versus the more conventional manner makes a distinct difference. Having the stirrups under that point produces a balance and light springiness through the entire body of the rider that is not there with the conventional stirrup position. The viewer sees clearly that the conventional rider needs more effort to maintain balance or remains slightly off balance, usually behind, with the resulting necessity of stiffening the knee. In the new position, the horses respond by stepping farther under with the hind legs, rounding their backs and moving forward with more ease and energy. The rider can turn the ease and balance on and off by shifting the stirrup position back and forth. However the conventional position is improved by practice in the new balance position.

Some people habitually ride with their heels higher than their toes, always reaching for the stirrup on tip toe. Others ride with their heels too low, causing unnecessary tension in the ankles, knees, and hips. With the stirrups under the balance point, the rider's feet automatically come into a position more level with the ground, but the soft ankle will allow springy depth of the heel as needed for activities such as jumping.

Why have so many people not tried or used this positioning of the stirrups before? One reason is the constant command to "Push your heels down;" riders are urged to use greater leverage to send them down. Unfortunately the resulting tensions through the whole body usually limits the descent, and the excessive tension locks the ankle joint and sends the feet out in front of the body.

Some dressage riders consider it more elegant, more like the old masters, to hold the stirrup nearer the toe. However, the nearer the stirrup is to the end of the foot, the more the rider must grab downwards with his toes in his boots to keep the stirrup on. This in turns stiffens everything above.

Fortunately, most people who ride cross-country, event or foxhunt automatically carry their stirrups under the balance point for comfort and safety. Working Western riders say they would have terrible ankle and leg cramps at the day's end if they carried their stirrups in any place but the Bubbling Spring point.



Please note that different the exact location of the "bubbling spring" or balance point of the foot varies in different people. You must find it by feel and the individual's reaction—you cannot look at a rider's foot or boot and tell someone where it "must" be.