

Middle

The second in a series on developing the independent seat, correct use of the knees, hips and pelvis are explained in order to enable the rider to move with the movement of the horse rather than against it.



Management

THE INDEPENDENT SEAT: the knees, hips and pelvis

by Jane Myers



The all-important shock absorbing system that makes the difference between a rider moving *with* the movement of the horse and moving *against* the movement of the horse includes the rider's knees, hips and pelvis. Unfortunately, there are many die-hard misconceptions about what the knees, hips and pelvis should do when riding, for example riders have often been taught that they should grip with their knees - in fact, in the good old days, people were often made to ride around with a coin or a dollar between their knees and the saddle so that they could learn to grip even better! Many have also been taught to 'push' with their seat for upwards transitions and 'sit down' for downward transitions - leading to confused horses. Riders are also often confused about how their pelvis should move when trying to sit to the trot.

Many of these misconceptions came about because of the largely unscientific teaching methods that were common in the past. Good riders that have emerged from that era are usually good riders

because they have learned, by trial and error, to ride well *despite* what they were taught rather than because of what they were taught. Consequently many good riders today still teach what they were taught rather than what they actually do! To find out what good riders do when riding it is best to ask them to verbalise *as they ride* - this often surprises them, as they realise that they do not always do what they thought they did!

KNEES

Gripping with the knees actually makes the rider less secure. When riding correctly the weight of the rider (on a moving horse) should transfer down the leg and be absorbed by the hips/pelvis and the knees and ankles. If the rider grips

Many good riders today still teach what they were taught rather than what they actually do!

with the knees the downward movement is blocked at this point and the kinetic energy that should travel downwards into the ankle and be dispersed, instead pops the rider upwards out of the saddle. This leads to the rider feeling even more insecure and gripping even harder!

During flat work the knees should touch the saddle but not grip, in fact the whole

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leg should drape around the horse without inward pressure, unless giving an aid. Think about how a table cloth drapes on a table, it does not exert inward pressure and it does not attempt to lift itself off the table, it just hangs. This is what the rider's legs should do. The thigh should be at 40 to 45 degrees from the vertical, with the lower number (40 degrees) for more experienced riders and the higher number (45 degrees) for less experienced riders. Many riders ride with stirrups that are too long, making them unable to utilise the dip and spring action of the joints, which was covered extensively in the first article of this series (A/May Vol 31 No 6).

As riders rise to the trot their knees should open and close without undue moving up or down. The thigh should behave like an upside down pendulum on an old fashioned clock, with the knee staying still and hip swinging forward to describe part of a small circle. Therefore 'rising' to the trot is not a very accurate term for what the rider actually does, as if the rider literally goes up and down they tend to get left behind the movement of the horse. If instead they work on getting their thigh to work correctly, rising becomes much easier and smoother as they move forward with the horse. A good visualisation for this is to imagine that there is a strong elastic band attached to the navel at one end, with the other end attached to the horse's poll. Each time the rider's seat leaves the saddle the hips should move forwards, not upwards.

Any amount of leaning forward in sitting trot will cause the rider to bounce as the hips/pelvis cannot move correctly with the upper body in a forward position.

A common problem riders sometimes experience is 'double bumping' while rising to the trot, which is due to the rider not engaging the muscles in the legs and instead allowing the horse to throw them up and gravity to bring them back down. Rising in this way tends to cause the rider to land a fraction too soon and feel a 'double bump' sensation - the first bump is the seat hitting the saddle and the second is the horse bumping the rider back up as its hind leg comes underneath its body. When rising correctly the lift from the horse and the lowering due to gravity still play a part but the thigh muscles control the speed and the height of the rising and lowering. This means the rider is able to land softly and



Many riders ride with stirrups that are too long, allowing the legs to swing forward and making them unable to utilise the dip and spring action of the joints.



The whole leg should drape around the horse without inward pressure, unless giving an aid and should be at a 40 to 45 degree angle.



'Rising' to the trot is not a very accurate term as each time the rider's seat leaves the saddle the knees stay still, and the hips should move forwards, not upwards.

gently and at exactly the right moment. A good exercise to further improve the rider's rising, or to check whether they have good control over their seat, is to practice changing the diagonal through two 'rises' rather than two 'sits'. At first most riders get left behind on the second beat, but with practice it becomes easier and the rider can add another skill to their repertoire.

Although the knee joint can suffer while riding, it can also be improved through riding in many cases. As riding (like swimming) is a non-load bearing exercise the joints get a work out without the jarring that occurs through running for example.

If persistent pain is experienced in any joints when riding then it may be necessary to see a joint specialist who may be able to help overcome any problems with various methods such as supporting the



knees with wraps or bandages, stretches or strengthening exercises. It is possible to buy neoprene knee supports that have been designed for riders, which may be used either short or long term. The key is to take it slowly if returning to riding after injury, allowing the soft tissues to strengthen gradually. Warming up with gentle stretches before getting on the horse and stretching the legs before dismounting are good ways to reduce injuries, as is the use of a mounting block both for the horse, saddle and rider. Care should be taken when dismounting if the rider has weak/problem knees – it is important to ensure that the rider does not land heavily on locked knees, causing further damage to joints, tendons and ligaments.

HIPS AND PELVIS

The hips/pelvis are the third joint involved in the shock absorbing process and play an important part in correct riding.

