

THE

ATHLETIC EQUESTRIAN

OVER 40 EXERCISES
for Good Hands, Power Legs,
and Superior Seat Awareness

RIDE LIKE A
VARSITY ATHLETE
with



**SALLY
BATTON**
and
Christina Keim

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The Fundamental Two-Point: Gym Squats on Horseback

Many riders only associate the *two-point position* with jumping, so much so that sometimes this seat style is called “jumping position.” But the two-point position is really the basis of all rider athlete fitness, so even if a rider isn’t interested in jumping, I believe that it is important for her to learn how to do it correctly. In fact, I introduce the two-point to beginner riders at the halt quite early in their education, as it helps them learn how to get their heels down and develop the proper balance needed for all future riding (fig. 3.1). Furthermore, the two-point position helps riders develop better body awareness and strengthen leg muscles.

The two-point position engages the rider’s calves, hamstrings, and quadriceps, just as



3.1 Even beginner riders get to try the two-point at the halt. Piper shows how to “ride like a jockey,” which puts her up into her two-point position at Floyd Woods Farm in Chester, New Hampshire.

practicing squat exercises at the gym would do. The biomechanics of a correct gym squat are virtually identical to those of a correct two-point position, so much so that I often call practicing two-point position “gym squats on horseback.”

Ultimately, there are three distinct seat styles that English riders must master: the *full seat*, the *light seat*, and the *two-point seat*. The *three-point seat* is being used when the rider has three points of contact with the saddle—her seat and each leg. However, the term “three-point” is rarely used today, and the majority of my riders wouldn’t even know what I was asking for, so I tend to use the term *full seat* instead (fig. 3.2 A). We will discuss the full seat position further in chapter 7 (p. 84).

In the *two-point seat*, the rider has just two points of contact—her legs. The rider’s seat is completely out of the saddle and her hip and knee angles close (fig. 3.2 B). The *light seat* is halfway between these two seat styles, when the rider has transferred some but not all of her weight out of her seat and into the legs (fig. 3.2 C). Each style is used at specific moments during a ride for the most effective communication with the horse.

When the two-point seat is correct, the rider will have developed the alignment and balance that serves as the basis for all future work. But many riders have not been taught the proper mechanics of the two-point, and instead of sinking into her leg and closing her angles, the rider stands over or even ahead of



3.2 A-C Teagan is in her full seat with three points of contact between her and the horse: her seat, and her two legs (A). Then Teagan demonstrates her two-point position, with her two legs as the points of contact between her and the horse (B). Positioned in her half seat or light seat, Teagan is halfway between her full seat and her two-point seat with some, but not all, of her weight out of her seat and into the legs (C).

3.3 Olivia M. uses her back to hold herself up in her two-point instead of allowing her legs to support the position while riding at Over the Oxer in Dover, New Hampshire.



the pommel. The rider is then both unbalanced and unable to apply her aids correctly.

In addition, the rider is using her back to hold the two-point, rather than allowing the legs and abdominal muscles to support the position. Riders will often say that their back hurts during or after extended time in the two-point position (fig. 3.3). Generally, this indicates that the rider needs to strengthen her quadriceps and abdominals with exercises completed both on and off the horse to protect her back and execute the two-point correctly.

In this chapter, I will break down the essentials of the two-point into more precise detail, specifically discussing the biomechanics of the rider and the correct action of the hip. I will share my favorite unmounted and mounted rider exercises for developing an awareness of body position in two-point, which will lead to the ability to quickly assess where you have

gone wrong if you start to lose your balance, and to fix it on your own. Practicing this important position correctly will allow riders of any discipline to become stronger, better balanced, and ultimately more effective with their aids.

TWO-POINT BIOMECHANICS IN PRACTICE

A rider who can correctly execute her two-point position will be balanced and able to hold the position for multiple circuits around the arena, or galloping cross-country, without worry of falling back into the saddle or onto the horse's neck (figs. 3.4 A & B). In a correct two-point, the rider's leg joints—including the ankle, knee, and hip—are fluid and shock absorbing, and the major muscle groups of the leg (quadriceps, hamstrings, and calves) are engaged.

