

# MODULE 8: Breaking Down the Exercises – Balance Exercises

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The *Ridefit* exercises can generally be broken down into the four areas of effectiveness: balance, coordination, stability and mobility. In this module we'll explore in detail various balance exercises that are central to the *Ridefit* program, clarify proper form and execution, and discuss modifications to the exercises to accommodate riders of all fitness levels. And finally, we'll outline the most important criteria for creating balance exercises that will uniquely benefit riders, so that you can come up with customized fitness programs for your equestrian clients.

As we discovered in Module 2, balance on a horse is different from standing balance, in that the rider is A) on a moving object, and B) generally seated, or kneeling after a fashion. All of the standing balance training in the world is not going to significantly improve seated balance, and therefore we must use unique exercises to train that specific type of balance. Furthermore, fitness training on a moving object is not generally a capability that people have conveniently at their disposal, nor is it a common equipment type available at a gym. Therefore, we must get somewhat creative in our choice of exercises and equipment to give riders the best feeling for the balance they need in the saddle.

Additionally, we effectively “train” balance by challenging the body’s ability to find its equilibrium – or by essentially putting the client “off balance”, requiring their bodies to quickly adapt so as not to tip over. This puts the client inherently at risk of falling, so care should be taken in ensuring the client has taken precautions to prevent injuring themselves while they establish a greater proficiency.

It may be helpful to remind the rider that balance training necessarily will feel awkward and that they may feel inept, uncoordinated, or struggle greatly as they attempt these exercises. Help them understand that the more awkward and uncomfortable they feel, the more benefit they will be gaining. This can help normalize their uncomfortable feelings while helping them come to appreciate the struggle and the process of training their bodies for greater competence in the saddle.

## Core *Ridefit* Balance Exercises

### Seated balance on the ball

**Primary objective:** minimizing the movement of the unstable balance ball, while maintaining an upright torso, a relaxed lower back, and releasing tension throughout the body.

**Performing the exercise:** The rider should be seated on a stability ball of the proper height for their body (while sitting on the ball as though in a chair, their knees should bend at approximately a 90 degree angle to their bodies and the ground). Shorter clients should be seated on a smaller ball, while taller clients should be seated on a larger ball.

Once comfortably seated on the ball, the rider should find a spot to fix his/her eyes on and then lift the feet off the floor and hold them up for at least 60 seconds. The feet can either come out straight ahead of the body, or can be brought back and to the side of the ball. Each method will challenge the balance in slightly different ways, and therefore it is useful to vary the position of the legs in this exercise.

- Legs lifted to the front of the ball will cause a tendency for the rider to attempt to balance their bodies by leaning back. This should be discouraged. The rider may also try to balance by collapsing in the waist. Instead, the rider should be encouraged to sit up straight, with a flat, but not rounded lower back, and lifted chest while maintaining a tension-free posture.
- Feet lifted to the side of the ball will tend to encourage the rider to tighten through their quadriceps muscle attachments at the front of their hips. These muscles are often weak in riders, and this may cause some discomfort as they initially attempt this exercise. This position may also expose some hamstring weakness, and riders may also tend to try to flex their ankles too far, thinking they must keep their heels “down”. However, in this position, the heels cannot be kept “down” without extreme contraction of the shin muscles, so this should be discouraged. It is important to remind the riders to keep all the muscles they are not actively using relaxed and in neutral positions so as not to introduce unnecessary tension into their joints.

Whatever way the rider practices this exercise, he or she should be encouraged to feel both seat bones evenly on the ball at all times. Riders will very often try to balance the ball by bringing their awareness and muscle tension up into their shoulders. They should be encouraged to drop their weight into their seats (sitting “heavy”), breathe deeply, and release their lower backs “down” – slightly reducing the curve of the low back. This will actually stabilize their balance more quickly than any other effort – underlining the fact that on the horse, a relaxed rider is the most balanced, secure and stable rider.

