

Getting the basics right with Christine Weal

The perfect riding position is a little like the Holy Grail. Everyone talks about it, and many people have an opinion on what it should entail, but it is actually something that is achieved by very few! It's no wonder that so many riders strive to develop a flawless riding seat though. As well as looking elegant and effortless with aids that are invisible to the onlooker, adopting a correct position helps the horse's perform to the best of their ability. A balanced, relaxed rider naturally results in a balanced, relaxed equine.

The Perfect Riding Seat: What Is It?

The perfect riding position is something that has been developed, refined and passed down through the generations. One of the first things to realise is that the term 'seat' is a little misleading. As the Greek historian Xenophon rightly pointed out, the riding seat has nothing at all in common with sitting on a chair, but rather resembles standing upright with slightly straddled and bent knees. The following five points describe the ideal position and how to achieve it.

1. Sit centrally in the deepest part of the saddle, with your hips square to the horse's hips and your weight evenly distributed across your two seat bones. Make sure there's a vertical line running through your ear, shoulder, hip and heel.

2. While your body should remain upright and not collapsed at the waist, make sure that there's no tension running through it. Your seat, thighs and knees should all be relaxed on the saddle.

3. To help you remain in balance and absorb the movements of the horse, shake off any stiffness through the shoulders, spine and hips – otherwise you're in for a bumpy ride and your horse will suffer discomfort through the sensitive areas of his body.

4. Make sure the lower part of your leg – below the knee – rests lightly against the horse's sides with its weight dropping down, unforced, into the ball of the foot which should 'rest' in the stirrup. Your heel should be slightly lower than the toe, with the ankle remaining supple and the toe pointing forward.

5. There shouldn't be any tension in your shoulders, which will allow your arms and elbows to hang loosely at your sides. Keep your fingers softly closed around the reins, bearing in mind that there should be a straight line passing from your elbow through to the hand along the rein to the horse's mouth.

Professional New Zealand dressage rider and trainer, Christine Weal, thinks that the standard of riding is generally very good in New Zealand. However, there are a couple of things that she has noticed popping up time and time again.

"A common error is not maintaining that all-important line through the arms and hands to the horse's mouth," says Christine. "Some riders don't realise that if they jut their elbows out just a little bit, it gives the horse an opportunity to escape the contact. Not using the leg enough and over-correcting are issues that crop up from time to time. These are easy habits to slip into and usually occur because the rider doesn't fully understand contact. However, these simple little mistakes make it harder to keep the horse soft through the jaw, and connected front to back."

According to Christine, it is also important to acknowledge that riders can be just as crooked and one-sided as their horses. She emphasises that while it can be useful to focus on the trickier side, it is important not to go too far the other way as this can cause further imbalances.

"As far as rider position goes, keep it simple. Try not to do too much. Remember, less is often more when it comes to horses."

Christine Weal pictured here with Emma Goer's horse - SPEILZEIT



Avoid looking down, as it will bring horse and rider behind the movement and throw both out of balance. Don't lean too far forward as your horse will follow you and fall onto the forehand," says Christine. "Concentrate on staying level."

Christine also points out; it is imperative you try to remain relaxed in the saddle or the horse will tighten up through its body if you are tense. If you are having trouble loosening up, you might want to check that you are breathing properly. Many riders become so focused and concerned with the task at hand that they forget about remembering to breathe. Your muscles automatically become tight when you hold your breath, this tension ripples through your entire body. Breathing out helps to relax cramped muscles.

Leaning Back Doesn't Equal Impulsion

Many riders lean behind the vertical (especially in trot extensions!), because they think they're driving their horses more forward. The problem with leaning back, however, is that you'll end up pushing your horse's back down.

So if you tend to lean back, here's a quick tip to give you some muscle memory for keeping your upper body straight. While you're standing on the ground, lean back and ask a friend to put the palm of her hand between your shoulder blades. Ask her to gently push your upper body forward until your shoulders are above your hips. Repeat this several times. Close your eyes as you're being pushed forward so you can really memorize the feeling of bringing your upper body over your hips.

Then when you're riding your horse, pretend your friend is gently pushing your upper body forward so you can sit up straight.

Keep Your Pelvis in Neutral

Riding, whatever your discipline, is all about balance. You need to be centred and balanced, and you always want to keep your horse in good balance for his stage of training.

A great image to help you keep your pelvis in a 'neutral' position in your quest for good balance is to imagine your pelvis is a big bucket filled with water. When your pelvis is in a neutral position, you can keep all the water in the bucket. If you ride with an arched, tense back, the top of your pelvis tips forward, and the water spills out the front of the bucket. If you ride with a rounded lower back, the top of your pelvis tips back and the water spills out the back of the bucket.

Help your horse find his balance by riding with a neutral pelvis and keeping all the water in the bucket!