When I first teach a rider how to achieve

3.4 A & B Denny Emerson demonstrates a classic galloping two-point position (A). Staying centered and balanced off the horse's back aids the horse's balance as he gallops around the cross-country course in eventing. Daryl also demonstrates the two-point position necessary when galloping cross-country while eventing (B).



the two-point, I have the horse stand at a halt in the center of the arena and ask the rider to stand up in the stirrups. Generally, she will stand up by completely straightening her knee and hip joints, almost as if she were standing on the ground. Her open angles make it virtually impossible to maintain her balance (fig. 3.5 A).

Once the rider has felt the instability of standing with open angles, I have her return to the full seat, then ask her to rise out of the saddle like a jockey at the Kentucky Derby. Now, the rider is usually in a position somewhat closer to what I'm looking for in a correct two-point, but typically she is also standing on her

3.5 A & B Stella has incorrectly straightened her knee and hip joints to try and find the correct two-point position (A). Her hip angle is better in B, but she is still open in her knee and is standing on her toes.



toes, causing her to lose balance yet again and pitch forward onto the horse's neck (fig. 3.5 B).

I'll then take her step by step through the three most common two-point mistakes in order to start her onto the path to two-point nirvana—the perfectly balanced two-point position.

The Three Most Common Two-Point Mistakes

When I work with new riders in lessons or at clinics, I ask them to demonstrate their two-point at the trot fairly early in the ride. Almost always, riders will make one of three mistakes, listed here from least to most common: *they have their lower leg too far back, they have their lower leg too far forward, or they are simply standing over the pommel.*

Bringing *the lower leg too far back* in two-point is a less common problem, simply because when the rider's leg is in this position, she will find it nearly impossible to maintain her balance out of the saddle. But unless someone has specifically helped her to feel that her lower leg is incorrect, she is usually unaware that this fault is the cause of her two-point problems. Instead, she becomes increasingly frustrated because this leg position causes her to repeatedly fall forward onto the horse's neck, never finding the synergistic rhythm and balance between horse and rider that proper leg position allows. Riders who habitually pinch with their knees, either because of poor balance or weak leg muscles, will often end up with a lower leg too far back (fig. 3.6 A).

Bringing *the lower leg too far forward* is a fairly common problem, and it can be caused by a rider trying to shove her heels down instead of



3.6 A-E Stella demonstrates one of the most common two-point position mistakes with her lower leg too far back (A). Now Stella demonstrates other common two-point position mistakes with her lower leg too far forward (B) and by opening her angles (C). This puts her up and over the pommel of the saddle. Jinae demonstrates the incorrect two-point with open angles over a jump (D) and has “jumped up the pommel” by opening her angles as the horse took off, which leads to near zero shock absorption for her upon the horse’s landing (E).

allowing her ankle joint to flex through proper foot positioning in the stirrup and stretch in the calf (see chapter 2, p. 20). This rider, too, will struggle to maintain her balance in two-point, usually falling back into the saddle. Not only is this frustrating for the rider, but it can be painful for the horse, who often receives a jab in the mouth and a slam on his back as a result

of his rider’s loss of control (fig. 3.6 B).

But by far the most common two-point mistake I see is that the rider *simply stands up over the pommel*, opening the angles of her ankle, knee, and hip. A rider who has learned to execute her two-point this way is never balanced or stable in this position and can even start to look as if she is “posting to the canter,”

