

# The Equine Line

by Mary Agneessens

Since 1983 Certified Rolfer Mary Agneessens of Scottsdale, Arizona, has been teaching clinics for dressage associations throughout the country. For three years, she worked as a staff member for the National Dressage Federation's Instructors Seminar. Her seminars were based on the concept that a rider's position can have a deleterious effect on the horse's performance.

What I have found from my 19 years of working with horses is that often structural problems that arise are simply a reflection of how the horse is being used on a daily basis. I have also concluded that often it is more appropriate to change the training technique or the rider's position than to undo a horse's muscular defense. I strongly suggest to anyone who wants to Rolf horses - if it is possible - to watch the horse being ridden before making a decision about where to begin the Rolfing. If you are sure that the problem inherently lies with the horse, then I offer these few guidelines.

This is what I look for:

- Does the horse freely move forward? Forward is both a physical and mental attitude basically indicating whether or not this horse is happy and willing to go to work.
- When watching the horse work, does he carry himself or does he stiffen and lean against his rider? The reluctance of the horse to carry himself can be seen in various ways, e.g. leaning on the bit or the rider's aids.
- Is the horse supple? Can the horse maintain balance when he moves through a corner? When the spine of the horse is in motion, how many dimensions does its movement incorporate? How does the rib cage behave?

- What are the quality of his gaits? If a horse does anything but a pure gait then something along the way has created a problem. OFTEN it is from poor training, but occasionally it stems from an injury.

It takes a long time to really see equine movement, but here is a list of what to look for when studying the gaits.

## The Walk

### Definition:

- a) The walk has STEPS
- b) Four-beat motion
- c) No moment of suspension

### Sequence:

1. Right hind    3. Left hind
2. Right front   4. Left front

## The Trot

### Definition:

- a) The trot has STRIDES
- b) Two-beat motion
- c) Moment of suspension after each stride.
- d) The presence of DIAGONAL UNISON is absolutely necessary. This means that within the motion of any pair of legs, both legs must leave the ground at exactly the same moment. If the diagonal legs are not unified, an incorrect three- or four-beat motion occurs.

### Sequence:

Diagonal pairs of legs move alternately. There is a moment of suspension after each stride.

## The Canter

### Definition:

- a) The canter has jumps.
- b) Three-beat motion.
- c) A moment of suspension after the third beat
- d) The horse is on the correct lead when the inside front leg is leading

### Sequence:

1. Outside hind
2. A diagonal pair of legs (inside hind foot, outside front foot)
3. Inside front foot; then the moment of suspension.

