Online HorseCollege

Student Workbook

2.R.08 Maintain Riding Position

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Introduction

No matter the discipline or sport you take part in with your horse or the horse you ride, being able to balance and maintain your position while riding will decrease the burden for the horse to carry and increase your ability to stay in harmony and communicate effectively with the horse. Maintaining a correct riding posture will also attribute to your safety while mounted and success as a horse and rider combination.

Personal Equipment for Riding

The personal equipment and attire you use for riding needs to be safe and appropriate. Loose and inappropriate wear will increase the risk of incident/injury should you have a fall.

Appropriate Attire

Riding boots have a smooth sole with little grip which means your foot will come out of the stirrup easily, reducing the risk of getting your foot wedged in the stirrup. They're also enclosed which will provide your foot with some protection should you get stood on. Footwear such as runners are unsafe as they have too much grip on the sole (in an emergency it is safer to have you're foot come out of the stirrup from little grip than be unable to get it out because of too much grip) there is also the risk of the laces becoming tangled around the stirrup iron if they come undone.

Long pants such as jodphurs or jeans protect you legs from the sun and from rubbing and/or pinching from the stirrup leathers (which results in nasty bruising). They will also provide your legs with some protection from abrasion, if you have a fall. Shorts may be preferable if you are riding bareback or swimming your horse in a dam though sometimes the combination of horse hair and sweat can make your legs itchy.

Shirts should have sleeves (for sun protection) and be tucked in. If your shirt is tucked in it cannot flap around and scare your horse.

Helmets should fit your head appropriately (as discussed in previous workbooks) and be approved to the recognised standard in your area. Helmets should be used for all riding activities.

Gloves are an optional piece of personal equipment (except in dressage competition, they are compulsory). There is a wide variety available and designed to give a better grip on the reins and reduce rubbing/blisters on the hands. If you are not accustomed to riding with gloves on it can take some time to adjust to.

Spurs are also optional, and should only be used by experienced riders. Again there is a wide variety available and spurs with rowels (wheels) should spin freely.

Personal Equipment for Riding

Appropriate Riding Attire

Inappropriate Riding Attire

Position

Your security in the saddle and the effectiveness of your aids depends greatly upon your position when riding. Your position and seat when mounted should be such that you can maintain your balance in all gaits, in both directions and still give the necessary aids to guide and control that horse.

Starting from the top, whilst riding your focus should be in the direction you are travelling (not looking down at the horse).
Your shoulders should be level with the chest open. To achieve this think that you push your rib cage out. This will bring your shoulders back without 'pulling' them which will create tension.

Your spine needs to sit in line with the horses' spine and your weight should be carried evenly on both seat bones.

Shoulders should be positioned over the hips so that you're not leaning forward, drawing your weight out of the saddle.

Your elbows should be by your side and the forearm should form a straight line which runs from the elbow, along the forearm, down the rein to the bit in the horses' mouth. This will allow for good communication to the horse.
Hands hold the reins with your fingers closed around them and thumbs positioned on top facing upwards, with an even contact on the reins (this means that you hold the reins with no slack but are not 'pulling' on them).

From your hips your legs drape around the horses' ribs and your lower leg should stay in contact with the horses' sides all the time, but not squeezing or gripping.

Stirrup lengths even, with your stirrup iron sitting just behind your toes, on the ball of your foot with your heel dropped down so it becomes the lowest point in your body. Toes pointing forward.

The Independent Seat

An independent seat is one where you can maintain your balance and apply different aids, simultaneously without the application of one aid affecting the application of another. An example of this could be maintaining your position whilst staying on a circle and asking for a transition to trot.

You should be able to maintain an independent seat no matter what discipline you're riding. Your physical posture on a horse will either lighten or increase the burden for the horse to carry and move. No matter what position, seat or discipline (i.e. dressage, jumping, trail riding, pony club) you use it will take systematic training and exercises in developing the necessary balance and fitness.

Depending upon the build of the rider and the width and height of the horse, everyone's position may vary slightly and some riders may find certain aspects of maintaining their position more difficult than others.

Balanced Seat

It is important that the rider learns to balance and develop an 'adhesive' seat to be able to follow the horses' movement without causing restriction, discomfort or pain to themselves or the horse.

Starting from the top the riders' body should be erect, free from tension and be situated over the centre of the saddle, not pushed back towards the cantle or forward over the pommel. The head looks in the direction of travel between the horses' ears. The back should maintain its natural shape (not convex or concave) with the shoulders level. The muscles of the upper body will keep the riders' position steady while still allowing movement and the shoulders should be open without tension.
The rider will use their back muscles, hips and seat to follow the movement of the horse.