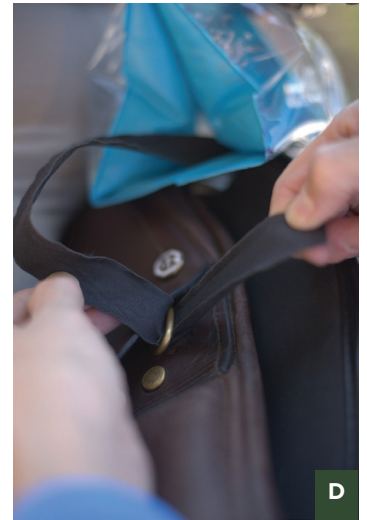
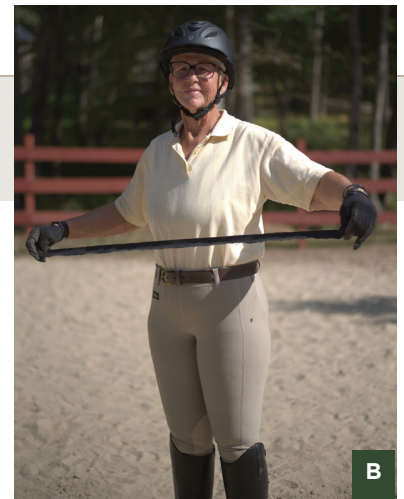
THE POMMEL BLOCKER

As with many bad habits, riders who stand up over the pommel in two-point don't usually know that they are making this mistake. As an instructor, I can remind the rider over and over to not open up over her pommel, but her incorrect muscle memory is a powerful opponent. In my teaching, I needed a tool that the rider could actually feel, a tactile reminder to keep her seat back over the saddle, in order to help her to learn a new habit. The solution I came up with is called the *Pommel Blocker*, and you can make one for yourself with materials from your local department store (fig. 3.7 A).

Here is all you need: an inflatable child's sized swim float (I like the ones shaped like a triangle) and a length of self-adhesive Velcro. To determine the right length of Velcro, inflate the float, then take a piece of baling twine or a flexible ruler and run it through the middle where the child's arm would go (fig. 3.7 B).

You will need a long enough piece of Velcro that it can run through the *Pommel Blocker* (fig. 3.7 C), through each "D" ring on the saddle, then connect back to itself on the bottom of the *Pommel Blocker* (fig. 3.7 D).

The *Blocker* should fit snugly to the front of the saddle. If you used a piece of baling twine, clip it at the correct length, then use this piece to measure your Velcro. Apply the self-adhesive backing to your float, and you are ready to put your *Pommel Blocker* to use (fig. 3.7 E).



3.7 A-E The *Pommel Blocker* (A). Rae has measured out the length of Velcro she needs to attach the *Pommel Blocker* to the saddle (B) and places the Velcro through the open ends of the *Pommel Blocker* (C). I put the Velcro through the D-rings on either side of the *Pommel Blocker* and attached the Velcro to itself (D). The *Pommel Blocker* is correctly placed on the saddle's pommel in E.





3.7 F & G Rae demonstrates posting too high—a common fault of the posting trot (F). With the *Pommel Blocker* in place, Rae is prevented from posting too high and can learn better body mechanics (G).



Alternatively, cut a piece of clothesline to the appropriate length and use this instead of Velcro to secure your *Pommel Blocker*. Simply run it through the float and the D rings, then tie it in a bow for easy removal.

I can guarantee that with a *Pommel Blocker* attached to the saddle, a rider feels an immediate difference. If she goes into two-point by opening up her leg and hip angles, the rider will hit the *Pommel Blocker* instead, giving her an instantaneous reminder to sink into the joints and keep the seat centered.

Tools like the *Pommel Blocker* should be used long enough to help the rider acquire a new sensation, but then they need to be removed or else they can become a crutch. For a rider trying

to develop correct biomechanics in two-point, I suggest using the *Pommel Blocker* for half of the ride, then removing it and finishing the ride without it. Ask a friend to see if she can notice a difference.

The *Pommel Blocker* is also my favorite tool for riders that post too high (fig. 3.7 F). This is a common challenge for new riders, and when I see this bad habit developing, I like to use the *Pommel Blocker* for the full duration of every ride for several weeks (fig. 3.7 G). Once I see that the rider is consistently keeping her post closer to the saddle, I will begin to wean her off the *Pommel Blocker* by starting the ride with it on as a reminder, then finishing the ride without it to see if the correction is maintained.

a major equitation ring fault. Instead of folding correctly and maintaining her center over the horse's center in an athletic stance, the rider who stands over the pommel is stiff and must rely purely on strength to try to get out of the tack. She usually rides with a pinched knee (as the body tries to grip with its strongest leg muscles, the quadriceps) and a loose, swinging lower leg. The worst part is that because she has practiced her two-point in this manner over and over, her muscle memory for the movement is completely incorrect—and she likely has no idea that she is doing it wrong (fig. 3.6 C).

