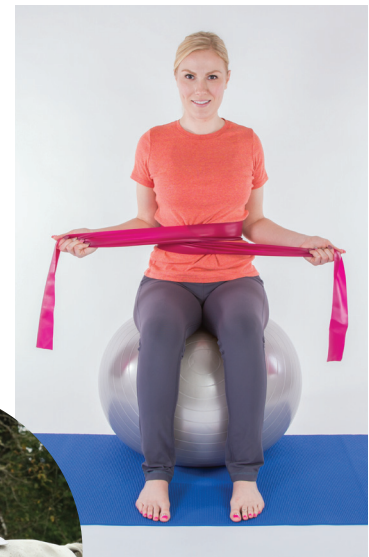


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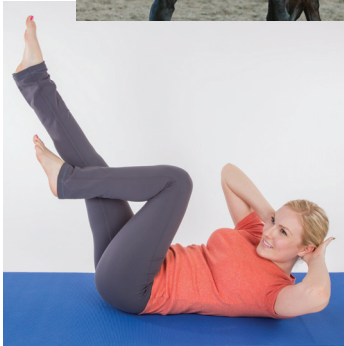
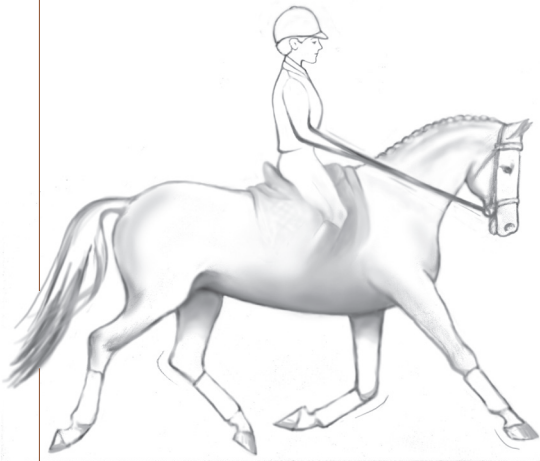
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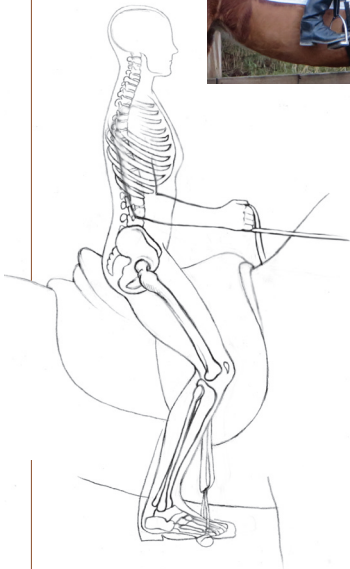
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2 Proper Posture

The second Rider Fundamental is *Proper Posture*: the basis for a balanced, stable, and effective riding position. Correct posture provides the foundation for efficient riding and organized management of the horse's energy. While proper posture creates an elegant position, it is not just about looking good: Good posture is a healthy position for the spine and the position from which you can most easily balance and move with efficiency.

The exercises in this chapter focus on understanding and maintaining good posture. From this stable body position, muscle suppleness in the shoulder, arm, hip joint, and leg is possible, allowing clear communication with your horse.

What Is Balance?

Balance describes a state of equilibrium, or stability and steadiness, which is maintained despite movement. Life experience teaches us how to deal with “unbalancing” situations, such as walking on rough ground, carrying an infant with one arm, or putting on a shoe while standing. When riding, however, you are expected to sit “quietly” on a constantly moving surface—the horse! Moreover, that “surface” does not always move predictably; it is no wonder that many find maintaining their balance, and coordinating their aids, extremely challenging. The moving horse presents a huge threat to balance. A

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sudden spook can overwhelm the balance of even the best riders and lead to a fall, but failures in balance can occur even during planned movements and transitions.

The balanced rider seeks her own “self-carriage,” with her torso steadily positioned over the horse’s movement; this balance must be so secure that the rider feels like a legless doll in the saddle. As mentioned, from this place, suppleness in the hip and shoulder joint muscles is possible, and the ideal image of horse and rider moving as one can emerge.

Riding in balance confers a sense of being centered, *physically* and *mentally*.

Being Physically Centered

Being *physically centered* means riding with the middle of your body as your base of support. It means riding with correct posture and postural support, and with movement controlled from the area around your center of gravity.

A concrete way to define your balanced center is to equate it to the physical location of your center of gravity. The center of gravity is a theoretical place

A Pretty Picture



Lynn Palm, experienced English and Western trainer, shows correct neutral spine alignment (see p. 27) in Western tack aboard Rugged Painted Lark, a 1997 APHA horse she co-owns with Heidi Burkhalter. Note that Lynn’s rib cage is balanced over her pelvis and she allows the normal curves of her spine. This supports a quiet, balanced halt in her horse. It doesn’t matter your type of saddle, correct posture is universal to all riding disciplines! Achieve your correct posture with Find Neutral Spine and Pelvic Rocking Supine.

in the body where body weight is concentrated, or evenly distributed. In the upright human, this point is in the middle of the torso: Roughly, it's in the abdominal region just above the pelvis and a little below the belly button. For my discussion, the precise location of the center of gravity is academic; what is much more important is being able to recognize the power of riding from this general place within your body. This place should be the starting point for your aids, assisted by your arms and legs.

