

The Dressage Seat

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a red zip-up jacket and black riding pants, is smiling as she sits on a grey horse. The horse is in motion, possibly performing a dressage movement, in an indoor arena with large windows in the background. The horse has black wraps on its lower legs.

Achieving a
Beautiful, Effective
Position in
Every Gait and
Movement

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*Classical Schooling with the
Horse in Mind*

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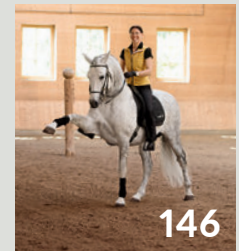
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Translator's note: For clarity of meaning, we have followed the convention of referring to riders as "she" and horses as "he." We fully appreciate the gentlemen riders and the mares!

The Seat in the Lateral Movements

A horse that is moving sideways offers many challenges for the rider's seat. The attempt to follow lateral movements with suppleness very often fails due to the rider's lack of body awareness.

The Leg-Yield

I will begin with the simplest initial sideways steps of the horse, the leg-yield. It doesn't matter if you are practicing at the walk or the trot. Assume you are traveling to the left and want to do a right leg-yield along the long side. How should you use your body to achieve the movement?

First, flex your horse a slight bit to the outside right before the second corner of the short side, and cut off the corner by riding at an angle to the wall. I turn my upper body and pelvis toward the wall. Pay attention because, at this moment, the following almost always happens:

- One shoulder goes higher or lower than the other.
- Your shoulders turn toward the wall but your pelvis is locked up and doesn't come along.
- Your waist collapses with the attempt to turn your body.
- Your weight goes completely to one side of the saddle when you just simply want to turn your body.
- Your outside leg sticks out stiffly while the inside leg is pulled up and clamps on.

Pay strict attention to turning the upper body in one block so that your shoulders stay parallel with, and exactly over, the hips. Check yourself in a mirror that is placed on the long side of the arena or have yourself videotaped, especially from behind. Be conscious of the position of your legs and try to load the seat bone a little more in the direction you are riding. Being constantly aware of all your body parts is endlessly important for riding and requires frequently asking yourself about your position. Often, quietly go through a checklist about your body. You will need to check the problem areas that you know about. Gradually, you will develop a better feel for erect posture with the right level of body tension. It is always easier to give the desired aids correctly and to make adjustments as needed out of a correct position.

When you have achieved this stage of body awareness with the necessary coordination and mobility, you can consider shaping the horse. Any attempts to train a horse or to improve a horse in some way before you have reached this state will fail, or lead to results that aren't consistent with the ideals of a classically ridden horse but rather a robotic creature that is far from "through" and balanced. The seat is always the key to success. I can promise you that regardless of the level of riding, you will never stop trying to improve your seat.

The Shoulder-In

The next lateral movement is the shoulder-in. After riding deep through a corner turn on the diagonal. It helps if you take your eyes along in the turn and look at the diagonal.

The upper body is turned slightly toward the inside of the arena, and the shoulders are aligned with the horse's shoulders. Katharina Reinthaler on the Frederiksborger stallion Sirius in shoulder-in at the trot.





Shoulder-in on the circle. The inside rein is pushed slightly forward to check that the horse is truly on the aids rather than being held in the bend and flexion. The rider sits deep but relaxed on the horse. Vera Munderloh on Super.

You differentiate between the closed hand and the opening hand. In the shoulder-in the closed hand is usually on the outside. The outside rein presses softly against the neck and encourages the horse's shoulders to the inside. The exercise actually should be called "shoulders-in." The opening inside hand moves slightly to the side, helps to maintain flexion, and also supports the inside leg, making it easier for the horse to step sideways. The outside rein is taken up as necessary, for example, when the horse wants to continue down the diagonal once he has

brought his forehead toward the inside. The outside rein prevents this and assures that the horse stays in the shoulder-in while the hindquarters continue down the track. The inside leg drives sideways and the outside leg prevents the shoulders from escaping, and also prevents the hindquarters from evading sideways toward the rail.

Ideally, you should imagine that your seat leads the horse into the shoulder-in, in that you guide the forehead inward and then the outside rein catches the horse while your inside leg drives softly sideways. Under no

circumstances should you think about pushing the hindquarters to the side. That would be backward. Above all, you must be sure that you are speaking clearly to the horse so that he doesn't misunderstand, and that you sit in the direction of the movement. This means sitting to the outside in the shoulder-in. In this way, the horse learns from the beginning to always follow your weight, and you can use this subtle hint from your seat constantly without an observer noticing it.