The good news is that with increased body awareness, most riders *can* change each of these incorrect biomechanics (figs. 3.6 D & E). But doing so takes diligence, and sometimes a little help from one of my favorite tools, the *Pommel Blocker* (see sidebar).

TWO-POINT RIDER BIOMECHANICS: EVALUATE YOUR AWARENESS BASELINE

Where do *you* stand on the Rider Awareness Scale when it comes to your two-point position? To find out, try this series of four exercises.

✧ Exercise: Two-Point Test 1 ✧

In the first exercise, the rider will exaggerate putting her leg out of position until she develops a kinesthetic sense of how this impacts her upper body balance. Start by getting into your two-point at the trot, then bring the lower leg

so far forward that you can see the toe of your boot. You will immediately feel your upper body shift backward to compensate, and you will likely fall into the saddle. Next, try bringing the lower leg too far back.

I haven't met very many riders that can stay off their horse's back for too long when in this position; most people have to put their hands down onto the horse's neck just to stay in the saddle! Practice this exercise until you develop a clear awareness of the position of your lower leg, and the resulting negative effect on your balance with your leg in each incorrect position. Riders who have practiced this exercise enough will almost instinctively know the necessary correction if they experience a loss of balance in the future.

✧ Exercise: Two-Point Test 2 ✧

The next mounted exercise requires the assistance of a friend. Starting at the halt in the center of the arena, get into your two-point position, and have your friend place her hand, if you are comfortable with that, or have her hold your *Flat-Back Roll-Up* about 2 to 3 inches in front of the cantle of the saddle. (A *Flat-Back Roll-Up* is a thin magazine rolled tightly and secured with packing tape. The uses for the *Flat-Back Roll-Up* will be discussed in chapter 6—see p. 66). Your friend is now going to try to push you forward with pressure from her hand or your *Flat-Back Roll-Up* on your tailbone. If you have opened the angles of your ankle, knee, and hip, your friend will easily push you

onto the horse's neck (fig. 3.8 A). Now, re-center yourself in your full seat and rise into two-point while keeping your friend's hand or the *Roll-Up* in contact with your tailbone the entire time (fig. 3.8 B).

Imagine the feeling of "squatting" while unmounted—your weight goes down into your feet and the muscles of your legs engage. The angles of your leg joints close down and the hip tips slightly. This is the same feeling you are trying to create in your mounted two-point. Keeping this "squat" feeling in mind, your friend is now going to try to push you forward, while you do everything possible to resist her. If you have been successful in sinking down through the leg while rising into the two-point, you won't fall forward. When riders find this correct position, they are amazed at how strong and secure they feel in the tack (fig. 3.8 C).

* Exercise: Two-Point Test 3 *

Finally, have your friend keep her hand or the *Roll-Up* just in front of the cantle, and get back into your corrected two-point. Transition from the two-point seat to the full seat, alternating between them without letting your tailbone break contact with your friend's hand. If you do this correctly, your seat will still be clearing the saddle when you are in two-point position, but it will likely be much closer and more centered than it was before. I tell riders to imagine that their femurs (thigh bones) are pushing their seat bones toward the cantle, rather than thinking about their shoulders coming forward.



3.8 A-C With Jerianne positioned this far up and over the pommel, I will easily be able to push her forward and off balance with the *Flat-Back Roll-Up* (A). She closes her hip and knee angles to bring her tailbone closer to the *Roll-Up* (B). She is now centered and balanced (C). It will be impossible for me to push her forward and off balance.

COACH SALLY'S TOP 10 TIPS

Tip 3: Dress for Success

When I watch the evolution of a student from casual rider to top athlete, one of the most striking changes is often in how she presents herself and her mount for lessons, clinics, and competition. At busy lesson barns, riders who start off with their hair hanging out of their helmet, no belt, and a grubby T-shirt will sometimes start to emulate the turnout of more experienced riders as their own skills increase; but otherwise, these skills must be taught.

