



Of Giants on Dwarves

By Tina Pantel

When it comes to tall people on small horses the opinions are split, from 'can't be done', to 'totally o.k.' Does the physical leverage of a rider who is 185 cm (6 foot) tall not constantly throw a pony with a height of 135 cm (4,5 foot) off balance? Is it even possible to ride according to classical principles in this situation or should other rules be used?



A stable and well balanced seat is immensely important for tall riders with long upper bodies.

Empires were conquered on small horses – the Mongols showed us how. The effectiveness of the Mongol army was in part based on the flexibility of their tough and hardy horses that were about 130 cm at the shoulders. To be sure every rider had two or three horses with him that could be exchanged to cover the greatest possible distances. Icelanders do the same today when they trek across the highlands. The motto is 'next pony please'. On the other hand, the Mongols were not the tallest of people and were therefore more proportional when it comes to rider versus horse height. It is a totally different picture when it comes to very tall riders on small Welsh or German sport ponies, Icelandic or Camargue horses, small quarter horses or other breeds or mixed breeds with a stock height of less than 150 cm (15 hands).

"The most extreme picture I have ever seen in one of my clinics, were very slender riders of about 190 cm (5 foot 10 Inches) on dainty Welsh C ponies with a height of 132 cm (13 hands). In two-point position the riders' upper body was longer than the ponies' necks", Stephan Vierhaus (trainer B, IGV) from Borken remembers; he is a proud 191 cm (5 foot 10 Inches) tall

himself. That was the only time he recommended to a tall rider to look for a somewhat larger and stockier horse. The students did not return.

Considering his size, Vierhaus himself does not ride every clinic horse. He points out that the stock height is not the most important issue. “The shorter the legs, the more curvature in the ribs and barrel, the better a relatively smaller horse can balance a tall rider because its centre of gravity is lower. Many ‘old fashioned’ Icelandic horses are therefore able to carry their tall riders sure-footed across the rocks and lava.” The modern ‘ultra slender’ model – here Vier-



The horse reflects the rider. Looking down and leaning forward are enough because of leverage to cause the horse to fall onto the forehead and move ‘into the ground’.

haus refers to the horses that are becoming leggier and daintier – has a lot more problems. Vierhaus discovered, “Many Icelandic horses try to balance a tall rider via speed. They literally run behind their centre of gravity and end up on the forehead.”

If you want to get a feel for this situation he suggests that you carry a child on your shoulders and to ask it to lean in different directions. “You notice right away how quickly you will tense up in order to stay balanced. The horse has the same problem and tenses up with the slightest weight aids.”

Birgitta Beyring from Fintel had the same experiences with her Icelandic gelding Samson. The



The rider sits upright and straight. The horse moves forward, the hind end clearly steps towards the centre of gravity and the horse carries itself.

rider who is 179 cm (5ft 10 Inches) tall and weighs a slight 58 kg (128 pounds) points out: “Tall riders should not forget that all of their movements immensely influence the balance of a relatively small horse since their long upper body acts as a lever. A two-point seat that may work well on a big horse may already be too much for a small horse and bring it onto the forehand. The trainer should make sure that a tall rider works especially on a stable seat and self-awareness of any movement. In lateral movements smaller changes to the rider’s weight distribution are often enough to allow the horse to step under the new centre of gravity.”



Kerstin Diacont (52), photo on the left, trainer and author (‘Individual Training for Horse and Rider’) from Neu-Isenburg can only agree. The former Hessian champion in trail, horsemanship and reining rides dressage up to class M and coaches students for a variety of breeds and riding styles. “The horse has to deal with the main problem. It has to find its balance under a relatively high additional weight relative to its

own weight. Light and leggy ponies are worse off in this regard than stocky ones with shorter legs. The lower the horse’s centre of gravity the easier it can find its balance.” This does not mean that uneven pairings cannot have fun though since small horses are ‘just handier’. The most important part is a balanced and stable seat with a straight upper body. Careful when it comes to riding canter. According to Diacont it is the most problematic among all gaits and exercises when it comes to balance. Most small horses have problems with the clear-beat canter with suspension and one leg support. The horses run behind their centre of gravity, can’t corner or have a four-beat canter. “Here is helps to engage the hind end so the horse will lift its back to balance itself and get off the hand. This is true for all horses of course but especially for those who have balance issues because of their tall riders.”

