RIDING WIDE AWAKE

By Paula Josa-Jones • Photos by Pam White (pamwhiteart.com)

> "Exercises based on a holistic system of movement analysis offer a means for improving dressage performance."

A dedicated dressage rider is always looking for ways to improve. Yet making significant progress in the saddle can be a challenge. It's easy to get caught up in trying to correct certain aspects of a ride, but that approach—a fix here, a fix there—is rarely completely successful. Achievement more often comes from being able to see the big picture—the whole rather than the individual parts. This is especially true for riders who want to be more confident. Focusing not on the use of hand or seat or legs but on the totality of parts and their concerted movement can yield telling insights that provide a framework for effective change and lasting improvement.

The Study of Movement & You

The concept of movement analysis may be new to you. But it is routine for dancers and athletes as well as physical and occupational therapists. There are a number of approaches, but one that can be particularly useful for dressage riders is known as Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis. It combines the work of two movement theorists, Rudolf von Laban (1879–1958), a Hungarian dance artist and choreographer, and his student Irmgard Bartenieff (1900–1981).

Often recognized as a visionary whose ideas bridged the gap between the performing arts and science, Laban developed a system that defined all elements of human movement in terms of body, effort, shape and space. The basic components could then be identified and examined alone and in relation to one another.

Bartenieff, a dancer and physical therapist, applied Laban's movement theory to the physical and kinesiological functioning of the human body as she worked with dancers and polio patients. The concepts, principles and exercises she developed as a physical reeducation method became known as Bartenieff Fundamentalstm.

Together the work of Laban and Bartenieff provides an elegant tool for you to use as you attempt to achieve your dressage goals: being balanced, aware and expressive as you create a balanced, willing and expressive horse with whom you enjoy an unobstructed flow of movement.

Putting the Theory to Work

Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis can help you become a better rider by increasing your awareness of:

- connectivity: the relationships among body parts
- initiation: where movement originates in the body
- sequencing: how movement transitions through the body
- internal support: breath and the bodily systems of bones, muscles, nerves, ligaments, fluids, endocrine glands and organs.

Of these four components, connectivity is especially important in broadening a rider's viewpoint to become more successful in the saddle. Dressage riders experience many types of connection based on developmental movement patterning. In this article, we will consider: 1. The relationship between the head and the tail or coccyx and 2. The relationship between upper and lower body.

Because riding requires a high degree of both central stability and fluid mobility, it is essential to find alignment around the vertical central column of your spine as it balances

Strengthen the Head/Tail Connection

Exercise 1: Big X Curl

Benefits: This movement integrates the whole body, creating a clear sense of connection between your trunk and what I think of as six limbs: the two arms, two legs, head and tail.

How to: Lie on your back and keep your spine in a neutral position—in other words, don't press it down. Extend your arms and legs to create an X shape (1). Imagine all six limbs radiating from your navel.

Become aware of your breathing and as you exhale and curl onto your side, sweeping your limbs along the floor in an arc (2). Softly hollow your abdominal muscles as you bring your head and tail toward each other (3).

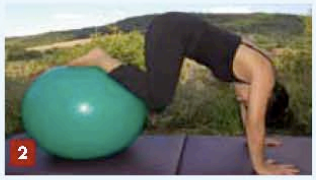
Now inhale and slide your limbs back to the starting position. Think of them radiating from your navel and allow each one to bloom back into place to form the X again. Move all six limbs smoothly and simultaneously.

Considerations: Initiate the exercise from your fingers and toes (distally) rather than from your head and tail (your core). Then try beginning from your elbows and knees (mid-limb). Does one approach feel more connected or natural than the other? Sense the three-dimensional volume of your whole body.

Exercise 2: Big Ball Curl

Benefit: Working with an inflatable exercise ball subtly challenges balance and brings more differentiated engagement to your core. Note: If you are unaccustomed to working with a ball, you may want to have a spotter help you maintain your balance.

