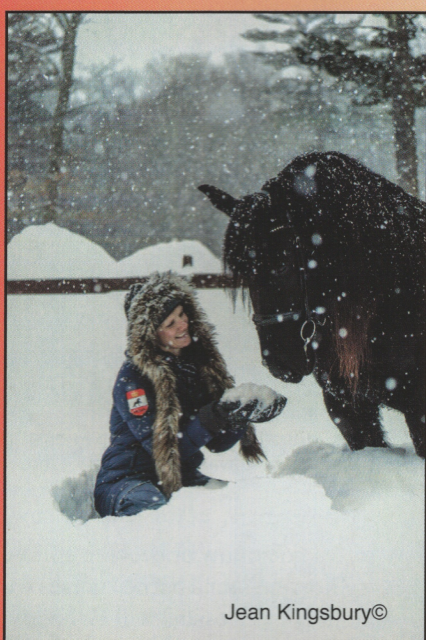


The Friesian Back - Taking the Hollow Out of the Middle



Jean Kingsbury©

by Meghan Hamilton

Meghan Hamilton is a USDF Bronze Medalist, professional rider and coach, who operates her Riding Inspired dressage program out of Sleepy Hollow Farm in Dartmouth, MA. She is a current member of FHANA (Friesian Horse Association of North American), and USDF (United States Dressage Federation), and has been a demo rider for NEDA (New England Dressage Association). As a clinician, Meghan also offers many clinics and workshops that often highlight working with the riders biomechanics with a holistic approach. Meghan also breeds and has a special affinity for training the Friesian. With over 25 years in the saddle she is constantly re-investing in her education. She is a current student of international rider, Olympic Team reserve, and Pan Am Gold Medalist, Heather Blitz, FL, and has ridden in clinics and recently completed a RWYM Teacher Training course with RWYM (Ride With Your Mind) international coach Mary Wanless, UK.

Mechanically Friesians were designed to draft carts and carry heavy warriors into fierce battle. Physically they are changing as breeders are producing more “sport” or modern type Friesians that have a better ability to perform under saddle. Today we use them in just about every discipline you can imagine. The Friesian specifically can be challenged in some of these disciplines as the requirements of the disciplines challenge the Friesians body, and often they have to evolve into a much more organized structure through careful training. Tips from this article can be easily applied to just about any discipline with your Friesian.

The Trouble With The Back

With the ever-changing market of black beauties, we often see many different physical body types. Options often include: long backs, short backs, strong and weak backs, more active

hind legs, less active hind legs, reaching necks, or perhaps shorter and locked necks. With such a variety you have to first diagnose what you have to work with. The solutions to issues often vary between different body type challenges, and knowing which challenge you have will help you to be more successful in your horses training. There are few Friesians out there that naturally carry their body with ease and have a lot of ‘bear down’ or ‘core engagement’ in their body. The Friesians gaits are rhythmic and classy for drawing carriages, and therefore make them less adjustable under saddle. Horses that draft carriages often have a more hollowed back, as they are pushing into the harness with their chest and necks and that is where the power is coming from, they literally pull themselves around with their forelegs.

But fortunately, despite their physical shortcomings, with extraordinary brilliance and devotion to please their riders, Friesians make admirable, loyal riding companions.



Meghan Hamilton©. Shown is a version of a more hollow-backed Friesian, Madison, an 11 year-old mare owned by Meghan Hamilton.

Horses whose backs are hollow and that are very upright in front of the saddle can only take very small steps with their hind legs.

Round backed horses, who can elongate their necks, help stop the stifles from being forced backwards and they can take longer steps.



Megan Hamilton©. This Friesian is more flat backed with an uphill wither. Nikko is a coming 3 year-old owned by Debbie Wilson.