If the rider has been doing the standing in the stirrups balance exercises outlined in previous articles they should by now

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Independent Seat Part 2 cont...

be able to get their legs underneath them and engaged when riding. By engaged it is meant that the leg is under the rider with the correct hip – heel – ankle alignment, rather than out in front of this imaginary line or trailing behind it.

If the rider still cannot do this there are several reasons for this, the most common being the saddle and very stiff hip joints in the rider.

THE SADDLE

The saddle plays a crucial part in the correct alignment of the leg. A good stock, western or dressage saddle helps to achieve a correct leg alignment by having the stirrup bar in the correct place and allowing/encouraging the leg to hang directly below the hips, whereas an all-purpose saddle and even many dressage saddles have the stirrup bar positioned too far forward which pulls the leg forward no matter how hard the rider tries to keep it back.

All-purpose saddles are not really suitable for anything but low level jumping as they are a compromise between two very different styles of riding and are therefore not ideal for either. A good, modern dressage saddle not only has stirrup bars that are positioned well back but also has correctly positioned thigh rolls that help enormously with the correct positioning and security of the leg. When buying a new saddle it is important to check that it helps rather than hinders correct leg alignment before purchasing.

THE HIPS

Stiffness in the hips (apart from injuries or wear and tear to the hip joint itself) is usually down to not enough flexibility in the soft tissues around the hip. In particular many people are tight in the ligaments and tendons that run from the hip area down towards the front of the thigh. It is possible to tell if this is the case when, if the legs are positioned correctly while mounted the rider feels uncomfortable. Usually this area will loosen with frequent riding as long as the rider continues to maintain the leg in the



Left: A good stock, western or modern dressage saddle has the stirrup bar in the correct place to allow the leg to hang directly below the hips.

A rider's legs are pulled forward in an all-purpose and other saddles that have the stirrup bar positioned too far forward.

correct position - it is normal to feel sore in this area when first returning to riding after a break but not normal to feel sore when riding regularly and consequently, any real pain should be investigated by a physiotherapist or similar. As with knees, some stretching before mounting is always a good idea.

Once the hips are positioned correctly the seat should be able to move with the horse. Unless giving the horse a specific aid with the seat (and only very experienced riders are capable of doing this), the seat must follow the movement of the horse's back. In walk this means that as well as the pelvis moving forwards and backwards slightly (following the movement, not shoving the horse along – there is a world of difference), the seat bones should dip alternately as the horse walks. When the horse takes a step the belly swings to one side as the back leg on that side moves forward through the air. If the seat is following the movement of the horse's back properly it is possible to feel each seat bone dip and lift in turn.

In trot, the belly of the horse also swings to the other side as each back leg swings forward through the air. When standing in the stirrups and balancing on the horse the rider should be able to feel the alternating dipping of each side of the horse's back, and if the rider is allowing their weight to travel down the leg without blocking the movement by gripping with the thighs or knees they will feel each heel dip slightly in time with this dipping of the horse's back. Once this feeling has been mastered the rider is ready to work on improving the sitting trot.

MASTERING SITTING TROT POSITION

A good exercise to improve a riders sitting trot is for the rider to start in the standing trot and then lower themselves into the saddle (thinking *kneel* rather than sit). By keeping some weight going down the leg the rider can play around with just how much weight is needed in the ball of the foot to keep the leg engaged. As soon as the rider starts to bounce (which means that the leg has disengaged and is starting to creep up the sides of the horse – therefore stirrups start to flap and the rider may even lose them) the rider should stand up again which re-distributes some weight down the leg and re-engages the leg.

Other tips for sitting trot are that the upper body should be vertical (eventually) but can be *slightly* leaning back to begin with. Any amount of leaning forward in sitting trot will cause the rider to bounce as the hips/pelvis cannot move correctly with the upper body in a forward position.

There is much argument about whether the rider should allow the lower back to hollow when sitting to the trot (and thus absorbing the movement by allowing the top of the pelvis to swing forward) or should flatten the lower back (and absorb the movement by allowing the bottom of the pelvis to swing forward), however it really depends on how the rider is put together. Much information about riding assumes that people are all built the same and that they should all conform to an ideal position or way of doing things - riders with disabilities

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have proved that this is not the case. In particular, the lower back is an area that humans differ in quite remarkably, as some people are 'sway backed' and these will usually find it easier to allow the top of the pelvis to swing forward and others are naturally straighter and will find it easier to lower their tailbone and allow the bottom of the pelvis to swing forward during the sitting trot.

A last tip for this area is that wrap-around lumbar supports (sold in Saddlery stores) can be invaluable for stabilising the lower back when first returning to riding or for riders with a weak lower back. They give the rider the feeling of stronger core muscles (the muscles around the pelvic girdle and lower back) until the core muscles develop through frequent riding. Some people will always need this support, most will not as riding is one of the best ways of developing strong core muscles.

Making sure that the knees and hips/pelvis are working well to allow the rider to move *with* the horse rather than *against* the horse is a great achievement in rider development and well worth striving for.

In the next issue Part three of the series Independent Seat covers the Upper Body of the rider

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Jane will be a presenter at **Equitana Australia**, from the 18th to the 22nd Nov 2010, at the Melbourne Showgrounds. www.equitana.com.au.

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