



The Right Horse for the Job

By Heidi J. Potter

It can be difficult to determine how much weight a horse can comfortably carry. We know to consider age, breed and physical condition. There is also the well-known statistic of horses being able to carry 20% of his body weight for tack and rider. However, another big consideration is the rider's physical ability. The feel of the weight the horse receives can differ greatly when you compare a rider with good balance and correct posture, who supports themselves with a rider who does not. A large, well balanced rider can be easier to carry than a smaller, ill-balanced rider.

A couple of analogies may help with this. For example, consider the 40 pound dog that turns into 80 pounds when you carry him towards a tub full of water. It's a pretty amazing transformation. Not only do they feel heavier but the difficulty increases when they begin to squirm and struggle. You may feel like you need four arms and a lot more muscle to get the job done.

Another analogy is the act of lifting and carrying a child. The willing and/or awake child reaches up to you. Effortlessly, you swing them up and onto your hip. Compare lifting and carrying that same child while asleep or in full blown temper tantrum mode. One supports their own weight and maintains their own balance. The other does not support their own weight and may also be creating additional movement. Even though their actual weight has not changed, the feeling of the weight you carry is very different. In therapeutic riding situations instructors often deal with a student who is unable to support themselves and who struggles with balance. This puts an extra burden on the horse. It is important to consider this when determining the right horse for the job.