Back Up Your Heel Position 12

Use this 5-Minute Fix to feel the connection from your back to your heels. Next time you are fighting to get your heels down remind yourself to flatten your back and allow the weight to sink into your heels.

Do you:

- **Have trouble keeping your heels down?**
- **Find they creep up even after you have jammed them down?**
- **Constantly hear your instructor yelling "Heels Down!"?**
- **Have one heel that comes up more than the other?**
- **Wish you could do something about it?**

Here's a quick tip to help you keep your heels deep.

Next time you ride notice what happens to your heels. Are they above, at, or below the level of your stirrup? How much weight is on your toes? Are you bracing against the stirrup to get your heels down? What happens when you shorten your stirrups? Do you stiffen all over trying to keep your heels where they belong? Do you feel unsteady no matter how hard you jam your heels down?

12.1 An excellent example of a "light seat" over ground poles. Notice the rider's solid, flat back, and her crisp angles at the elbow, hip, knee, and ankle. There is a straight line from elbow to bit and the angle of the forearm matches the angle of the thigh. The rider's weight is sinking into her heel without her jamming the lower leg forward. The ankle is well placed under her hip with her buttocks back in the saddle counterbalancing the angle of the upper body, which is correctly inclined forward from the hip. Her eyes are looking forward because her base of support is solid. (Note: The towels under the flaps of the saddle provide thigh contact in order to achieve this solid position—see Fix 31, p. 122.)

Heels Down

It is unfortunate that most riders are taught to get their heels down incorrectly. Instead of learning to sink their weight into their heels, they typically end up bracing against the stirrups, straightening their knees, then leaning forward in an attempt to balance over their feet. In this position, their ankles remain rigid. People spend hours trying to stretch their calves; buy hinged stirrups (which can make matters worse); or resign themselves to being unable to achieve this most basic tenet of a good riding position. When they brace the lower leg forward or jam their foot against the stirrup, a tremendous amount of tension is created that must be resolved first in order to have a solid, deep heel.

A secure heels down, providing the rider with a good base of support, comes from a solid, flat back position and supple, relaxed joints—particularly the hips, knees, and ankles (fig. 12.1, and see also figs. 18.3 and 32.6, pp. 75 and 131). When your back is hollowed, you won't be able to get your weight into your heels correctly, no matter how hard you try. Your leg weight must "fall" through the heel in a direction toward the horse's hind foot—with your knee bent—in order to achieve heels down. How deep your heel actually goes is more a function of stirrup length and much less important than the way in which your weight goes into your heel.

When you have a "deep" heel your foot rests on the stirrup and your calf touches your horse's sides—that is, when his conformation allows (see Fix 29, p. 114). You will then be able to apply calf pressure to give your horse a leg aid. When you need a stronger aid, you can make your calf muscles firmer by flexing your ankle—as long as you keep your knee bent and don't let your lower leg swing forward.

The purpose of flexing the ankle is to tone the calf muscle creating a stronger leg aid when used against the horse's sides, which is separate from heels down (see sidebar, p. 52). When your ankle is already flexed to the maximum so that your heel is as far as it will go, you lose the ability to refine your leg aids into softer or stronger signals. Instead, you will always be "shouting" at your horse with your legs, which can make him dull and unresponsive. When this happens, most riders have to resort to using artificial aids like a whip or spurs in order to get the horse to move.

EXERCISE

On the Ground

The alignment of your lower back determines whether your weight falls into your heel or toward the front of your foot. Here's an exercise derived from *Bones for Life®*, a program developed by Ruthy Alon based on the Feldenkrais Method® to teach people how to organize their skeleton into a safe weight-bearing posture in order to maintain bone health. This exercise will help you understand the connection between your lower back and heels.

Stand with your feet in a "step position" (one foot ahead of the other about hip-width apart). Make sure your knees are bent. Place the back of one hand on your lower back. Hollow your back and feel how your weight moves toward the front of both feet (fig. 12.2). Now flatten your back and feel how the weight shifts into your heels (fig. 12.3). Change your foot position and see what happens when you have the other foot forward.

Shift your body over your front foot and feel how this tends to hollow your back, transferring your weight to the front of your feet again. (This is a normal event when walking.) Bring your body back and while still in the step position, lift the front of the forward foot and jam your heel into the ground. Feel how your lower back hollows, your knee straightens, and you lean forward with your upper body (fig. 12.4). This is just what happens when you jam your heels down against the stirrup, except that in the saddle, you wind up swinging your lower leg forward and pushing your buttocks back toward the cantle.

12.2 Hollowing my back shifts my weight forward onto the front leg and toward the toes of both feet.

12.3 In "step position," my back is flat and the weight is sinking into the heel of my back foot (left heel).

12.4 Lifting the front of my forward foot and pressing into the heel is essentially the same as bracing against the stirrup. My knee straightens, which pushes my pelvis back and up, and causes my back to hollow.

12.5 I sink deeper by bending my knees—in effect, shortening the stirrups if I were in the saddle. My back lengthens and even more weight goes into my back heel.

Now, flatten your back in the step position again. As you flatten, let your knees and hips bend. Feel how your back lengthens. The weight transfers across the whole foot and into the heel of the back foot. Notice how your pelvis comes underneath you (fig. 12.5). This allows your seat to come forward into the deepest part of the saddle. Your weight will sink down through both heels making your base of support very stable (see also Fix 32, p. 126, for additional help when in the saddle).