Small Steps

Lessons on the lunge, preferably without stirrups, can be hugely beneficial and are certainly not something to be ashamed of. Many professional riders continue to have sessions on the lunge, even when they are at the top of their game. Having someone else in control of the horse grants you a rare opportunity to focus entirely on yourself, and correct any problem areas. There are a number of exercises that can be done on the lunge to improve balance and symmetry.

Jockey Stirrups

Take your feet out of the stirrups and pull both knees up towards the pommel of the saddle. Imagine that your stirrups are getting shorter and shorter, until they are jockey length. In this position you can feel the exact location of your pelvis and the seat bones. Stretch the leg back down again, concentrating on keeping this deep contact with the seat bones. Repeat this exercise several times in walk, on the lunge circle.

Upper Body Rotations

Knot the reins, and holding your whip with both hands, raise your arms above your head. You should be forming a U position. Make sure that your hands are at exactly the same level. If one hand is higher than the other, it usually means there is a slight giving way in your upper body. Rotate to the right and left, ensuring the hands remain at the same height and the movement is executed smoothly and harmoniously. This can be done at walk on the lunge, in the beginning, progressing to the faster paces once you are comfortable and confident.

Watch and Learn

Finally, observe as many riders as possible and try to pinpoint who really swings supply through the hips and who wobbles about with tense hips and no support in the waist. Who sits tall and looks completely calm, in absolute harmony with their horse? Which riders look like they form one unit with the horse, with aids almost entirely invisible to the spectator? Watch the professionals out competing, paying particular attention to their balance, posture and how they move with the horse. Along with recruiting the services of an experienced trainer, this is one of the best ways of learning how to adopt the correct position.

As with all things that are worth waiting for, achieving a riding position to be proud of will take time. Remember though that with practice, your seat and balance will become easier and your horse's way of going will improve. Keep motivated, remain on track and you could eventually be rewarded with a more comfortable ride and a horse that is happily swinging along in exquisite self-carriage. There can't be many stronger motivators than that.

Dealing With A Hot Horse

"The first thing many riders do when they find themselves on a hot horse is take the leg off and pull up with the reins. This is actually one of the worst things you can do. Sit close to the horse, as this will give him confidence. Put your legs around him and feel the reins softly. You will almost feel him breathe a sigh of relief."

"Remember that horses are fantastic mimics... they never fail to reflect whatever your own body is doing."



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The Halt

At the halt the horse should stand attentive, engaged, motionless, straight and square with the weight evenly distributed over all four legs. The horse should maintain a light and soft contact with the rider's hand and be ready to move off at the slightest indication. You should have contact from the leg and the horse should not be afraid to stand still. The halt is obtained by the displacement of the horse's weight to the hindquarters; this is achieved by driving the horse towards a softly closed hand, causing an almost instantaneous but not abrupt halt.

By deepening their seat, the rider achieves impulsion required for the halt; this stimulates the horse's hindquarters to reach forward and underneath his body, thus accepting a greater load of weight, creating the balanced halt. This stimulation is the result of the rider's leg pressure on both sides of the horse's body, encouraging the "lifting" of the spine to meet the rider's seat. The rider should keep his upper body straight and push through the small of his back into passive and sustaining hands. Once halted, the rider should allow a slight relaxation of the upper body and at the same time will advance the hands slightly to give the horse a period of relaxation. This relaxation is a vital part of the training process because without them, nervousness and restlessness will set in.

Many people incorrectly halt their horses by employing the hand brake method: pulling on the reins rather than driving the horse into a softly restrained hand. If your horse is not engaged correctly, isn't moving equally into the contact from both hind legs, or not responding to your seat and leg, your horse won't halt square. A halt that is not square can also be the fault of the rider using one leg more than the other or the horse is trying to escape through an open aid. For example, open elbows, reins not even, legs not evenly applied, uneven weight aids.

Practice makes perfect!

Let me start by describing a correctly ridden downward transition. First, make sure you are in a balanced position with your shoulders, hips, and heels in a straight line. Your reins must be short enough that you have an

elastic connection with your horse's mouth, with your arms out in front of you creating a straight line from your elbow to the horse's mouth.

These prerequisites are imperative to the success of the downward transition. A correct halt requires your horse to be active behind from walk to halt, requiring only a soft contact. You should also get a sense that the horse would move forward immediately from the halt when asked, rather than your horse using the halt as an excuse to shut down and collapse. All of this shows that the horse understands the concept of moving into both reins in balance.

I cannot stress enough, the importance of keeping your horse and rider position straight. The horse's head needs to be positioned straight and in the middle of its chest, keep your shoulders straight, look up, elbows closed and do not collapse in your sternum, ride into a closed hand. As your horse comes to the halt, soften with your hand. If your horse isn't moving into both reins, you'll feel an uneven contact. If your horse twists, the problem is generally in the hindquarters, you will need to correct this with your legs (if you are crooked or unbalanced, you will force your horse off balance).

When your horse halts square, you'll feel his weight evenly distributed under your seat bones. Leaning down to check will probably knock your horse off balance, so ask a friend to tell you when the horse is square or use a mirror.

