

THE COMPLETE COMPONENT

THE INDEPENDENT SEAT:

the upper body, arms and hands

By Jane Myers

It requires all three parts of the body – the legs, hips, and upper body to work together to create a truly independent seat, and practising the feel of sitting correctly makes this easier to maintain.

Involving more than just the rider's bottom, all three parts of the body – the legs, hips, and upper body are required to work together to create a truly independent seat. The order these articles have been presented - *Volume 31 No 6 Starting at The Bottom, Vol 32 No 1 Middle Management* and this article are the order riders need to concentrate on when learning to ride or improving their riding with the aim of gaining an independent seat.

A still and correct upper body position cannot be achieved until the rider has learned to properly utilise the ankle, knee and hip/pelvis joints - furthermore a rider cannot achieve 'good hands' until the lower body is working correctly and they can control the upper body and have an independent seat.

Most riders would be able to identify with many of the problems involving the upper body, arms and hands – having identified these problems in others or having one or all of them themselves. Common rider problems with the upper body include tipping forward too much, leaning back too much, slouching and excessive movement of the upper body, neck or head. The upper body should remain relatively still throughout the movements of the horse and should stay more or less vertical. This means that if the horse is travelling uphill

or downhill, the upper body moves to keep that vertical position.

FORWARDS

Tipping forward is often seen with nervous riders who tend to sit in the ejector seat position - trouble is this makes them feel even more insecure!

The horse feels the gripping of the thighs and the lower legs dig in when riders adopt this position, thus sending the wrong messages to the horse, especially recycled racehorses! For this problem riders can work on exercises to develop balance (see previous articles) until the feeling is of security.

Once the rider has improved their balance and seat they should find that the upper body naturally comes into the upright position. If not, it may be that the habit is so ingrained that the rider feels as if they are upright when in fact they are not. This is when the rider needs the help of some 'eyes on the ground' - a friend or instructor - to tell them when they are actually vertical. As with all changes it will feel strange at first to break the habit of leaning forward but as the brain learns the new feeling it starts to feel natural and normal. When a rider is sitting up tall and breathing deeper – they can visualise the air going down into the very bottom of their lungs.

The saddle can greatly influence the rider's position so the saddle should be checked to ensure it is not tipping forward. It should be only one centimetre higher at the cantle than the pommel when the horse is standing on the flat - any more and it will tip the rider forward. The conformation of the horse can add to this with some horses being built more 'down-hill' than others, with their withers lower than their hindquarters.

BACKWARDS

Leaning back is not as common a rider problem but tends to be seen in those riders who are at the other end of the spectrum - they are so relaxed they allow themselves to lean back and their legs to come forward. This may be comfortable for some riders, (especially men!), but it is very difficult for a horse to carry a rider in this position. The further back the riders' weight sits on the horse the harder the horse's job is, as the horse's back become weaker as it nears the loins. Again the remedy is to sit up and allow the legs to hang down from the hip. As with the rider who tips forward, check that the saddle is not preventing the rider from sitting upright. Make sure that the cantle is not lower than the pommel. Horses that are swaybacked will also cause

Continued



THE CORE



The core of the body includes the muscles, tendons and ligaments that encircle and criss-cross the lower back and belly. In order to have a stable core a person must have both strong belly and back muscles, hence the term 'core strength'. These soft tissues are vital as they stabilise and support an area of the body that is very flexible but needs a lot of strength. When a rider has good core strength they have much better control of their limbs because once this important area is stabilised the limbs are able to work more efficiently due to having a still and strong source of attachment.

Independent Seat continued...

the rider to fall into a 'hole' in the middle of the horse's back making it difficult for them to sit upright. In both these cases professional saddle fit help should be sought.

CORE POSTURE AND UPPER BODY

Exercises that develop the core muscles of the rider will help to strengthen them and make it easier to sit tall for longer. Slouching - rounding the shoulders - is usually seen in people who also have poor posture on the ground or when sitting in a chair. Good riding can help those with poor posture enormously, likewise those who have good posture off a horse will tend to have good posture when riding. Riders with poor posture should have someone watch as they walk, sit and ride, telling them what they see. It is not helpful to think about sticking the chest out but instead to think about making the shoulders as far away from each other as possible, aiming to lift the sternum upwards and breathe deeply. Looking forward between the ears of the horse while riding, rather than down at the neck, is important because this stretches the head and neck upwards rather than forwards. This means that the head is then balanced over the body rather than forward of the body, as the head is relatively large and heavy and this places the weight correctly in line with the body rather than

in front of it. With the head in this position it is also easier for the rider to see what is coming up and where they are going.

Riders who struggle to improve their posture should seek professional help with this problem, as it is often difficult to change old habits without someone to be the 'eyes on the ground' and to offer suggestions or techniques for better posture. This is not confined to the older or more mature rider, as poor posture in young people leads to lots of problems both on and off a horse in later life - definitely one to nip in the bud as soon as possible!

Riding well comes easier to some riders than others - but that does not mean that everyone cannot ride better.

