

Snippet 12: Building Blocks

The phrase “Building Blocks” is one of the basics of the teachings of Sally Swift in her Centered Riding philosophy. Her blocks for humans are arranged vertically with all the sides of the little square blocks aligned and all the corners matching. That describes perfect posture for us humans.

But horses have Building Blocks as well. Theirs are divided a bit differently and certainly are arranged differently as theirs are horizontal. Still, when we riders speak of straightness, we are thinking that their blocks have the sides aligned and the corners matching just like ours. That gives them good posture!

This again is what Sally taught. “Comparable Parts”, she said. What we do with our parts usually is mirrored by our horses. Other authors have pointed out that the point of harmony is where horses and riders’ spines meet in alignment. And from that harmony comes the beauty that we so want to produce.

An examination of the details is needed to achieve that harmony and beauty. In Centered Riding the human blocks are: Feet and Legs; Pelvis, Rib Cage, Shoulder Girdle and Arms, Head and Neck. If we imagine these blocks hanging from an imaginary sky hook, it is a lot easier to line them up and keep them organized. The fun process is “take your reins in one hand. With your free hand put your finger in your ear on that side. Walk your fingers up from there to the top of your head. That is the spot from which your spine would come out of the top of your head if it could. Notice that it is a bit farther back than you might have imagined. Tap it to feel it too. Now run the “string” of your spine up to the sky hook and hang down. Rattle around a little. Let the blocks stack up. With your ground person check their alignment and squareness of the “corners.”

That is Building Blocks for riders and how to get your spine to come to rest totally vertically on top of the horses’ spine.

For the Horse. His Building Blocks are divided differently from humans. His are: Head, Neck, Shoulder Girdle and Front Limbs, Rib Cage, Pelvis and Back Limbs. Since these Building Blocks are organized horizontally, there is no possibility for hanging from a string. Instead all the Building Blocks hang down from the support of the horses’ top line muscles and ligaments. This used to be described as a “bridge, but for me there are too many designs of bridges for that to be a universal picture.

Everything hanging down from an elastically firm clothesline is a better picture. Starting from the front, the nuchal ligament down the top of the neck supports the head and the neck blocks. (No calling your sweet horse a blockhead now!) The nuchal ligament reaches down through ligaments to each of the seven cervical vertebrae and holds up that part of the skeleton. The nuchal ligament goes over the fulcrum of the withers and morphs into the long back muscles. One of these is on each side of the spine and has many downward attachments to the many small muscle enveloping the rib cage.

The Long Back muscles morph into the gluteus maximus muscles on each side of the pelvis to encompass and support its two sides. The last morph is into the hamstrings which help hold the rear limbs on and move them.



To repeat. The Horses' horizontally aligned Building Blocks all are suspended and hang down from the Top Line muscles and ligaments. Straightness involves keeping these blocks lined up and "square". This allows for the Horse to Reach through that structure and look for the contact with the rider's receiving/returning hand. ONLY Straight horses can and will do that. Then the energy produce by the hind quarters can flow all the way through its Blocks. That is described as "being through". When the top line works properly, the skeleton is supported, and impact on the joints is minimized. Then the horse can look forward to a long and pain free useful life with us as we usually wish it to be.