During a lesson I will often ask, "What is the shape of the surface you are sitting on?" I want to know if the rider is aware of what they're sitting on and if it is one of three shapes: if it is hollow, if it is flat, or if it is a mound to sit on. The most common shaped backs will be hollow or flat, with the long-term goal of making them flat or a mound (rounded and engaged from

the core with energy pushing from behind, reaching through their body).

It is a really good question to get riders thinking about what it is they are sitting on so they can ultimately have a self-diagnosis of what they have and to figure out what they need to do in their training rides. The hollow-backed horse feels like you are sitting on a toilet seat - you can feel the rim, but the rest is just lost space under your seat bones. The flat backed horses feels a little more solid, like there is a shelf surface to sit on, more definite. The round backed horse feels more like an upward pushing, firmer energy that has a springboard quality.



Carol Hill©. Here I am riding a very stuffed, upward pushing Friesian; interesting, because Madison's way of going was more hollow. Careful training can create great success.

There are many reasons horses go hollow or become hollow in the back. To improve the hollow and round backed horses we must look at the causes. A number of Friesians will be hollow because they are genetically built they way, and others have been affected by their riders past or present and have an innate way of going based on how they have been ridden and trained over time. For a Friesian that is naturally built more hollow the focus of the training would be through specific exercises to help get the horse more 'over' the back and using the hind quarters and core more effectively.

Tip: Mastering the Friesian Back - How to Keep it More Stuffed

Getting 100% out of your horse is a finely tuned blend of being bold and riding bigger than the horse, living between half halts, and not allowing the horse to get bigger than the rider. Ask for more. Get more. Become more. This particular lesson has changed so much for me in the way I ride or train Friesian horses, but also how I teach others to ride their own horses. One day in particular I was riding the Friesian mare Victoria R (Tori) and I was sort of just doing what I always did. I was losing power from the hind end and I learned that Tori is a horse whose natural tendency is to "cut the switch" or energy from behind. Through most patterns or movements,

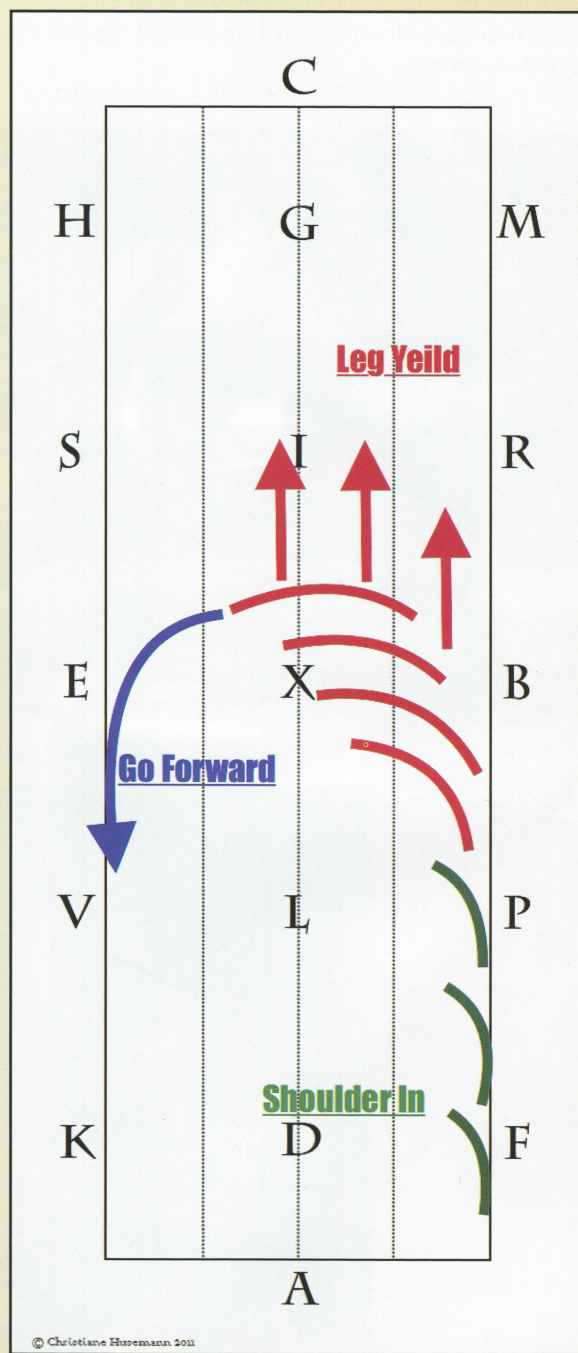
Tori slowly slows down, but sometimes she abruptly would “cut the switch” off to her energy. Tori also can get squishy through the neck, which is sort of an inherent trait of the Friesian breed. Finding a place where I can prevent her from ‘cutting the switch’ kept the energy flow coming from back to front, and kept Tori’s back up and reaching into contact, rather than squishing back against me, losing contact as a result. During a lesson with my coach, Heather Blitz, she engaged us in several exercises that required me to be a lot bolder and work outside my comfort zone - to also ask for more and not just be OK with “OK.” I began to work Tori on a circle, building energy from my legs and asking for Tori to get quicker from a karate chop leg request, and sometimes to a tap of the whip, every time I made a change. The change could be as simple as changing direction, a serpentine, but eventually evolved into shoulder-in on a circle 5 steps, then bump with my legs forward, then leg yield 5 steps, then bump with my legs forward. Soon I felt like I was not riding the same horse I started with. I started to feel more of a mound to sit on rather than a flat space, but also I felt that Tori had more stuffing inside her - she was energized and had her back up.

