

SYLVIA LOCH

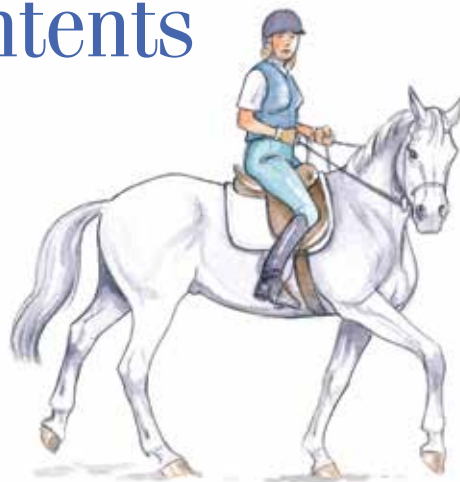
The
Rider's Balance

Understanding the
weight aids
in pictures

Foreword by
**Charlotte
Dujardin**



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Foreword

Most serious dressage riders will be familiar with the teachings of Sylvia Loch, studied and practised over her many years devoted to horses.

For my part, I first discovered her in *Horse & Rider* magazine and she always explained things very clearly so that one could take on board even quite complicated instructions. She made the reader feel as though they could accomplish these movements and exercises for themselves – the description of the aids being so crystal clear. It seemed all was possible with one's horse or pony, even although some of the work was surprisingly advanced.

I always liked the idea of *The Classical Seat*, Sylvia's first book – and how important it was to sit tall and make things easier for the horse underneath. Throughout my career in dressage, this has been one of the most important factors of my own work. How can a horse be balanced if his rider is not balanced too?

I also like the idea of elegance that the classical work brings to the relationship. So many riders seem unaware that a central, upright position and quiet, discreet aids will work for their horse so much better than moving about and doing too much – as is too often seen.

Sylvia's explanation of the weight aids is something which all serious riders and trainers should aspire to understand and take on board. Not enough is written about 'feel' and often this is difficult to put into words. Now, the excellent explanations in this book – much helped by the photographs – should leave us in no doubt.

The Rider's Balance is very clearly written and will help both riders and trainers understand better exactly what their horse needs to feel from them. My mentor and trainer, Carl Hester, has always spoken to me about the importance of a good seat and every aspect of balance. With his encouragement and example, it is something I work on every single day.

For this reason, the advice offered in Sylvia's amazing new book should really help all horses and their riders. Only by understanding how our posture and weight impacts on the horse, can we develop a meaningful sense of communication and partnership. This is so important if we are to move on and take ourselves and our horse to a higher plane.

Charlotte Dujardin

7 How the Horse Moves into Pressure

Bend, Crookedness and Rider Impact

The horse cannot readily resist the weight aid of a correctly placed inside leg.

It was such a big discovery when I began to understand the role of the inside leg in riding; I can only marvel that it had never meant very much before. Looking back, maybe I just didn't think about it very much. As a child, I just got on and rode, but while I did worry about getting the correct canter lead on the centre line of a dressage test, none of the teachers at Pony Club had offered any solutions. It is only when I entered the world of teaching and training that I realised there is a lot more to the weight aids than meets the eye.



Circles

The beauty of circle work is not only the effect it has on the horse, but also how it improves the rider. It teaches awareness and body control. In the riding school or dressage arena, the ideal scenario is when we use both types of pressure – whether downward or lateral – sparingly. For example, on a circle we should be aware of placing a little more downward pressure into the inside stirrup placed at the girth to draw the horse into the correct bend. However, almost a second later, we may bring the same leg to bear a little more against the horse's body, to send him out again. It is very much a question of weight down and weight against, but finely juggled.



Bend on a circle is much improved by maintaining pressure in the inside stirrup and supporting the horse with the inside leg at the girth throughout. Clearly, the (unseen) outside leg assists the horse behind the girth.



This simple exercise will be backed up by the outside leg moving behind the girth to support the bend and prevent the horse from escaping onto a new track.

Crookedness

I believe there would be far fewer crooked horses and far fewer crooked riders if people could be made more aware of the almost magical powers of the rider's inside leg. It is such an essential aid that its understanding and practice should be part of everyone's 'equipment'. And therein lies the problem. Since most people are one-sided, they may obtain good results on one rein, but on the other their horse may be crooked. Not because they have done too little – the problem is often quite the contrary. They are crooked because they have done too much.