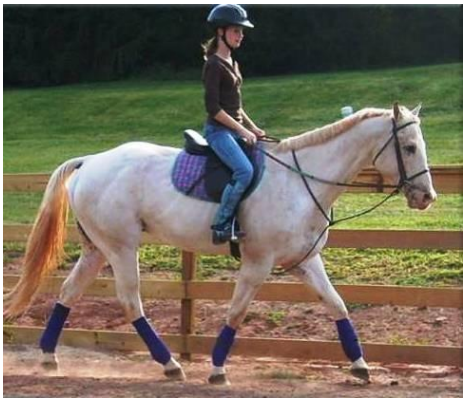
From the shoulders the riders arms should hang freely downwards, kept close to the torso but with the elbows slightly forward. The hands with hold the reins with the thumb kept upwards on a closed hand. By carrying the hand in this manner it allows for subtle rein aids which keep the elbows by the riders' sides.

The seat or pelvis should be in the deepest part of the saddle and be supple and free from tension. Any tension in the seat or thighs will cause the rider to be levered out of the saddle. The rider should be seated on their seat bones rather than the pubic bone which will tilt the rider forward (and cause bruising in unpleasant places!). The pelvis will also need to follow the movements of the horse and works in combination with the back muscles. The hips should stay level.

The thighs should turn inwards so the knees point in the direction of travel and should slope downwards around the horse. This is particularly desirable when trail riding through closely spaced trees because knees and toes that stick out are likely to be caught on passing foliage.

To keep the riders' foot under the centre of gravity the knee needs to stay slightly bent the lower leg then slopes backwards from the knee with the inside of the leg resting just behind the girth and maintains a soft contact on the horses' belly.

The stirrup should be positioned on the ball of the foot, just behind the riders' toes. This will mean that the heel remains the lowest part on the body this will also help to keep the foot positioned in the stirrup without it becoming wedged into the stirrup. The ankle should remain relaxed with the foot almost parallel to the sides of the horse.



Holding The Reins

When holding the reins of a snaffle bridle they should be of equal length, untwisted and pass between the third and little finger. The end of the rein will pass out over the second joint of the index finger. The thumbs will be bent slightly and press lightly down on the rein to assist in preventing it slipping along with the fingers being closed. The end of the rein will hang down, buckled together to the inside of the right rein and on the off side of the horse.

With the knuckles held in a vertical position (thumbs towards the sky) the hands are held apart at a distance which is about the width of the horses' mouth or bit, with one hand on each side of the horses' neck.

Another method of holding the reins which can be performed using one or two hands to hold the reins is 'bridging'.
Bridging the reins means the rider holds both the left and right rein in one or two hands. It is useful when galloping to provide a steady contact for the horse and a secure rein for the rider as a bridged rein cannot slip through the hand as easily. It is also useful when trail riding to use one hand on the reins whilst opening and closing gates (covered in future workbooks).
To bridge the reins:-

1) Start by holding the reins, one in each hand, thumbs on top as described previously in this workbook
2) Then turn both hands over so that your thumbs are now facing each other with fingernails down (piano playing hands)
3) Pass the rein from your right hand into your left hand or vice versa
4) Now your left hand should be holding onto both reins with your fingernails down
5) From here you can either ride with one hand or you can repack up the reins with your right hand so that the right hand holds the right rein and the end of the left rein and the left hand holds the left rein and the end of the right rein (with two hands you will re-turn your hands so that your thumbs nails face up towards the sky again, with one hand the fingernails remain facing down)

Riding

Warming Up & Cooling Down

Like us, horses need appropriate warming up and cooling down to prepare them for exercise (mentally and physically) and prevent injury. Your warming up routine should be relevant to what you plan to work on in that riding session for example, it would be appropriate to warm the horse up in walk and trot before doing canter.

The purpose of cooling down the horse is to bring the heart rate back down towards a resting level (28-45 bpm). An example of an inappropriate cool down would be cantering on a loose rein around the arena, the horse may be relaxed but it's not a routine that will lower the heart rate. The amount of time you take to cool your horse down will depend on how strenuous the exercise was.

Posture during Trot

In the rising trot whilst it is common for beginner riders or unfit riders to drop the shoulders forward to lever themselves out of the saddle (see image a.) however a strong, balanced rider will not exaggerate this and the rising motion will come more from the riders hips with the seat being 'pushed' out of the saddle by the horse's action. As the rider rises, the hips should come up and forward (see image b.) then come back and down into the saddle with the upper body remaining upright.

It is important to remember not to exaggerate this motion as it will cause you to come behind the movement (meaning that you will no longer be in time with the horse) and affect the position and how you use the lower leg.

To be able to ride elastically the riders feet must remain under the centre of gravity, the knee will stay bent and the heels remain the lowest point in the body. The lower legs will remain in contact with the horse's side but not gripping or clinging on. Upon returning to the saddle the rider should sit gently down into the centre. No noise should be able to be heard upon the rider touching the saddle.

When riding with shorter stirrups, for example during jumping exercises it is more appropriate for the rider to lean forward from the hips to stay in harmony with the horse.

Image a.
The rider has brought the shoulders forward to get out of the saddle

Image b.
The upper body has remained upright, knee is bent, heel is still the lower point

Posture during Trot (cont.)

Sitting trot can take a long time to develop and perform well. Every horse will have a different trot. Sitting trot allows a constant contact with the horse's back which will allow the rider to give aids at every stride as apposed to rising trot where the rider can only give an aid every second stride. Sitting trot can be more demanding for unfit riders and horses and also young horses may not have developed enough strength over the back to carry the riders' weight all the time in sitting trot.