needs to respond right away to your aids. Friesians do not have much natural endurance and riders must carefully increase this through fitness training so that they can work for longer periods.



Megan Hamilton©. Here I am riding Victoria R (Tori), owned by Michele Jalbert. We are in the middle of the shoulder-in to leg yield exercise. She is moderately stuffed, pushing well from behind, but this picture was taken at a moment when she was just a little behind the vertical, and her throatlatch could be a little more open with the poll slightly higher.

These tools communicate faster to the horse, before the horse loses energy, rather than communicating after the horse has cut the switch and the back hollows. If riders learn how to ride bigger, to be bolder in their requests, to rise to the occasion bigger, to match the horse’s forces and not allow the horse’s forces to get bigger than them, they are well on their way to having more success in keeping their Friesians back up, and whole body more stuffed. Don’t forget to reward every effort your Friesian offers. Fitness is half the battle, and the Friesian



Megan Hamilton©. This diagram shows where to begin the horse in trot with shoulder-in 5 steps, go forward, leg yield for 5 steps, go forward again.

How do riders affect the back of the horses? Riders often are not consciously aware of what they do that makes their horses back hollow. Equestrians don't ride unconsciously on purpose. Riders must become consciously aware of their incompetence in order to become consciously competent and make a change. One of the common ways riders can cause the horse to become hollow through the back is by the riders' hands that pull backwards.

Be impeccable with your hands. Hands must remain in front of the saddle. The more a riders hands pull back towards the saddle the more the horse feels that rein pressure and often begins to curl the nose behind the vertical, closing the underside of the neck and elongating the top of the neck. Additionally, they can begin to shorten the neck like a squished accordion and avoid remaining reaching forward because of the restriction of a pulling hand.



Tip: The rider's hands must remain in front of the saddle, remaining hip width apart. The goal is to get to a point the rider feels that the horse could take the riders hands forward and reach.



Megan Hamilton©. Here Maureen Taylor is riding Madison. The rider is leaning behind vertical, which is pulling her hands towards the saddle, curling the horse's nose in, and creating a more hollow back behind the saddle.



Megan Hamilton©. Here the rider is sitting more on vertical. Her hands are in front of the saddle and give the impression that the horse could easily take her hands forward, allowing her to stretch and reach. The horse's nose is almost on a perfect vertical line and her back is 'more up.'