At a minimum, riders should wear polished, well-fitting boots, a tucked-in collared shirt, and hair in a net, even when schooling at home. How a rider appears on the outside reveals the dedication she feels to the craft of horsemanship on the inside. Presenting yourself and your mount in a clean, workman-like way shows respect for yourself and your instructor, clinician, or judge (fig. 3.9).

However, you don't have to buy the most expensive equipment or model the latest equestrian style trend (even though you may want to) to dress like the rider you want to become. Both tack and riding attire are made in a range of price points to meet the needs of riders at all levels. An entry-level ASTM-SEI approved riding helmet that costs less than \$100 is just as safe as a high-end helmet at \$500 or more; entry-level saddles are just as functional as their more pricy, custom-designed cousins.

One of the easiest steps a rider can take



3.9 Alex is dressed to impress with her properly fitted helmet, clean shirt and jacket, and black gloves.

to look great is to thoroughly and regularly groom her horse. The horse's coat should gleam as a result of routine currying and dandy brushing; a body brush will bring up the oils that create shine. Take the time to pick out the horse's feet, mane, and tail. Don't present to your lesson with a manure stain on the horse's belly or bedding stuck to his flank. Keep manes neatly pulled and bridle paths clipped.

Leather products that are cleaned and oiled regularly not only look better, but last longer as well. Bridles, saddles, girths, martingales, horse boots, and rider boots all should be regularly maintained so that dirt and grime don't build up.



3.10 Suehayla and Bodie are polished and ready to shine at a collegiate competition.

Metal on bit rings, stirrups, spurs, and buckles should be polished to a shine.

Once the tack is on your horse, tuck all the straps into keepers and runners, so that nothing is flapping on the horse. Make sure that your clean saddle pad is appropriate for the day's activity—for example, a baby pad is fine for schooling but not a show—and that it is pulled up into the gullet of the saddle.

Practice keeping your tack and riding equipment clean and organized until this becomes your habit. Work over time to build a small wardrobe of attire that is comfortable and fits well. Keep up with routine grooming so your horse's coat is always one good brushing away from a shine. In this way, even on those days when you are short on time, you and your horse will always be “dressed to impress” (fig. 3.10).

Whenever I do this exercise with riders for the first time, they usually comment on how strange it feels, and they think they are not far enough out of the saddle. But for a jump of 3 feet in height or less, the rider's seat only needs to be about 3 inches out of the saddle (fig. 3.11). If you look at photos of most riders jumping fences in this height range, you will see that many of them are much more than 3 inches out of the saddle. Their upper body is “ahead” of the motion, a serious rider jumping fault that makes the horse's jumping effort more difficult and will result in a point deduction from the judge in an equitation class.



3.11 Teagan and Ruby are in harmony as they go over the Aloha jump at Maunawili Farm in Kailua, Hawaii.

✧ Exercise: Two-Point Test 4 ✧

Now that your seat is closer to the saddle, get back into two-point and one more time repeat the earlier exercise, in which your friend tried



3.12 A & B When Emmaree's knee and hip angles are open, Simone T. is easily able to push her off balance (A). When Emmaree's knee and hip angles are more closed (simulating a correct two-point), Simone T. will not be able to push her forward (B).



to push you forward (see p. 37, fig. 3.8 C). With your deeper and more centered balance, she should be unable to do so.

If you don't have a friend to help you try this while riding, you can practice an unmounted variation of the exercise at home with a family member. Standing in an open space on level ground, place your feet about a shoulder-width apart and get into a full squat; slowly reopen your angles until you are about halfway between your full squat and standing positions, and ask a family member to push you on your tailbone.

Notice how this affects your balance (fig. 3.12 A). Next, start to get back into your squat and stop when your angles have closed down enough that you are simulating a correct two-point position. Again, ask a family member to push you on the tailbone and see if she can disrupt your perfect balance. You'll find that in your full two-point/squat position, you will remain balanced and centered (fig. 3.12 B). But when your leg angles are in the halfway open position, your family member will be able to easily push you forward.