Excessive movement of the upper body is seen in riders - usually dressage riders - when riding big moving horses in extended trot. If they have not learned correctly how to absorb the movement down through the joints of the legs that energy goes upwards rather than downwards - it has to go somewhere! In some riders even excessive movement of the head is seen. For excessive upper body and head movement the rider needs to work on improving absorption through the ankles,

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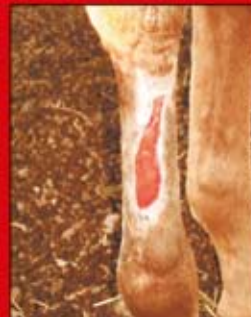
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In canter, the rider must balance the strides in the angles of the hips and elbows, with the upper body staying relaxed and vertical and the legs lying quietly on the girth and absorbing the movement through the ankles, knees and hips/pelvis.



knees and hips/pelvis. In many cases the stirrups are too long and the rider is not able to absorb the movement correctly downwards through the joints of the legs. See the previous articles in this series for further information on this problem.

ARMS

The arms of a rider should be still and soft - flapping arms are unsightly and detrimental to the horse that is attached to the other end of those flapping arms via its mouth! Obviously it is not possible to have good, still hands if the arms are not under control. The elbows should rest at the waist of the rider. In sitting trot the elbows should be still, but not stiff, and in rising trot they should open slightly and close slightly as the rider rises and sits - otherwise the hands will move up and down with the rider.

A good exercise to make sure this is happening correctly is to hold a piece of string that goes around the underside of the neck of the horse and is held in each hand along with the reins. The rider should be able to rise to the trot without increasing the pressure on this string.

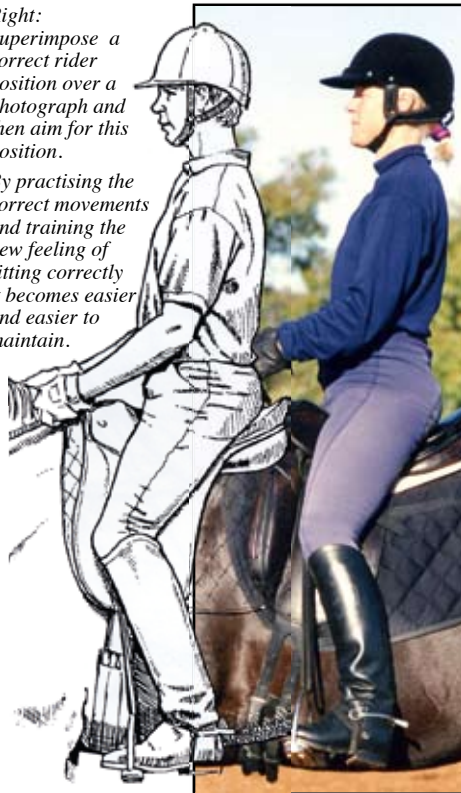
In walk and canter the elbows should follow the movement of the horse's head. Be careful to keep the backs of the hands facing outward as turning the hands downward - as if riding a bike - brings the elbows out and rotates the scapula off the back. By practicing riding this way the rider will start to develop still arms as their brain begins to 'file' this new feeling.

HANDS

The fingers should be neither too loose or open, nor too gripping or tightly clenched

Right: Superimpose a correct rider position over a photograph and then aim for this position.

By practising the correct movements and training the new feeling of sitting correctly it becomes easier and easier to maintain.



Left: Riders can have use a photo or video to check on their position on the horse. This photograph shows a lack of straightness in the shoulders/hips and head position.

on the reins. To ensure this soft hold, pretend that there is a very small bird in the hands whilst riding. The aim is to hold the bird but not crush it or let it fly away.

The term 'good hands' or 'bad hands' is often used to describe a rider and indeed most like to think they either have or are aiming to have the former. A rider who has worked hard to gain an independent seat should have no problem other than maybe having to make some minor adjustments in order to have reasonably good hands. Still, but soft hands are the start. Developing more and more 'feel' is something that takes time to achieve. In the same way that a masseur might take years to develop the 'feel' in their hands, a rider also needs time and experience to develop this feel. Once the hands are still the rider begins to become much more aware of what is happening and can control the pressure they exert on the reins. This is then the start of developing 'feel'.

Gadgets that measure the pressure that the riders hands and arms exert on the reins will

be readily available in the future, however they are currently in the development stages. Aids such as these will go a long way to improving riders' hands for the benefit of the horse.

A couple of other checks the rider should do from time to time is to check the fit of the saddle, particularly if there have been changes to riding position. It is a good idea to have saddle fit checked periodically for the sake of the horse, the rider and the saddle, as sometimes, if a rider has been riding crooked for some time the saddle will actually have compacted on one side more than the other. Thus, even when the rider tries to sit straighter, the saddle prevents them from doing so. Again this is a saddle-fitting problem and needs expert attention.

It is also a good idea to have someone look at the rider's position whilst sitting on the horse, from in front and behind, from time to time. They need to observe whether shoulders and hips are level, if there are equal amounts of the body on both sides of the horse and check that the rider's feet are level, that the head is straight and that the back is straight (i.e. the waist is not collapsed to one side). Alternatively, videoing these things will also enable the rider to see if and where their position is falling down, making it easier to understand what needs changing or fixing!

Riding well comes easier to some riders than others - some are just naturally more athletic than others - but that does not mean that everyone cannot ride better. In fact, having determination is far more important than having natural skill. By practising the correct movements and training the new feeling of sitting correctly it becomes easier and easier to maintain. As new habits are formed the rider no longer has to consciously concentrate on position and their attention can be switched to developing higher levels of skill, which will benefit the horse and the rider.

About The Author

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An experienced horse person, author and academic, Jane's interests include rider balance, horse behaviour, horse welfare and sustainable property management.



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Jane will be a presenter at **Equitana Melbourne**, from the 18th to the 21st Nov 2010, at the Melbourne Showgrounds. www.equitana.com.au