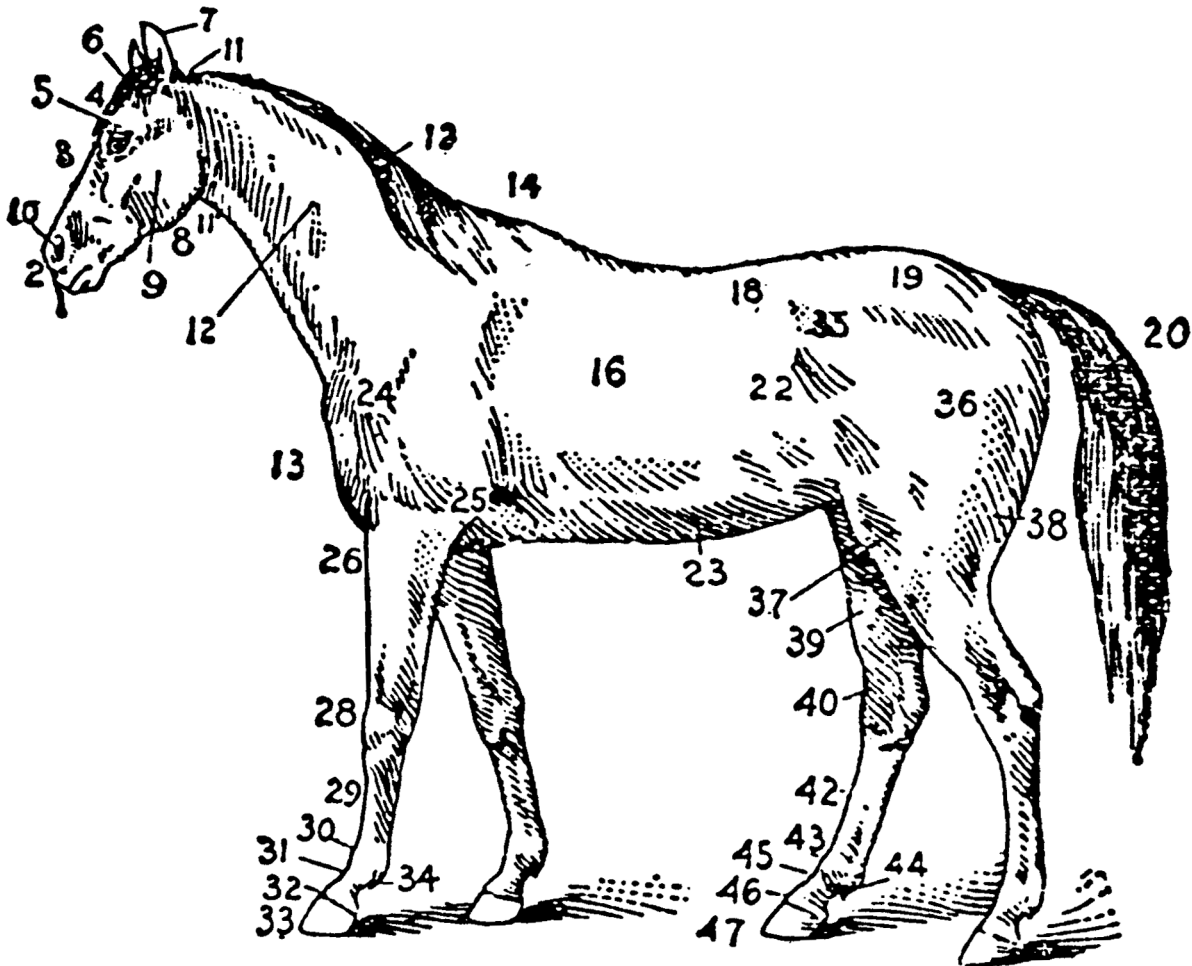
Those are just some of the guidelines that I have found to be useful to my work with horses. Please, in your endeavors of Rolfing the horse, remember that more often than not the problem stems from the rider's effect on the horse more than the inherent structure of the horse. So watch the horse being ridden and then watch the horse moving freely, without the rider, and notice what changes occur. Then make your decision as to whether or not you want to change this horse's defense system. I have found, from the many riders I have worked with, that only the finest equestrians take responsibility for their effect on the horse's structure.

An interesting perspective on Rolfing horses is that they are very similar to working with young children. For instance, they are a direct product of environmental influences. They try desperately to please those around them, and their confusion results in an emotional response. So be aware of the horse's environment, watch how he is handled and notice how he reacts to stimulus around him.

Horses are animals of flight. When they are frightened, their first instinct is to escape. A serious problem can occur if the horse feels he needs to escape from you. So, at all times, be aware and be careful. Never believe all those people who try to convince you that a certain horse is well-behaved. As an insider of the horse world, there are very few handlers who truly know what a well-mannered horse is.

I am more than willing to answer any questions you may have concerning Rolfing horses. Telephone (602)423-3882. ■

**dres-sage'** (drĕ-săzh'; *F.* drĕ'săzh'), *n.* [*F.*] *Manège.* Guidance of a mount through a set of maneuvers without perceptible use of the hands, reins, legs, etc.



**Horse.** 1 Lips; 2 Nose; 3 Face; 4 Forehead; 5 Eyebrows; 6 Forelock; 7 Ears; 8 Lower Jaw; 9 Cheek; 10 Nostril; 11 Poll; 12 Mane; 13 Chest; 14 Withers; 16 Ribs; 18 Loin; 19 Croup; 20 Tail; 22 Flank; 23 Belly; 24 Shoulder; 25 Elbow; 26 Forearm; 28 Knee; 29 Cannon or Shank; 30 Fetlock Joint; 31 Pastern; 32 Coronet; 33 Hoof; 34 Fetlock; 35 Haunch; 36 Thigh; 37 Stifle; 38 Buttock; 39 Gaskin; 40 Hock; 42 Cannon or Shank; 43 Fetlock Joint; 44 Fetlock; 45 Pastern; 46 Coronet; 47 Hoof. See also *HARNESSES, HOOF, Illusts.*