Above Most riders find it easier to bend their horse on the left rein as it is generally easier to drop their weight to this side.

Right The rider must keep the inside hip forward to support the inside leg. Any leaning will be reflected by the horse, but the rider can correct this by placing more weight into the outside stirrup.



'Doing too much with the right hand' is a common complaint from many trainers about their students (and many students about themselves) – but they seem unable to correct it. It tends to make their horse easier to ride and bend on the left rein, although a weak left leg may allow the horse to fall in. In both scenarios, riders need to be aware of their shortcomings.*

**What is said here is, of course, statistically true, because the majority of people are right-handed/sided. However, the 'mirror image' effect may be seen in people who are left-handed/sided. Therefore, ultimately, the issue is of one-sided dominance. For*

the purposes of illustration in this chapter, I have cited examples referring to the more common right-sided issue, but left-handed readers may find that the exact opposite applies to them. If that applies to you, please 'reverse' the examples given.

From years of teaching experience, I believe this most common fault starts below the belt. It concerns the rider's right leg. Overuse of the leg causes an imbalance in the seat which, in turn, forces the rider to overuse the right hand. Instead of making the horse more supple to the right, it generally does the opposite. This is particular noticeable in turns and circles.



*How not to turn right
– showing overuse of
the right leg and right
rein – a common sight.*

‘Too much right hand’

‘Right-handed dominance’ can be much improved by the teacher asking the rider to hold both reins in the left hand for a reasonable period of time. But that only works up to a point. Unfortunately, it is much harder to correct the overuse of the right leg than the underuse. The former can be helped by removing the right stirrup and teaching the rider to let the offending leg hang down. Even then things can go wrong, since the rider's right thigh muscles may overcompensate.

Either way, what generally happens is that the horse wants to move away from the sideways pressure of the rider's right leg. He will then try to move left despite the fact that the rider's hand is asking him to move right. What few appreciate is that the right leg has slightly ‘shortened’ or contracted and even though the rider's stirrups may look the same height, the horse is pressured by it.



Nine out of ten riders tend to over-aid with the right leg to turn. Instead of moving into pressure this has the result of pushing the horse away, with the rider slipping to the outside.

This misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the situation is compounded further, when the rider asks for more bend to the inside. This often causes riders to twist so, if it hasn't already happened, further attempts to flex the horse right simply pushes the horse further left.

Problem-solving

The only way to cure this very typical scenario is to persuade the rider to advance the inside hip, sit a little more into the inside seatbone and think of letting their weight 'drop' into the inside leg. The rider may then bring the outside rein and leg to bear against the horse as an indirect aid, such as is used in formal Western riding.

The worst thing the rider can do is ask for more bend with the right rein, ask for more bend at the girth with the right leg and turn the upper body too much to the right.

Bad habits do not develop overnight; it can take years to get to a scenario where, as well as the horse being crooked, the rider is too. Worse is to follow – crookedness in the rider generally leads to a state of one leg becoming over-dominant. Then, whatever horse this rider is on, instead of inviting him to turn around the rider's leg and step under the rider's weight, this leg is fighting this intention by pushing him away from it.



Left Here, the rider corrects herself by transferring more weight to the inside stirrup and immediately the horse moves into the pressure.

Below Generally we must think of turning the whole horse when we ride, rather than pulling the head round. The outside rein is essential to the process.

Muscle memory

It is more difficult to correct a habitual fault than one that is random and simply the result of a momentary imbalance. Often, the more riders try to correct, the worse the fault becomes. There is no easy way to reduce the pressure of the dominant leg other than being aware of it and constantly trying to let it drop – let it go – weight down.

When students first have a lesson on my schoolmaster and I ask them to turn right off the track at say B or E, the riders with ‘leg problems’ almost always disappear up the school. They are so tight with the right leg, they push the horse away.

Generally, they end up at the top of the school in a vague sort of shoulder-in movement. When I am asked, ‘Why did he do that?’ my answer is inevitably the same: ‘Because you asked him to.’ Many of them had no idea they had one leg much stronger than the other.