How to: Position your abdomen over a medium-sized (22- to 26-inch) exercise ball. Place your hands on the ground and spread your fingers so your palms feel rooted to the spot. Roll out over the ball until it is supporting your thighs, just above your knees. You are now in the plank position (1). Feel your navel and the front of your body lift to support the viscera and spine (2). Imagine the tubular esophagus in your throat lifting slightly to support your neck vertebrae. *(continued on next page)*



Breathe out and with a strong, sustained action lift your abdominals slightly to create a shallow whole-body curve. Inhale and return to the plank position.

Roll out on the ball a bit farther so that your shins are resting on it and notice the small balancing adjustments that your body is making. Do not respond by gripping! Initiating from both the navel and legs, bend your knees and pull the ball toward your hands. At the same time curl your head and tail toward each other and hollow your abdominals toward your spine.

Extend your legs to return to the plank position with your shins resting on the ball.

Repeat a few times. To dismount from the ball, use your hands to slowly push your body back over it until you can place your feet on the ground.

Considerations: The entry into and exit from each exercise also are the exercise. The quality of the effort—smooth sequencing, connectivity and breath support—is more important than the number of repetitions that you do.

Exercise 3: Mounted Curl & Extend

Benefit: Extending and curling will help you feel the relationship between the front and back of your body as well as bring awareness to the vertical line of your spine.

How to: Sit on your horse and ask someone to hold him for you. As you exhale, curl your head toward your tail, bending your spine in a gradated curve—resist bending one part to a greater degree than the rest. Likewise, don't forcibly push your spine back. Instead, move your belly toward your back as you. Keep your arms over your ears.

Now inhale and extend/lengthen your spine the other way into a smooth arch. Reach up and back with your head and down and back with your tail to create a long tensile arc. Allow the abdominals to soften forward in a lengthening arc, supporting and extending the spine along the column of the breath.

Considerations: Notice any tension in your hands, arms and shoulders as you move smoothly from curling to extending. Be aware of a tendency to tighten your legs, brace your pelvis or contract your feet or ankles during the exercise. If you are tempted to strain or stretch, reduce the effort and feel how the resulting relaxation is transmitted into your seat, neck, shoulders and legs. Visualize your horse flexing and extending his spine and breathing deeply as you continue to invite elasticity and breath into your own spine.

Improve Upper & Lower Body Connection

Exercise 4: Jump In, Jump Out

Benefit: This exercise integrates the head–tail pattern with a jumping action of the lower body.

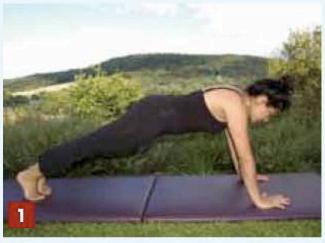
How to: Starting on hands and knees, press up with your legs and extend your body into a plank position (1). Remember the sense of internal support from the Big Ball Curl and actively engage the front of your body in a lifting movement that supports the spine. Don't simply push with your arms and legs and collapse your spine.

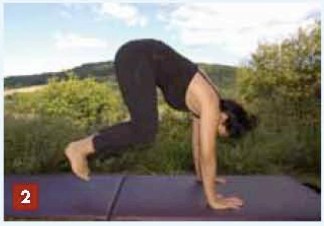
As you stabilize with your upper body, exhale and jump your legs toward your hands (2), curving your whole spine from head to tail (3). Now jump your legs back to the plank position.

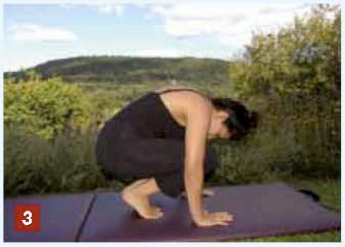
Make the movement strong, direct and quick like a punch, with a solid push through your arms. Support the movement with your breath: Exhale completely when jumping in and fully inhale when jumping out. Keep the action of your legs spoke-like and direct. Feel a lengthening engagement of your inner thighs without pressing them together. This helps to recruit the supporting core muscles.

Repeat three times then come back to all fours and rest in child's pose.