**Modifications:** Once riders have become accustomed to the feeling of this seated balance, it will be very important to introduce other ways of moving, controlling and relaxing different parts of their body, changing their head position, etc, in order to continue challenging and strengthening their sense of seated equilibrium. Such modifications may include:

- Dropping the arms down and letting them hang relaxed (the tendency will be for the rider to lift his or her arms in an attempt to assist their body’s balance), and/or holding them in a relaxed riding position with soft wrists – making wrist circles will help keep the arms relaxed.
- Lifting the arms overhead, to the front and out to the side. Each change in position will further challenge their body’s balance.
- Turning the head from left to right
- Twisting the whole upper body slowly from left to right, with arms in any position (at hips, out to the side, in front, etc) while maintaining the even weight on both seatbones and an upright but relaxed upper body.
- Moving the legs from front to side and back without putting the feet down.
- Imagining the ball is a clock face and controlling it with the pelvis by moving it from a 12 o’clock position to a 6 o’clock position, 3 to 9, and to all the other positions on a clock face.
- Holding free weights in hands and moving arms around.

- Leaning backward, forward, and from side to side.
- Bringing the arms up to shoulder height, with hands clasped in front of the chest, while making small oblique contractions with the latissimus dorsi muscles under the arms, and keeping the seatbones as even as possible.
- Lifting one leg at a time while attempting to keep the seatbones absolutely even will present a different challenge to the rider's seated balance and will improve leg control in the saddle.
- Practicing a "half halt" movement – flattening the back while gently engaging the transvers abdominus muscles of the core body while keeping the seatbones absolutely even, both side to side and front to back, will bring great awareness to how effectively the rider is half-halting. If the ball tries to roll forward out from under the rider, this will indicate that they are likely pushing their horse too much onto the forehand in their half-halt attempts, while if the ball tries to roll backward, it will indicate that the rider is incorrectly attempting to half-halt by tilting their pubis forward. This action will tend to cause the horse to hollow slightly and leave the hind legs out behind itself rather than encouraging the horse to bring the hind legs forward under the body, and carry more weight – as a half-halt should do. This exercise cannot be over-estimated in its value for the Dressage rider.

**Additional notes** about the seated balance training on the ball:

- The firmness of the ball will reduce or increase the difficulty of this exercise. A very firm ball will be significantly more challenging to balance than a less inflated ball by virtue of the fact that there is less "play" in the ball itself. This will require the rider's balance to be much more precise. A less inflated ball will give the rider the impression of being more "wiggly", but the reality is that while it may require more muscular effort to steady, it will actually be less effective in training the rider's balance.
- Riders attempting this exercise for the first time will rarely be able to stabilize the ball sufficiently to keep their feet up for more than a second or two at a time. This will improve with practice.
- For safety purposes, it is highly advisable to position the rider next to a wall or something stable they can grab onto for support, should they become very off balance and start to tip over.
- Nearly every rider can develop proficiency with seated balance on the ball. The exception to this may be riders with vertigo. These rider should be approach this exercise with care to always have a support nearby to prevent them falling and suffering an injury.
- Encouraging riders to position their balance ball in front of the television and sit on it rather than a couch or a chair when they are watching shows is an excellent way to increase the speed at which they gain proficiency at this exercise.

### **Lying back on the ball with one leg lifted**

**Primary Objective:** This exercise has three objectives – first, to challenge the rider's balance in a slightly different way, such that the brain has to continuously adapt with the head in a different position while still maintaining the hips and core as a base of support, second, to counteract the instinctual sense that

most humans have that they must lean forward for a sense of safety on the horse, and finally to train the rider's body in advanced body awareness and control.

**Performing the exercise:** The rider should lie back on the ball, which should be positioned approximately under the lower back, with knees bent to about a 90 degree angle, and feet squarely on the floor. Arms should be initially brought out to either side of the ball to provide a steadier balance and a way to "catch" the individual should the ball roll to one side or the other. The rider should then lift one leg and hold it up for at least 60 seconds, repeating with the other leg. This exercise is much more difficult than it appears, and it is not at all unusual for riders to initially struggle greatly simply to lift their foot off the ground.

**Modifications:** Once the riders are somewhat secure in their balance for this exercise, they may be encouraged to bring their hands up to be clasped behind their heads. This will support their necks and prevent any potential strain of the neck muscles. Any change to the position of any body part during this exercise will add difficulty to this exercise.