A rider will require a deep supple seat for sitting to the trot. Lunge line exercises are useful for developing a deep seat, in particular riding without stirrups. The rider needs to be able to follow the movements of the horse with the pelvis. The pelvis needs to move in the sitting trot to absorb the movement, the more the rider tries to hold it still the more they will bounce. As the horses' back comes up in trot the rider uses the abdominal muscles and deep muscles of the lower back to tilt the pelvis so that it slopes forwards from top to bottom then as the horses' back the muscles are allowed to lengthen and the pelvis tilts backwards again.

The amount the rider moves should be in proportion to the movement. Once the rider possesses looseness and elasticity in the sitting trot it will become more or less an automatic process.

Image a.
The rider has pushed back out of the deepest part, the lower leg has come forward and the heel drawn up

Image b.
The upper body has stayed tall, heel remains the lowest point and the rider has contact with the saddle

Troubleshooting & Tips

Every rider will have their own, different position faults. But if you can recognise them it makes correcting them much easier.

The Head

Pulling the chin in or sticking it out will bring about un-suppleness in the upper body which in turn will affect the ability to follow the horses' movements and to prepare for oncoming obstacles.

The Shoulders

Curling or dropping the shoulders forward will bring the riders upper body forward. Sometimes it can result from or in the rider also looking down. This posture puts the rider in a vulnerable position should the horse shy, pull its head down or buck. Keeping the shoulders back improves the stability of the position and security in the saddle.

The Arms

Clamping the arms up and against the sides of the body can bring stiffness in the shoulders and in the hands which will influence the riders ability to give rein aids. On the other end of the scale sticking them out like chicken wings will affect the suppleness of the seat and the application and independence of rein aids. It can also encourage raising of the hands and reins.

The Hands

Reins held with the finger nails facing down (piano playing hands) reduce the subtlety of the rein aids and usually result in the elbows being drawn back behind the body and/or out to the sides. Fingers which are not closed around the rein allow it to slide through. Hands which are brought too high or low affect the communication through the rein aids and can effect the way the horse works and how the bit works in the mouth.

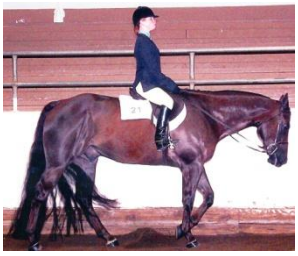
The Upper Body

Crookedness at the shoulders prevents the rider from being in balance and shifts the weight off to one side (can lead to uneven muscle development in the horse from carry more weight on one side).
Convex (like a banana) or concave (hollow) backs result in stiffness and affects how the rider will apply the aids.

Troubleshooting & Tips (cont.)

The Seat, Pelvis & Thighs

Any tension in the seat or thighs (turning the thighs in or out) brings the rider out of the deepest part of the saddle which will affect the ability to use the aids especially weight aids. Rotating the pelvis forward to where the rider is sitting on the pubic bone will minimise the ability to follow the movement and may further affect the position by bringing the upper body into a convex position.



The Knees

Gripping with the knees pulls the heel up and the seat out of the saddle, riders will then tend to also drop the shoulders forward.

The stirrup length will affect this also. Stirrups which are too long result in a ‘fork seat’ where the rider has to balance on the thighs meaning they can no longer use and effective lower leg. Stirrups which are too short may result in a ‘chair seat’ where the angles of the ankle and knee are flexed to a point where they cannot flex anymore so the leg position comes forward so that the heel is under the knee. In the ‘chair seat’ a rider cannot influence the horses’ hind-quarters.

The Lower Leg & Foot

Lower legs which stick out or move in an, in and out fashion, disrupt the application of leg aids and will effect balance.

Toes which stick out will mean the heel is drawn up to apply leg aids thus leading to a loss of the stirrup iron and lower leg security and support. Toes turned in will pull the lower leg away from the horse causing the leg to move around when applying aids.

Rolling in or out on the ankles not only becomes uncomfortable but effects how the rider balances in the stirrup.

Remember a crooked position will compromise the performance of your horse, your own balance, the symmetry of your weight and the accuracy and consistency of your aids and independent seat.

Extension Lesson

Identify three of your riding position strengths (what you can do well).

1)…….

2)…….

3)…….

Identify three of your riding position weaknesses (what you need to improve).

1)…….

2)…….

3)…….

On a suitable horse can you perform the following exercises? Get another person to help you by holding onto your horse while you practice.

Whilst sitting on the horse, can you:-

- touch your right knee with your right hand?
- touch your left knee with your left hand?
- touch your right knee with your left hand and your left knee with your right hand?
- touch your right toe with your right hand?
- touch your left toe with your left hand?
- how far down the horse's neck can you reach?

When performing these stretching exercises remember not to push through any muscle pain.

Recommended Reading

Publication:-	Author:-
The principles of riding	German National Equestrian Federation
Fundamentals of riding	Charles Harris

References

Publication:- Author:-

The principles of riding German National Equestrian Federation

Images:-

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