The Travers and Renvers

In travers, you turn toward the rail, analogous to the leg-yield. But now your horse is bent and flexed in the direction of travel. You use your inside leg at the girth and imagine that the horse wraps around it. This is decisive for the bend. The inside hand helps to get bend and flexion and softens as soon as the horse has responded. If the horse loses bend or flexion, the inside hand helps to get it back again. The outside hand holds the contact and leads the forehead a little sideways by pressing the rein lightly against the neck. The outside hand can also be moved outward when the hindquarters don't move sideways enough. The outside leg brings the croup around and softens immediately when the horse goes sideways. You sit in the direction of the movement. Stepping on the stirrup is a good way to use the weight aid. This means that you step a little harder on the inside stirrup, which brings your weight a little more to this side. The sensitively ridden horse will immediately understand which way he is supposed to move. It is very important for this—and all lateral movements—to keep your weight constantly on this side.

Travers to the left, ridden with an erect posture, correct turn of the body, and very relaxed arms. Anja Beran on Ofendido.

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Renvers with swing and lightness in the hand. Anja Beran on the Lusitano stallion Regedor.



Renvers with very good bend. The rider's shoulders are exactly aligned with the horse's shoulders. Anja Beran on Ofendido.

Travers being ridden at the canter and on the circle. It is important for a sensitive seat and hand to allow the horse to elevate and “blossom.”

Many riders tend to “waddle” (like a duck) left and right in the saddle in the belief that they are helping the lateral movement. The opposite is true. The horse becomes insecure and unstable due to this “waddling.” He isn’t sure he should stay in the lateral movement anymore, because the seat signals something else than what the hand and leg aids are saying. The horse hears from the seat that he should change direction while the reins and legs tell him to go in the same direction. Yes, you guessed it: the horse will

get frustrated and become dull to the weight aid. Your uncoordinated body contradicts your other aids and, as a result, your horse doesn’t understand anymore and he loses motivation.

You sit the same in the renvers as in the travers, but now the hindquarters stay on the track and the forehand is brought to the inside while your horse is bent and flexed in the direction of travel. Renvers is merely the counter-movement to travers.

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As it should be! Shoulders precisely over the pelvis, lightly stepping in the left stirrup with soft contact. Silvia Wimmer on the Lusitano stallion Quilate.



Erect upper body with positive body tension in sync with the lateral movement of the horse. Vera Munderloh on the Lusitano stallion Novilunio.

The Half-Pass

When you ride a corner well and can thoughtfully bring the horse into a shoulder-fore, you can weight the stirrup at the beginning of the half-pass. My horses know immediately that when I step on the inside stirrup after a corner, which puts my weight slightly to the inside, they should go sideways on the diagonal. Ideally, you hold your shoulders exactly

When body language works, everything looks easy. Hands and legs become accessories. Anja Beran on Ofendido.

over the horse's shoulders and above your pelvis. Neither shoulder should be higher or lower than the other. When the horse doesn't lead well with the forehand, you can take your outside shoulder slightly forward to help the forehand to lead. If a horse has a hard time taking the hindquarters sideways, it is legitimate to take the outside shoulder back a little, which influences the hindquarters to step more sideways.

Let the arms fall down loosely and try to keep the inside hand close to the horse's neck. You relax this hand as soon as the horse is bending well and is flexed. The outside hand stays constantly in contact and can be lifted a little if the horse has the tendency to get too deep. Or, the outside hand can be

taken a little to the outside to align the horse and make him move sideways better.

You must make such decisions promptly and correctly if the half-pass is to be successful. Your body must obey you, which means you must be able to use each hand, at any second, precisely as necessary. Avoid collapsing the upper body or leaning back. You should be looking straight through the horse's ears toward the short side.

The inside leg should be at the girth. This is very important in the half-pass because the horse bends around it. Consequently, it must not be pulled away from the horse. A slight turn of the toes to the outside can help to have more feeling with the horse's body and improve the bend. The inside leg also takes

the horse forward. The outside leg is taken back slightly and initiates the half-pass. But pay attention! Often the rider bends the knee and takes the leg up and back, which causes it to act on the horse much too high up toward the saddle pad.

