

horses ^{and} people

October 2016

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"As rider aspirations go up, horse welfare goes down." We all know there is an unfortunate truth to this statement, but Centaur Biomechanics is leading the way in reassessing our approach to riding for performance.

Do What You Do, Better



WORDS BY Alex Mullarky
PHOTOS BY Centaur Biomechanics

Centaur Biomechanics founder Russell Guire has dedicated his life to studying the biomechanics of horse and rider interaction. His research has ranged from analysing the effects of mounting on the horse's back to developing the Fairfax Performance Girth, Team GB's 'Secret Weapon' for London 2012.

Centaur's annual Improve Your Riding and Confidence Conference is all about sharing knowledge to improve the relationship between horse and rider, in particular for performance. Russell encouraged us to consider: "Can you do what you do, better?" The answer: "Yes you can."

LEFT: Andrew Hoy's show jumping demonstration at the Centaur Biomechanics Improve Your Riding and Confidence Conference 2016.

ABOVE: Centaur Biomechanics founder Russell Guire is dedicated to sharing and improving our knowledge to advance horse welfare.

In his introduction, Russell recounted something that had once been said to him which he had not been able to forget: "As rider aspirations go up, horse welfare goes down". We all know there is an unfortunate truth to this statement, but Centaur Biomechanics is leading the way in reassessing our approach to riding for performance. In Russell's words, "I'm leading you to water. I don't want to make you drink, but I want to make you thirsty to answer these questions."

Over the course of the morning, Russell led his captivated audience through a series of studies he had conducted.

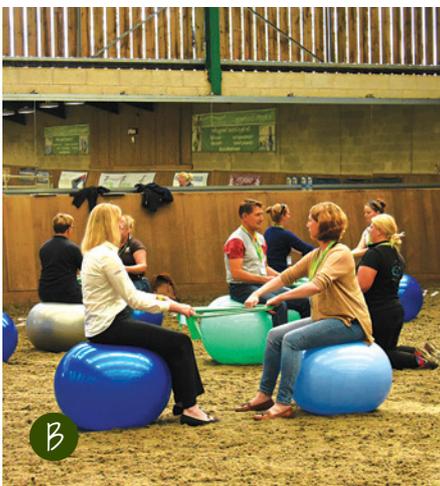
Among his findings was the enormous pressure exerted on the horse's back when mounting from the ground, highlighting the necessity of a mounting block. In another study, it was discovered that riders had very skewed perceptions of their symmetry in both seat and rein contact when seated on a static object. Even when you feel perfectly balanced, you may not be - emphasising the technologies employed by Centaur Biomechanics can provide vital information the eye and even the rider's 'feel' may miss.

Looking around the room where delegates from all over the world had gathered, including members of the Dutch Mounted Police, it was evident there is a hunger in every sector of the equestrian world for more in-depth information that can benefit our horses, no matter which way we work with them.

So much has already been discovered, and there are still so many questions yet to be answered - but Russell and his team are working towards those answers.



A



B



C



D

Among the major speakers for the day was seven-time Australian Olympian Andrew Hoy, who shared his tips in the classroom for “Behaviours of Success”: reminders to be a team player, trust yourself, never give up and celebrate success. This inspiring and entertaining talk was supplemented with anecdotes from behind the scenes of seven Olympic Games. However, it was after stepping out of the classroom and into the arena that Andrew’s teachings really took shape.

Moulton College in Northamptonshire, United Kingdom, is the kind of equestrian facility that most performance riders dream of; no doubt a fantastic environment to study Equine Rehabilitation and Therapy, among the other courses offered. In the stands of the covered riding arena, the delegates watched Hoy guiding a group of new students through pole exercises for rhythm. His advice to one rider really resonated: “Don’t force him, show him.”

IMAGE A: Conference organiser Russell Guire isn’t afraid to get in the saddle himself to help the delegates learn.

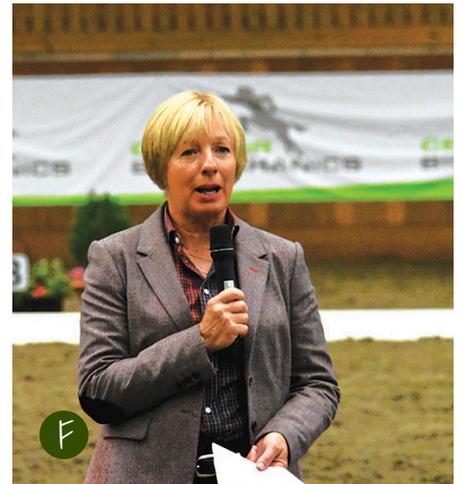
IMAGE B: Hands on practice on day two of the conference.

IMAGES C & D: Riding polework and show jumping exercises under the tutelage of seven-time Australian Olympian Andrew Hoy.



IMAGE E: With lectures and practical demonstrations, the Centaur Biomechanics conferences bridge the gap between science and the performance arena.

IMAGE F: Judy Harvey introduces the delegates to dressage judging.



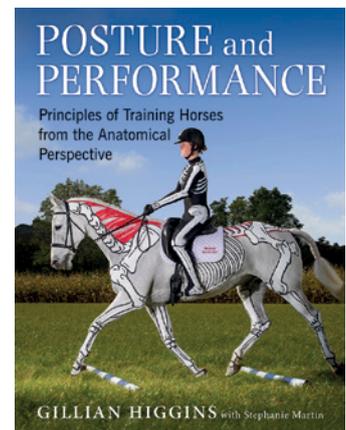
Guided by his coach, Judy Harvey, we then saw Russell himself ride through some flatwork exercises for dressage; happy to demonstrate that, despite being at the cutting edge of research in the field, he is continually learning - just like the rest of us. Judy, a well-known Grand Prix rider, trainer and judge, explained that harmony between horse and rider is now rewarded in dressage more than tension and flash movement.

In an effort to help us see through the judges' eyes, the delegates took out pencil and test sheets to watch and attempt to mark a series of dressage tests, ranging from medium level to the Olympic test for Rio. We discovered firsthand how difficult it is to keep from being drawn into watching avidly, and to remember to assess and mark each move. After a lunch break, a brief return to the classroom allowed Judy and Andrew to talk through footage of the various tests and compare their results with ours.

The afternoon was all about jumping, with Andrew taking a further group of riders through a series of gymnastic pole exercises, driving home the messages that we need to go with the horse's rhythm and give our horses confidence. We rounded off the day with a show jumping demonstration by Andrew Hoy to complement his earlier Olympic dressage test.

So much was covered in just one day, and the following day was set to have a fascinating series of speakers on topics from the effect of the bit on the horse's mouth to the science of the hoof capsule.

This is a conference that's definitely worth the trip if you're going to be in the United Kingdom, and hopefully one day Russell and the Centaur Biomechanics team will bring their findings out to Australia. It's both a reassuring and inspiring indication that advances are being made every day in the science of horse welfare for performance.



BUY

POSTURE AND PERFORMANCE
By Gillian Higgins

Learn more about anatomy and biomechanics in the new book by Gillian Higgins, available in the Horses and People bookshop: <https://www.horsesandpeople.com.au/product/posture-and-performance>.