By the time they have learned to let go of the dominant leg when it is on the inside (this may take weeks or months) riders often discover they are now less reliant on the same-side rein too. A



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This is good example of a guest student being able to let go with the unseen right leg and concentrate on the aids of the outside rein and outside leg to turn the horse.



The horse should be gently flexing into the inside rein, with the outside rein applying sideways pressure against the neck.



At the beginning of the turn, the rider weights the inside (unseen) stirrup and moves the horse away from pressure with the outside rein and outside leg in order to move right.



The rider continues to apply sideways pressure from the outside leg as the horse comes round.



The moment the horse straightens, the new inside leg drops to the girth and both legs apply a quick forward aid.

typical case of cause and effect. It is rewarding to be told by riders that this simple lesson has helped their own horses enormously, but it does take time and patience.

Turns

We are all generally taught the turn on the forehand in our early riding lessons, but too many riders continue with this exercise right through their riding lives and it tends to reinforce bad habits. That is very sad for their horses.

Turning on the forehand in movement places the horse in an unnatural balance, different from the one that he would naturally adopt in freedom. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to focus on the front end instead of riding the whole horse. The tendency in many riding schools is to allow the pupil to pull the horse's head and neck around so that the body can follow. This is putting the cart before the horse. It places the horse firmly on the forehand and causes the quarters to swing out.

By contrast, one of the best exercises to teach rider and horse together and to use gravity and proprioception to their advantage is the turn on the hocks.

Turn on the hocks

Both in movement and from the standstill, the horse will naturally move off from behind. Turning from the hocks or hindquarters, he can take his weight back, engage his hindquarters and push himself around. Once accomplished, the forehand lightens, the forelegs are relieved of their burden and he is free to move in whatever direction he wants.

The aids are relatively simple. The rider sits square, feels gently on the inside rein, and applies a little downward pressure into the inside seatbone and inside stirrup. The inside leg should never be clamped on, instead it hangs roughly vertical – toe at the girth. This allows the horse to bend and move into the rider's weight.

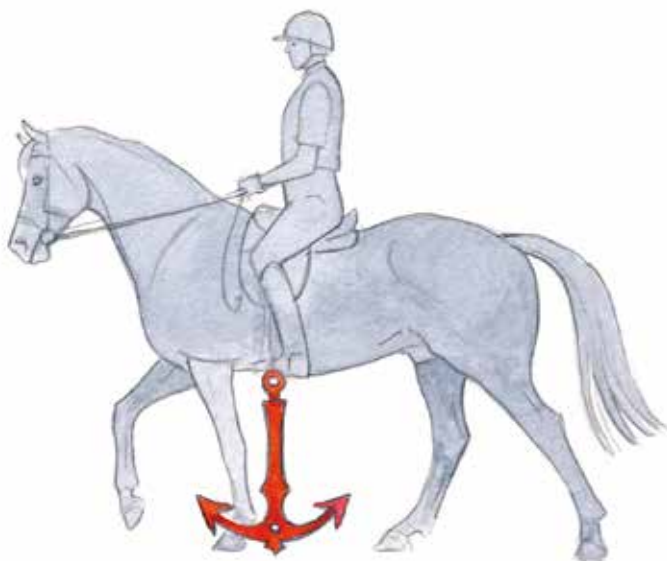
The downward weight aid is then complemented by the rider's outside leg and outside rein, which move against the horse's body (sideways pressure) to turn him into the required direction. Pushing down with the heel is counterproductive, but a little more pressure into the ball of the foot is helpful. This, in turn, allows the horse greater freedom to move into and around the rider's inside leg. I have discovered very few teachers emphasise this point to students, which is a great pity.

This is how we ought to ride horses – doing something that is natural for them. Instead, most riders focus on the front end and think it necessary to pull the head and neck around so that the body can follow. This places the horse firmly on the forehand and might be compared to us going through a door head first, rather than allowing our legs to carry us there.

Anchored

Some riders prefer not to use the stirrups at all to indicate the weight aids. Many rely on transferring the correct feeling through the seatbones, which is equally subtle. There is always the risk, however, that teaching the seat aids to a fairly novice rider may make them tip to the right or left, which is the worst scenario since it causes them to compensate by throwing their weight in the opposite direction. So, for the purposes of this book – I will generally refer to both the seat aids and the weight aids of the feet in the stirrups.