The same error occurs when initiating the canter. This is a big mistake. It not only looks unattractive, it is also uncomfortable for the horse. Many horses respond to this leg position by swatting their tail. It is correct to take the leg a couple of inches back, but only from your hip. In this way, the leg stays long. Imagine that you want to touch the horse's body as low down as possible. If you are wearing spurs, you are able to lift the abdomen up a little. If you are careful not to commit the gross error of over-bending the leg and taking it too far back, the horse responds much better when the spur is used at the correct place way down on the body rather than near the saddle blanket. But once again, you must first be conscious of what your leg is actually doing. Does it move too little or too much? Does it stay long and deep, or does it shove back and up? Advice from a good instructor is very important.

Your saddle can also hinder you from correctly using the leg. When it is too small with large knee rolls, it fixes your leg making it difficult to move the legs and the hips without force, because they are blocked by the small seat. If you want to be a little flexible in the leg, you can only move it by bending the knee. Consequently, such saddles are inappropriate and lead to an incorrect seat; over time they can injure the rider. This clamped seat also affects the horse's back negatively in terms of mobility and relaxation. If you don't feel comfortable or secure in a saddle that offers the necessary freedom of movement, you shouldn't invest in a saddle with big knee blocks, but rather in longe lessons to better train your seat. As Gustav Steinbrecht said, the seat should not be characterized by

a tight grip but by balance. This is the only thing that can give the rider security on the horse's back.

Stepping Over

Stepping over is a lateral movement that causes many errors of the seat. Since it is practiced on a circle, it is helpful to imagine a fixed point in the center of the volte or the circle. You can use a chair or a pylon because you always want to keep the same distance from the center. This helps you get the correct bend. You turn your eyes and upper body toward this object, which results in a distinct seat aid for stepping over. The inside leg drives sideways while the outside leg and rein catch the movement and stop it at any time.

Many riders make a critical mistake as they turn their upper body. They extend the outside elbow and carry the outside hand forward while the inside hand stays back. This looks like the rider's hands are on the handlebars of a bicycle that she is riding on a curve. What is right on a bicycle is backward on a horse because the outside rein helps you turn by pressing lightly on the horse's shoulders. If you yield this rein, you lose the outside support and your horse falls over the outside shoulder. With this incorrect hand and arm position, the inside rein alone does the turning, which results in pulling the neck in and the bit sideways through the mouth. Correct turning is impossible.

The outside rein must maintain a soft contact in all lateral movements and turns while the inside rein should soften when you have the right bend and flexion. The inside hand should move forward toward the horse's mouth while the outside hand stays in place. The outside elbow should also stay in place. You can see how it is precisely the opposite on a horse as on a bicycle.

Summary of the Seat in Lateral Movements

- Turn the entire upper body without collapsing at the waist.
- Shoulders stay at the same height and over the hips.
- Always take the weight slightly in the direction of movement.
- The outside rein maintains contact and the inside rein should soften.
- No "waddling" as the horse moves sideways.
- Let the legs be long and take the appropriate leg back a little from the hip, never from the knee.

Maintaining upright posture without collapsing is critical in lateral movements.
Anja Beran on Campeao.

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Erect posture in the saddle.



Erect posture from behind.

THE MOST FREQUENT POSTURE ERRORS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES FOR RIDER AND HORSE

The pelvis plays a central role. It is the connection point between rider and horse. Posture errors that have to do with the seat and the position of the pelvis are very common, but can be analyzed well—and ultimately, corrected. In addition, there are innumerable other posture errors or causes, as well as mixed patterns, that depend on the individual's anatomy, body type, personality, or emotional state. In this book, I can only touch on these points. There are many different reflexive reactions of the body and various compensation mechanisms. Every body can react differently to posture errors. On the pages that follow, I will describe the most frequent reaction patterns and compensation mechanisms.

The Overextended Seat

In order to have an impression and an understanding of the descriptions and explanations that follow, I recommend a practical exercise for you to try at the same time as you are reading. Sit on the front third of a chair and put your upper body in erect posture. Now move your lumbar spine in an extreme exaggerated hollow back, meaning, tip the water out of the water bowl to the front (p. 87). Notice how your body reacts. In most cases, the following happens: the tip movement of the pelvis to the front and the resulting movement of the pelvis building block forward affects the chest building block reflexively. This is also moved forward and is in an overextended position. The shoulder girdle now moves behind the pelvis building block. The head building block is reflexively taken back, which causes a clamped neck.

This demonstration alone shows that a tiny change in posture—in this case,

the overextended lumbar spine—causes a chain reaction of several compensation mechanisms.

What Happens at the Halt?

The lumbar spine is in a hollow-back position that tips the pelvis to the front. The spine of the chest responds likewise by overextending. The sternum is pulled up and the ribs are “open.”