Rein back is also a very useful tool for the training of the halt. Any time your horse pulls in the halt, the rein back will usually get your horse to respect your aids a bit more. If the horse remains straight in the rein back; it will shift the centre of gravity back towards the hindquarters. It helps to perform the rein back along side of a fence or wall so that you can more easily judge and correct the straightness.

ADVICE!
Any roughness or excessive action on the part of the rider will cause the failure of a soft and fluid halt.

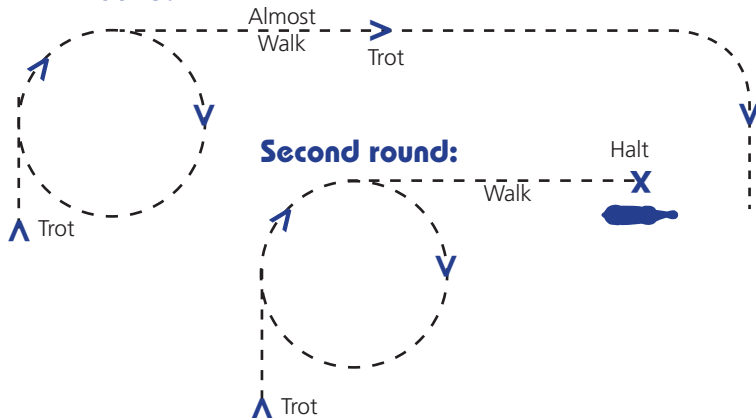
It is important not to switch your horse off. Five halts in one training session is ample.



Square Halt Under Saddle

1. For the first round, trot a straight line into a ten metre circle in the corner, trot out of that, bring your horse back until almost walking (two strides), trot on again, pushing your horse through the contact. This encourages your horse to use its back end, if they are using their back end then the shoulder will be up and the back end engaged and the halt is more likely to be straight and balanced. Continue to trot and follow the same pattern for the second round, this time come down to the walk and halt at X.

First round:



If your horse becomes tense, walk on a long rein and allow him to relax for one minute, reward him with a pat, then gather your reins and perform the exercise again.

HALF HALT

Half halts are the cornerstone of balance, engagement and preparation for a turn or transition.

Begin thinking of the half halt as a 'half go' because every half halt should contain the surge, drive and energy from the hindquarters.

A half halt is a three-step, three-second process. To the naked eye it appears that the rider applies the three sets of aids at the same time. However if you slow it down you would first see the rider's legs closing around the horse to create the drive from the back end, just before the horse surges into the medium gait the rider then uses inside rein asks for bend and softness, finishing the movement using the outside rein. This asks for reduction of pace and also works on lowering the head.

Within the three seconds it is important that the rider's legs remain active on the horse's side. This keeps the energy coming through from behind into the hand.

Half halts encourage a soft outline: only when he is soft in your hand will he stop leaning or pulling.



Imagine that there are two circles. When the horse is long, not gathered but is on the aids, the circles are apart. One circle encompasses the forehand and second circle around the hindquarters.



Your job as the rider is to close these circles together: the first coming up through the rider's legs, over the wither, down the front of the horse's face, down under the horse's forelegs and back up through the sole of the rider's boot; and the second circle coming up through the rider's legs, over the horse's rump or quarters, down under the horse's hind legs and back up through the sole of the rider's boots.

The hindquarters rotate under the horse's balance, thus driving forward and the forehand rotating upwards, lightening the horse's shoulders and leaving the forelegs freedom to swing with extravagance and less effort.



If both hind legs step further forward under the horse's centre, the quarters with bent haunches will carry more weight and then propel the body powerfully forwards and upwards. Because the centre of effort is shifted back and the quarters carry more weight, the forehand is lightened and elevated.

What you feel in your hand is a direct correlation to what the horse is doing with his hind legs. If they are lazily out behind his body, not supporting much of his weight, or only pushing with little engagement or carrying power, you will likely feel heaviness in your hands. And if his hind legs are actively underneath his body, supporting a good portion of his body weight, he will feel nice and light in your hands. So focus on getting those hind legs active!

HALF HALT EXERCISE



ADVICE!
Once your horse responds you must relax the contact until he is carrying himself in the required way.

Trot on a 20 meter circle, half halt for the downward transition through the centre, deepen your seat, come back to walk for just 2 or 3 strides. Then immediately ride an upward transition back into trot whilst changing the rein, using the half halt to make your horse wait in front, then ask for the trot, this takes 30 seconds. The key to pulling this movement off is to make sure you are keeping the horse in front of your leg in the transition from trot to walk - by riding forward from your seat and leg into your hand

like I described above, encouraging your horse's hindquarters to be active by using the half halt whilst moving into the walk.

You will know you have been successful in keeping the hindquarters active when your horse easily and smoothly steps right back into trot after your steps of walk.

Do one exercise changing the rein the next without changing the rein, this gets your horse on the job of listening instead of anticipating what you are going to ask for.