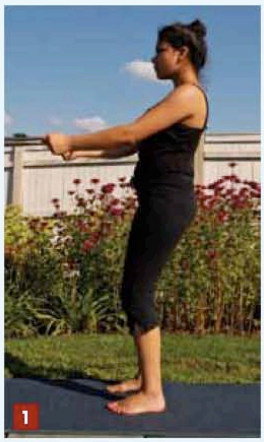
Considerations: To be effective, you must notice and allow the alternate relaxation and engagement of the back and belly muscles as you dynamically bend and extend the spine.

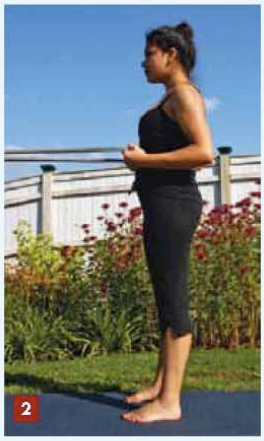






Exercise 5: Upper Core Activation





Benefit: The muscles of the upper core are important because they provide support for the arms and shoulders. When the upper core is weak or tense, the sternum collapses, the shoulder girdle cannot be supported on the back and the pectoral muscles pull the shoulders forward, destabilizing the seat. When upper-body connectivity is lost, a rider's elbows and hands may become stiff and braced and her rein aids may turn heavy and hard.

How to: For this exercise, you'll need a stretchy yellow Thera-Band® resistance band. Tie it to a doorknob or other suitable support at elbow height. Position yourself far enough away so your arms and the Thera-Band are extended (1). Bend your knees slightly. Inhale and draw your elbows back, initiating from the lower inner margin of each shoulder blade (scapula) and using a drawing-down action (2). Don't simply squeeze your shoulder blades together. Imagine you're trying to tuck your scapula into your back pockets without shortening your lower back. Feel the internal support of your lungs and rib cage. Slowly extend your arms, maintaining the width in the front of the shoulders.

Considerations: Repeat this movement several times, noticing the difference between scapula (core) and elbow (mid-limb) initiation. Feel the movement in your clavicles, ribs, sternum, spine and hips. Don't just exercise, explore!

Exercise 6: Rising Trot Mounted

Benefit: The rising trot is a beautiful example of successive movement sequencing and a good way to look at upper and lower body connectivity as you ride. As you rise, the movement from your horse's trot and your lower body is transmitted in a fluid, unbroken chain through your upper body and out through the top of your head.

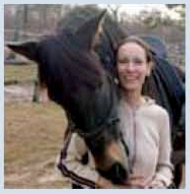
How to: Focus on creating a pure vertical dimensionality with a heels-to-seat-bones push in the up-and-down movement. Bring your attention to having your movement relate purely to the central axis of the body, visualizing the continuum of heels to head.

Considerations: When there is a break in the upper-body/lower-body connection, a rider's movement interferes with the flow of her horse's movement. For example, when a rider sits in a chair position during the trot, she has to pitch forward to rise, and her head tilts forward or back. There is an imbalance from left to right instead of a clear bilateral push from the feet. The core muscles don't create sufficient vertical stability, and the feet are an unstable platform for the upward vertical press.

over your horse's spine. Understanding the relationship between your own head and tail can create more fluidity, suppleness and articulation in your spine as well as new ways of finding the balancing midline. See exercises 1, 2 and 3. Our task as riders is to deepen the seat and lengthen the legs while maintaining an effortless buoyant lift in the upper body. This connection between the upper and lower body is the supple and stabilizing conduit that allows us to maintain a vertical position on a horse. Learning to articulate each separately from the other can help us feel more plugged in to that central vertical column of the body. See exercises 4, 5 and 6. As you become increasingly familiar with the exercises I've outlined, you'll gain a greater appreciation for the movement of your entire body as you ride. Your heightened awareness will help you to be more balanced, relaxed and expressive in the saddle, and your horse will become more responsive and engaged.

Thanks to model Chandrika Carl-Jones and Brandi Rivera and Jackie Hand.

Paula Josa-Jones, MA, is a certified Laban Movement Analyst, a Registered Somatic Movement Educator/Therapist and a Tellington TTEAM Practitioner.



She uses an embodied and intuitive approach to the human–horse connection. A choreographer, director and equestrian, she has created theatrical choreography for people and developed performances with horses, dancers and riders. Her Web site is ridehorsedances.com.