- Add ankle flexions (up and down) and circles (both right and left) with the foot that is being held up to further challenge the brain's ability to balance and multi-task.
- Changing the position of the head by turning it left and right will additionally challenge the rider's balance in this exercise.
- Also, moving the ball closer to the upper back or further towards the hips will change the center of gravity and thus challenge the balance in different ways.
- The rider may also lift the leg up and straighten it, making a "kicking" motion, which will also encourage greater adaptability of the brain.

**Additional notes:** This exercise is quite challenging, so any riders that may seem to have difficulty with balancing should do this exercise next to a wall or stable object on which they can support themselves should they start to tip to one side or the other. Riders should be discouraged from hanging their heads back in this exercise, and encouraged to support their heads and necks instead, to prevent unnecessary neck strain.

### **Kneeling balance on the ball**

This exercise is suited especially for jumper riders, who must be able to balance their upper body on a base of support that is in somewhat of a kneeling position. The exercise will significantly improve the rider's sense of balance and awareness of what their horse feels as they change from a half-seat position to a jumping position, and develop a finer control of this kneeling type of balance.

**Primary Objective:** maintaining a steady balance in a kneeling position, through any movement of the upper body.

**Performing the exercise:** The rider should be positioned near a wall or other stable surface on which they can support themselves while coming up onto the ball on their knees. They may use the tops of their feet and ankles to help stabilize their legs, but should stay up off their heels. Once they have found a stable feel on the ball and a fixed location on which to focus their eyes, they should let go of all

support and hold the ball steady beneath their knees. Some riders may prefer to start in a more upright position, with hands on their hips, while others may prefer to be more crouched. A more crouched position is more challenging, and will be more effective in training the jumper rider's balance. This position should be held for at least 60 seconds.

An alternate way of getting into the kneeling balance position on the ball is to stabilize the ball with the hands, while placing the knees one at a time onto the ball. This is a more advanced way of climbing into position, and should not be attempted until the rider is quite comfortable with the exercise.

**Modifications:** The duration of this exercise can gradually be increased to make this exercise more challenging and develop greater endurance in the riders. Additional modifications may include, but not be limited to:

- Having the rider hold their arms relaxed in a half-seat riding position, as though they are holding the reins.
- Moving the arms overhead, and into various positions around the body.
- Performing a “flapping wings” movement with the arms coming forward as the back rounds, and the arms coming backward as the back hollows.
- Moving the eyes from the fixed spot will significantly challenge the rider's balance in this kneeling position.
- Having the rider move from a half-seat position into a full release position with their upper bodies, as though they are going over a jump.
- Adding coordination exercises such as crossing the body with the arms to touch the knees, or juggling will bring this exercise up to an advanced degree of challenge.
- If this exercise is performed in a gym or studio with other equipment available, having the rider hold onto a strap or rope that the instructor is shaking back and forth and/or up and down will further improve the independence of the rider's base of support.

Additional notes: this exercise will develop great strength and stamina in the quadriceps muscles, especially near the attachments to the knees. Care should be taken to ensure proper stretching and mobility work is done to release any tension that may build up in those muscles. This exercise will very clearly indicate if a rider has a stronger leg (which most riders do), as the rider will tend to put more of his or her weight onto that leg. This should be carefully noted, with the rider encouraged and reminded to keep the ball exactly centered under their legs, and to challenge themselves in this manner.

There are many ways to train balance – with stability discs, Bosu, wobble boards, and any number of different equipment types, and these may be of great help to the rider. But, training the balance in a seated, lying or kneeling position on an unstable balance ball will be most effective in a sport-specific fitness plan for equestrians, due to the unique nature of the sport. These exercises will effectively “reset” the body's awareness of proper balance, and may straighten many a crooked rider, while simultaneously bringing their awareness to just exactly how much their balance faults can require the horse to compensate with their own bodies and balance.

# Module 8 Questions

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1. Which balance exercises would be most appropriate for a 70 year old rider who wishes to improve his or her riding balance?
2. Does a jumper rider need to have his or her seated balance trained?
3. Besides balance, what parts of the rider's body will benefit from the endurance training inherent in the kneeling ball balance?
4. What makes the single leg lift balancing exercise so effective for training rider balance?