Because the sternum is lifted up and the ribs are now open, the shoulder girdle tips back, and is no longer above the pelvis building block when seen from the side, but behind it. Since the rider would fall forward due to the overextension, she tries to compensate by lying back in this overextended position. The leaning back also affects the position of her legs as described below. The chin is reflexively pulled back when there is an overextension of the chest vertebral column. The shoulder blades are shoved together and pressed down. The arms and the elbows are pulled to the body.

The hip joints are strongly flexed due to the forward tip of the pelvis. Normally, there is also an outer rotation and an abduction action in the hip joint. Because the rider is leaning back and the shoulder girdle is behind the pelvis, the rider must clamp the thighs on in order to not fall back, which is an active adduction. The knee joints are usually overflexed, the thigh is taken forward and up, and the lower leg is taken back in compensation.

Depending on the length of the stirrups, the feet are stretched down, or the toes are pulled up. This posture makes the rider's whole trunk musculature tense.

Now let's go back to a quiet sitting position. What happens in a dynamic process such as riding where every movement of the horse affects the rider?

What Happens in Motion?

In dynamic movement, small errors in posture are magnified and cause much greater balance issues than in the static state (standing).

Walk: With the “push” from the horse due to his movement forward, the upper body tends to lean back. Just as when taking off on a motorcycle or in a car, you are thrown back. The rider tries to balance by shoving the chin forward.

Posting Trot: Taking the shoulders back tends to bring the whole upper body back. This intensifies the dynamic of the horse. To bal-

ance, the legs are taken forward. Pushing the legs down at the posting trot is no longer possible because they are directed forward. This then makes it impossible to take the upper body forward, which is important for keeping with the horse’s movement. Typically, you know this process is happening when the seat plops down in the saddle. The legs have to be strongly clamped on to hold yourself on the horse, in this case. The flow of movement is jerky and cramped, and the horse feels disturbed in his back.

Sitting Trot: When the chin is shoved forward, the front neck musculature is at the end point of its movement span, which means it can’t actively work anymore. The result is an unstable head posture with a nodding movement like a “bobble-head doll.” The abdominal muscles are also not active and the ribs stay open; the upper body whips back and forth in a wave shape. This puts the lumbar spine as far as it will go in an even stronger hollow-back position. There is no longer any shock absorption. Discs and vertebral joints can be damaged and irritated, and the rider can feel pain.

Canter: The upper body leans back due to the strong forward push of the horse at the canter. A strong movement of the trunk compensates to take the body forward. This causes the rider to rock back and forth on the horse, which creates more problems. With the strong use of the upper body, the saddle is usually shoved from back to front. This is not desirable. The legs are strongly clamped on, which gives the horse the impression that you want an even stronger push forward. The rider often starts to pull back on the reins with the swing of the upper body, which signals the horse to go slower. This results in contradictory aids to the horse that necessarily leads to conflict. This same sequence often happens in the transi-

tion from walk to trot and from trot to canter (with any increase in tempo).

The Rounded Seat

To better understand the description and explanation that follows, experiment with the following practical demonstration. Sit on the front third of a chair and put your body in erect posture. Exaggerate a rounded back, tipping the water backward out of the water bowl (p. 87). Now think about how your body reacts. In most cases, the following happens: tipping the pelvis backward pushes the pelvis building block backward, which reflexively works on the chest building block, which is also taken back, causing a rounded back. The shoulder girdle is now in front of the pelvis building block. The head building block must go forward, and this causes a “vulture neck.”

What Happens at the Halt?

The lumbar spine is rounded and the pelvis tips backward. The thoracic spine reacts by rounding, also. The sternum is drawn in and down. The abdominal musculature is inactive and slack. The shoulder girdle falls forward (protraction), the arms are rotated inward, the elbows point out and are too far away from the upper body. The shoulders are pulled up. The shoulder girdle is no longer above the pelvis building block, but in front of it. Since the rounded posture and the forward shoulder girdle would take the rider forward, she tries to equalize by leaning back in this posture, similar to how you see someone sitting on a Harley Davidson. Leaning back, likewise, affects the position of the legs. The chin is reflexively thrust forward when the back is rounded.

Tipping the pelvis backward extends the hip joint. Normally, this causes a reflexive



The overextended seat.

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inward rotation (adduction) of the hip joint. Because the rider is leaning back, the thighs clamp on stronger to keep from tipping over. The knee joints are extended. The lower legs are shoved forward to counterbalance. Depending on the length of the stirrups, the feet are extended downward, or the toes are pulled up. You can't use your muscles in this posture. The seat is unstable.