Once we have mastered the turn on the hocks and developed a feel for it, we will begin to appreciate the correct role of our inside leg. It will no longer be the leg that pushes at the horse – it will be his anchor! We will achieve far more bend and suppleness on circles, serpentines and that important entry down the centre line, when we can let it go!



Keeping our weight down is often helped by imagery. When I train riders who have a tendency to draw up with the inside leg, the idea of an anchor seems really to help.



Dropping the inside leg and applying a little more pressure into the inside stirrup at the girth is like putting the icing on the cake. If our horse is a little wobbly on a straight line, or hesitant in his turns, deepening our weight into the relevant stirrup will steady and straighten him.

If we wish to make a sudden change of rein, we will have instant obedience by pressing on the inside stirrup to leave the track and turn or move onto the diagonal.

If we want a good canter transition, it is an almost fail-safe way of ensuring that we will get the correct lead. The more we wish to continue the canter, the more we reinforce the weight aid of the inside leg, while the outside leg remains behind the girth. Every horse is different, but generally it is the inside leg aid that makes the horse *want* to canter on the correct lead. Basically, he just follows weight – see Chapter 8.

Our pillar of support

The old Masters always referred to the inside leg as a pillar of support. Pillars don't move, so this is a good analogy and one that every student can understand. A good instructor should explain about the importance of the 'feel' of the inside leg, as well as what it does or doesn't do. Most people do too much with it and if only they were taught about weight aids, they might be less inclined to move it forward or back when not appropriate.

As in all riding, just a few inches forward or back can make all the difference. When the inside leg is too far forward it may block the inside shoulder of a sensitive horse; placed too far back it becomes ineffectual as a support and worse, allows the horse to fall in on the inside shoulder. In both cases, bend will be lost and the horse may drift onto the forehand.

Here again is where my Weight Aid Workshops are so valuable. I invite a couple of students to skip (on the same leg) around the room and ask the others to listen. When I ask the question, 'Where was their weight?' generally, the hands shoot up and they say 'The inside'. Those giving this answer are of course right. The inside leg never blocks the horse. It is the stepping-down leg, which leads him into the various movements. It invites the canter, invites the turn and tells the horse in what direction we wish to go. It is also the leg that gives support to the horse in a bend or a turn. It is indeed a wonderful aid.

Refining the circle

As an example, the 20m or 15m circle to the right in walk, trot or canter will be much improved when we place a little more pressure into the inside (right) stirrup. This is a very useful weight aid as it draws the horse into the correct bend whilst supporting him through its position at the girth. Maintaining the same weight aid for the duration of the circle ensures continuity, but it must be very subtle. In the meantime, we must not forget to maintain the activity of the hocks and prevent the quarters from straying out with the outside leg, placed just behind the girth.

Opposite *The smaller the circle, the more bend. This requires more weight into the inside stirrup as the outside rein moves against the neck to guide the horse into the bend.*



On the larger circle, the inside leg continues to support at the girth, but with less pressure than on the smaller circle.

To make the circle smaller still – say a 10m – we may need to apply more downward pressure. There should be no need to use more inside rein – often quite the contrary. The simple solution is to weight the inside stirrup a little more and bring the outside rein closer to the horse's neck to support. Next time you watch a canter pirouette, notice the effect of the rider's inside leg weighting the stirrup. This is simply taking the movement to a more extreme form.



The tighter the circle, the more the horse is inclined to lean in. Again, the inside leg must support the horse and the rider's body should keep aligned to the horse at all times.

To enlarge the circle, we can again use downward pressure – only this time, it will be into the outside stirrup. This weight aid is rarely taught yet it is wonderfully effective. The inside leg continues to support at the girth; the outside behind. The position remains as before; it is just the ‘feel’ that will change.

The use of the stirrups to change the rein, ride a serpentine or a turn is a wonderful aid. The horse should remain bent to the inside (as normal) whichever rein he is on, but by using these weight aids we are able to rely less and less on our hands. Whichever direction we choose, our aiding becomes so imperceptible that this weight aid constitutes an invisible aid – it is so effective.

It was La Guérinière who wrote, ‘The weight aid of the stirrups is the finest of all the aids.’ I would say ‘Amen!’ to that, especially as I have found it works with all horses, trained or untrained. ■

In the circle the horse should appear to be evenly bent from head to tail.

