
THE RIDER'S SEAT

The seat is the base of the rider's position in dressage and it's the aid that has the largest effect on how the horse moves. In order to improve our seat and use it to the best of our ability, we first must understand why it's important and what effects it has on the horse.

WHY THE SEAT IS ESSENTIAL

The rider's seat is what allows us to have the largest impact on the horse's movement with the least amount of effort. However, this also means that it is the easiest aid for the horse to ignore, and it's also the aid that the rider can be most unaware of (Salzgeber, 2002). Sometimes we can get into the habit of doing things, without even realizing what's happening. The seat bones have a direct line to the muscles of the horse's topline. The muscles over the horse's back have the greatest influence on how the horse uses his body. If we were to leave the horse to his own devices, he would be perfectly happy not engaging the muscles over his back to actively swing his hind legs underneath him, engage his hind end, tuck his belly up, and move forward with impulsion. By perfecting the seat, we are able to influence our horse's body in such a way that it improves his overall movement. If the seat is used correctly and efficiently, the rider can create energy from the horse's hind end, receive it with her restraining aids, and cycle it back to the hind end. This is what is referred to as riding the horse from "back to front." Many riders who do not have a developed seat will ride from "front to back", which causes the horse to be unbalanced, heavy on the forehand, and not actively using his hind end. Even though it is much harder for a horse to travel with his weight rocked onto his hind end and lighter in the front, it is better for him in the long run.



(Braddick, 2012)

This is a photo of Charlotte Dujardin, who won both the individual and team gold for the UK in the 2012 Olympics. As you can see she's riding in correct position causing her horse to be light on the forehand and has forward intention and impulsion from the hind end.

DEVELOPING THE INDEPENDENT SEAT

The independent seat is what all riders (that is if they are serious about getting good) strive to achieve. Having an independent seat means that the rider is able to continuously connect to the horse's movement without having to use the reins as a means of balance or control. It also means that the rider can control each aid without disrupting their seat. Developing the independent seat takes time, practice, and lots of patience. If someone is going to try and achieve this seat they must understand the fundamentals of the independent seat. The first thing is acquiring balance, both mounted and unmounted (Neumann-Cosel, 2016). Because the independent seat requires riders to be completely balanced on their sit bones, they must be aware of their bodies during their ride. Take note of things like: how do you feel when you sit in the saddle? Do you tend to put more weight on one side than the other? Do you lean forward or back? Are you centered in the tack? Pictures or videos can help you compare what you feel to what is actually happening (Neumann-Cosel, 2016). It's also important to know what your tendencies are when you are just going about your day. Notice simple things like: when you stumble, which hand or foot catches you? Or, which way do

you turn when someone calls your name from behind? Usually, the direction we turn or the hand we depend on to catch ourselves is our most dominant side.

When the rider sits in the saddle there should be three points of contact. The two seat bones, with weight evenly distributed on each one, and the pubic bone (Peters, Sanchez, 2015). The spine should be kept neutral, while the upper back is relaxed and supporting. The rider should follow the movement of the horse with her pelvis (Salzgeber, 2002). In order to understand how this feels, something that can help is to close your eyes while your horse is free walking on a long rein and just let the motion of the walk move your body. It feels very natural, almost like how it feels when you are walking. This also helps you to recognize what it feels like to just be following the horse's movement. Once the rider can recognize the natural feeling of following the horse's movement, it's important to then know how to rebalance the horse using the correct position of the pelvis. The only way this can happen is by strengthening the muscles of the entire core (Peters, Sanchez, 2015). By using your core muscles, the rider can hold against the following motion of the horse to re-balance them when they start to become heavy on the forehand. Or when they need more impulsion, contraction of the core is necessary to drive the horse when their inside hind steps down and pushes them forward (Major, 2014). Another major component of the independent seat is to be able to stretch long and stay supple in the lower back. Being able to follow or resist the horse's movement with the pelvis comes from being relaxed and supple with the lower back.

EXERCISES TO IMPROVE

Although the only way to achieve the independent seat is to practice (and practice correctly), there are some exercises or tips that can help speed up the process. The number one thing that is best to do during your 10-minute free walk warm-up is to simply scan your body. Check in and see if you notice any areas where you might be carrying
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tension (Peters, Sanchez, 2015). There are some mounted stretches that can be done such as arm circles, quad stretches, ankle rolls, and cross-body arm stretches. There are also riding exercises to help with balance such as riding without stirrups. A good mantra to remember while riding with no stirrups is "toes up, knees up, eyes up" (Keim, 2016). It sounds so simple, but once you remember it and repeat it, you will stay more centered over the horse's center of gravity, and your seat will start to connect more and bounce less. Riding on the long line and dropping the reins is another great way to test balance.



(SCAD, 2014)

Riding on the long line without gripping the reins gives the rider a chance to practice having a seat independent from her hands without worrying about loss of control. Once this is mastered the rider can use her seat to the best of her ability.

Sources

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