Walk: With the push of the horse due to his movement forward, the upper body leans farther back, like it would on a motorcycle or in a car that has a jerky take-off and throws you back.

Posting Trot: Since the back is very round and leaning back, the legs are shoved forward and out with the rise of the post. The lower legs swing forward. This makes the rise impossible. The seat clamps together but can't rise out of the saddle. After this unnecessarily strong tension of the seat muscles, the body has to relax and the rider drops into the saddle. An active rise and sit is not possible. As the legs are shoved forward, the upper body is pushed back more, and the arms compensate by stretching forward. If the compensation doesn't work, the rider pulls hard on the reins. This causes the horse to move more slowly, which is seen as resistance.

Sitting Trot: Lacking the required abdominal and back tension, the upper body is unstable and rounds more against the force of the horse's steps. This leads to one-sided pressure on the front of the discs of the vertebrae and can cause damage (spondylosis and osteochondrosis of the chest vertebrae). The inactive neck musculature of the rounded-back posture allows the head to nod like a bobble-head doll.

Canter: Due to inactive musculature and the lack of effective control over muscle tension, the rounded seat has a strong effect on the whole body. The center of gravity of the body is too far back. With every stride, the rider is thrown farther back and moves like a pendulum forward in compensation. This is not a quiet picture. The effects on rider and horse are ultimately the same as with the overextended seat despite different posture errors (p. 96). The rider can stay on the horse only by locking on with the legs.



The rounded seat.

The “Hollow-Round” Back

This is a combination of an overextended seat and a rounded seat and is recognized in an overextension of the lumbar (hollow back) and increased rounding of the chest vertebral column. This is very common and is merely called “bad posture.”

The effects of the hollow-round back on riding are analogous to the consequences of riding with a hollow back and a rounded back. There are various combinations with localized deficits at other spots, according to the anatomical characteristics and the level of training of the rider. There can be movement limitations caused by injury to

the shoulder and hip joints, stiffening of sections of the spine, neurological symptoms, and muscle cramping, all requiring careful analysis. Correction can be difficult and take a long time.



The hollow-round back.

In a Nutshell

- A “small” posture error while standing still is worse in movement. Worst of all is how it affects the rest of the body when riding the horse.
- Well-trained horses react with sensitivity to the rider. Poor posture can cause contradictory signals, distorting responses and the normal flow of movement. A rider with a deficient seat cannot improve a poorly trained horse. The blame is not on the horse, but on the seat and posture of the rider.
- Only when the rider is in an erect posture, can she give the horse logical aids, and receive and send back impulses from the horse with sensitivity. From an erect posture, you can gently moderate a horse’s deviations from correct movement, and actively correct him with soft pressure.

Summary of the Most Frequent Errors Caused by Poor Posture or Poorly Used Muscles

Walk: Too much rotational movement due to insufficient musculature and lack of body control, especially in the shoulder region.

Posting Trot: The most frequent errors are pushing the legs forward or back instead of down. Usually the upper body is too far back, and the diagonal push of the horse is not maximized as already described. Unfortunately, this usually results in pulling on the reins and in contradictory aids to the horse.

Sitting Trot: The body is often unstable due to insufficient muscle tension. The rhythmic swing of the pelvis with the horse is not possible because the lumbar spine is stuck in an end position either with a hollow back or a rounded back. This results in abnormal loading of various structures, such as the discs.

Canter: Usually there is an excessive pendulum movement of the upper body that results in a “wiping” of the saddle. The upper body is not stable and is thrown out of control forward and back. The rider has difficulty staying on the horse and tries to compensate with legs clamped on.

Stepping Over/Travers/Half-Pass/Leg-Yield: Usually the body is over-rotated, so it can't work out of the center any more. This puts various muscles under a lot of tension, making it difficult to do movement patterns other than the rotation. Most riders mistakenly rotate only in the region of the chest. This is one of the biggest errors. The rotation must be synchronous and equal in the chest as well as the pelvis. This causes the whole body to turn in one direction. The rotation also puts the legs in the right place.

As you have learned, the seat should be slightly to the side in the direction of the movement of the horse. The most frequent error is misalignment of the parallel lines of the shoulders and pelvis. This is often seen as a collapse at the waist.

An additional error is pushing the chest building block out of alignment with the pelvis building block. The building blocks should always be one on top of the other, as seen from behind or in front.

