

Hints from the Hunter Ring - Rider Position

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Equitation is defined as "the art and practice of riding a horse". A horse ridden well is beautiful to watch; two different species thinking and acting harmoniously as a single unit. A successful partnership between rider and horse takes mutual trust, communication and years of hard work.

The novice rider is bombarded with commands from his instructors about his position. There are several reasons why good instructors emphasize a correct, balanced position. The most obvious is to ensure the rider doesn't fall off. Another reason is to enable the rider to require certain tasks from his horse. The ultimate achievement is for the rider to get his horse to perform while allowing him the freedom to perform well. Correct position is not only safe, it confirms clear communication between rider and horse. In jumping a course of fences, it is the rider's job to direct his mount around a course without interfering. A good basic position is essential if the horse is to jump the obstacles safely.

Good equitation starts with a solid leg and seat. Without these basics, a rider cannot be confident and independent of his hands. Establishing a good position requires a lot of time and hard work in the tack. Exercises in two-point position (in which the legs of the rider are the two points of contact with the horse) are the best way to establish a strong, stable lower leg. Two-point position is used when riding to jumps or galloping. In order to have a balanced two point, your leg must be in the correct spot: the calves against the horse's side just behind the girth, toes out a bit, ankles flexed in and the heels down. The rider in two-point stands up in the stirrups, just high enough so his seat is out of the saddle, with his upper body inclined slightly forward. Riding in two-point, you should be able to stand without the support of your hands. If you fall back, it is because your leg is too far forward. If you tend to fall forward, it is because your leg has slipped too far back or you are pinching with your knee.

Spend as much time as possible in two-point to get your leg in a steady position; you can then focus on your upper body, which should be inclined slightly forward. Do not crouch or lay on the horse's neck, as your position directly affects your horse's balance. If you are leaning too far forward, your horse will be falling on his front end. Even looking down can be enough to unbalance your horse. A horse on his front end is heavy in your hand, likely to trip, and has difficulty jumping. Have someone on the ground drill you in two-point and correct your position. Once you have a steady, secure leg, you can learn to use it to influence your horse's middle, back, and hind end to move forward and sideways. The hind end is the engine, and your leg, backed up with your seat and a balanced upper body, gets it to work.

Work without stirrups is the only way to obtain a good seat. Three-point (seat and two legs as contact points) is the position to use when working on the flat and at certain times when jumping. Your legs have to be strong enough to stay in position. Your upper body must remain tall; shoulder over the hip, with your lower back flexible enough to allow your seat to follow the horse's movement. Fact of life: It does not matter how fit you are or how much time you spend

on the weight machines at the gym. The only way to get your riding muscles fit and stable enough to be an aid in collecting or driving the horse is riding without stirrups.

Once you have developed a strong and balanced leg, seat, and upper body, you can learn to have good hands. Many riders do far too much with their hands. They use them to stay on, some use them to force the horse, others stiff the horse in the mouth when jumping and depend on them too much to steer. These riders create a heavy, unhappy, tough mouthed beast. A rider's hands should be elastic and move independently from the rest of the body. They should tactfully balance, guide, direct or follow the front of the horse, not inhibit his balance or forward movement. They should not be used to punish. In three point, your rein length should be short enough so your hands are over and just in front of the horse's withers. When you go into two point, you must shorten your reins because you are closer to your horse's mouth. Many riders compensate for a long rein length by having their upper body follow the horse instead of their hands. Correct rein length ensures a closer communications between you and your horse. It is difficult to follow the movements of the horse's front end smoothly if your reins are too long. Further, a rein that is too long will be ineffective and abrupt. Conversely, reins that are too short will choke the horse, create a stiff arm and cause the rider to be perched too far forward.

Once these basic position skills are established, work on the crest release, which is essential in giving the horse the freedom to use his head, neck and back to jump safely and with good style. For the crest release, the rider slides his hands halfway up the horse's neck, pressing into the horse's crest. Release as early as two strides before take-off and not later than when the horse begins to leave the ground. Sustain the release while the horse is in the air, until he begins to take the stride after landing. Your upper body should not move forward when releasing. Your hip angle will close following the movement of the horse. To learn how to perform a crest release, try the following exercises:

1) Release over a pole. The purpose of the exercise is to learn the movement needed to follow the horse's head and neck when jumping. Put a braid in your horse's mane halfway up his crest. Set a pole out where you work your horse. Now, ride your horse over the pole at a walk and a trot. Do this until he goes over the pole without changing his pace at both gaits, and then practice in two-point position. Next, walk over the pole and slide your hands up the horse's crest until you reach the braid and press your hands firmly into his crest. Make sure you are looking ahead and that all your weight is firmly in your heels. Only your arms should slide up -- you can stretch your arms in front of you without leaning with your upper body! Then trot the pole in two-point and practice the release. If your horse is steady, try releasing a few strides before the pole and holding it for a few strides after. Finally, try the exercise at an even-paced canter.

2) Jump a cross rail with balance poles. This exercise will also teach you how to move with the horse when jumping. Begin by setting up a cross rail with a pole on the ground nine feet in front of it and another pole nine feet behind. Trot to the jump in two point and release at the first pole. Plant your hands on another pole nine feet behind. Trot to the jump in two point and release at the first pole. Plant your hands on the horse's crest and press them until you are on the other side of the landing pole. Keeping the release until you are over the second pole will allow the horse to complete his arc without interference from your hands. Make sure that you

are not throwing your body or your base forward and concentrate on keeping your heels down so your leg does not move. Also, be sure to keep looking up and ahead.

When the crest release has become second nature, you are ready to learn the automatic release. In executing this release, the rider follows his horse's head and neck in the air, keeping a straight line from the rider's elbow, to hand, to horse's mouth, maintaining a feather light contact. Only advanced riders who have the utmost control of their balance should use this release.

If possible, someone should watch your position as you do these exercises. Body position faults over fences include getting left, jumping ahead, ducking to the side, shoving the body, falling back too soon and opening the hip angle too early. Hand position faults include an inadequate or abbreviated release, uneven hands, and hands that float above the crest. Leg position faults include the leg slipping forward or back, the heel coming up, and pinching the knee. Very often one of these faults causes another, and the horse suffers the result. For example, when an inexperienced rider's leg slips forward, he often falls back in the air and doesn't complete the release. The horse is stiffed in the mouth and hit in his back, which may cause his hind end to drop too soon, making his hind legs hit the jump (ouch!). A horse that has been repeatedly hit in the mouth will eventually protect his mouth by not using his back, becoming a stiff jumper with little scope. A green or sensitive horse will learn to stop. A rider that shoves his body ahead can make a horse drop a front rail or jump quick and flat in the air. This limits his jumping ability and makes him unsettled in his approach to jumps.

No matter how experienced, we all need constant work on our basic skills to fine-tune them. A horse with a trained and sensitive rider is more likely to try harder because his job is easy and even enjoyable. Having good basics is the first crucial step in establishing the mutual trust needed to form a successful partnership.