Cornelia Endres (56), photo on the right, national trainer for the German pony dressage riders in Dülmen-Buldern, knows the typical seat faults very tall riders sport. She herself is quite short and slender but often deals with children and youth who suddenly go through growth spurts and become too tall for their German sport ponies. These ponies are allowed to be 148 cm (14 ½ hands) tall at the shoulder in competitions for riders under 16. These riders can have a maximum weight of 62 kg (136 pounds) according to the



show guidelines but their height is not taken into account. "Many tall riders sit crookedly, make themselves smaller and thereby pull up their knees and heels. This means they don't sit deep enough in the saddle and their driving aids are not effective. Here we have to work a lot with the seat and riding without stirrups can help, too."

Conny Endres and Stephan Vierhaus agree that a tall rider with a long upper body is best served with a horse that is built 'uphill' and has 'a lot of neck'. "A stocky horse can also compensate for long legs better than a small one", Endres says. But what to do with the long legs while in the saddle? And which saddle is best to compromise between horse and rider? Birgitta Beyring knows how difficult it is for most riders of Icelandic horses to find a suitable saddle, "The saddle has to fit a relatively short back, but has to be roomy enough for the rider's butt. Here many riders cross into gray areas". Riders with long legs often need a larger seat so the upper leg has enough space. When the horse is short backed, this can lead to a saddle that sits too far in the loin region. Tall riders often only have the upper part of their calves at the horse. "In principle this does not matter because that area is enough to give proper leg aids. It does become a problem though when the rider thinks he has to have his whole leg at the horse somehow. He will twist his leg out, opens the knees and sits on a smaller base area. This leads to a less stable seat overall". Kerstin Diacont describes the problem. For tall people it makes more sense to keep their legs hanging loosely and turn the leg inwards from the hip joint. This keeps them much more stable and they do not need the lower leg.

In the scene of the Paso riders there also are many tall and heavy riders on the elegant gaited horses from South America that often have little curvature to their barrel, narrow cannon bones and long and weak fetlocks. "In South America the ranch owners breed enough horses. When one has a problem they take the next one", Stephan Vierhaus explains an increasing 'when broken, replace' mentality some riders sport. Where will it end? "Horse and rider have to be happy, and also get along among their peers. When a rider has to listen to silly talk all the time, such as 'can't you afford a real horse?' he has to be very says the IGV trainer.



Birgitta Beyring and her Icelandic gelding Samson

Vierhaus suggests that alternatives will have to be found when horses pump to an extreme degree during trail rides and have a hard time to get back to their regular pulse frequency. For

Conny Endres a rider who is too tall is acceptable, one who is too heavy is not. "That is not compatible with good equine husbandry." Birgitta Beyring was seldom confronted with rude words, but that may depend on the fact that many riders "accept it more that adult riders ride this rather special breed. I therefore like to explain the Icelandic horses are really not ponies as such, but rather small horses that are quite capable to carry even tall riders of normal weight for longer periods of time without suffering health issues". Where does it end when it comes to height? "When a rider is tall enough that his toes could touch his horse's knees while riding, he should maybe decide that the pony is a bit too small; even if he is very light. Riders who are too heavy should also not ride ponies, even stocky ones. The gear alone adds often more than ten kg. A horse cannot raise its back correctly with 'unlimited kgs on top'.

Seat tips by Kerstin Diacont for tall riders on small horses

- Aids have to come from a stable seat and not from arms and lower legs
- Many (and not only small) horses use the rider's hand as a fifth wheel and cannot balance themselves. Here the rider has to remember: keep the contact to the mouth but refuse to balance the horse with the reins
- When the upper body stays straight (seat bones point down, the edge of the pelvis faces up) we give the horse a stable frame and help it to balance itself
- Aids should be given short and flash-like. When the rider can be fine with his aids, he can sit more quietly
- Don't try to wrap your whole legs around the horse; instead keep them loosely hanging and turn them inward from the hip socket. That stabilizes the core
- Driving aids only with the upper part of the lower leg
- Careful with strong seat aids: a small movement with the upper body or the collapsing of a hip can throw a horse immensely off balance
- Leaning back will overload the horse's shoulder and bring it more on the forehand
- A horse has to offer enough energy from the hind end and must not block it in the back or neck. That allows it to balance itself correctly below the rider and remain steerable.

Text: Tina Pantel / Fotos: Birgitta Beyring, Barbara Schnabel, Jürgen Stroscher, private.

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