The stable position of your torso with muscular support around your center of gravity facilitates your center to be your *movement (kinetic) energy processing center*. Energy from your horse moving underneath you is put into your body. Learning to ride is the process of learning how to handle this energy.

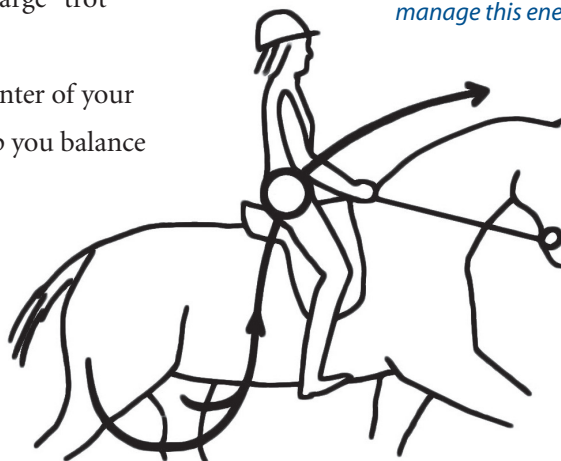
First, your goal is to not fall off. Then, you strive to move with the horse and not interfere with him. Finally, you learn how to feed this energy back into the horse to direct his way of going (more forward, more up, sideways).

That the horse puts movement energy in your body is clear if you consider what happens when that energy changes: For instance, if you are not prepared, you'll fall forward during the abrupt change of movement energy inherent when going from trot to halt. And many riders find it very challenging to not have the movement energy that can come from a "large" trot send them right off their horse!

Directing your horse by considering how the center of your body interfaces with his movement energy will help you balance and do so in such a way that you will feel you are moving *with* your horse, not just sitting on top of him. You are "owning" every step of the ride. This idea, fundamental to the exercise program I present in this book (see Suggested Workouts, p. 203), inspired the Energy Management Diagram (fig. 2. 2).

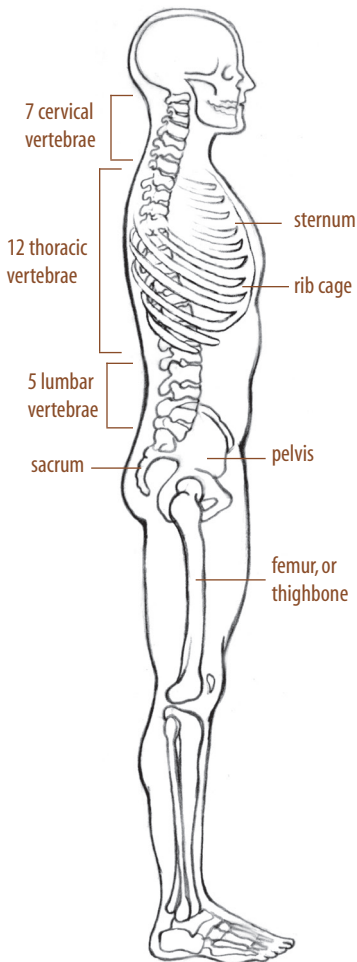
For many people, accessing and riding from this processing center is not a natural or instinctive way to think of riding. Instead, it needs to be learned. This is not surprising, however, as our hand-eye-dominated life tends to draw

2.2 *This diagram shows a simple way to think of how the "movement energy" from the horse interfaces with your body. Energy comes from the horse and passes through your rider's center. You can then direct the energy forward, upward, or sideways. Using the image of this diagram will help you feel part of the horse's movement energy. Remember, however, that the stability and integrity of the torso of the rider is needed to effectively manage this energy.*



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2.3 *Alignment of the vertebrae in the spine, standing. Note the curves in the seven vertebrae that comprise the neck or cervical spine; the 12 vertebrae of the thoracic spine (ribs attached); and the five vertebrae of the lumbar spine. The spine ends at the sacrum. Proper posture allows for these curves in the spine.*



us away from our body’s movement processing center, allowing the brain and upper body to control and dominate movement. When this happens, it leads to a stiff rider position, with shoulders and arms taking over.

But, when you keep movement control in your center, you enjoy improved balance, coordination, and grace. Consider a ballerina: Her centered movement allows extreme precision of balance so she can remain tall and steady on the toes of one foot, while creating graceful arcing movements with her arms. This is only possible with a foundation of balance from her center.

Being Mentally Centered

A correct, stable posture has the additional benefit of conferring a powerful sense of *self*, the *mental* aspect of being balanced and centered. From here, you can become a proactive rider, creating the ride you want rather than just reacting to your horse. Your center can also be a place of peace in your body. Rib cage breathing, as already discussed on page 12, draws your focus to this center. Breathing in this way helps to quiet a busy mind, allowing you to focus on your ride.

In order to find good posture and become centered and balanced on horseback, you need an understanding of basic anatomy—just enough to help you find your correct spine alignment and support it with the muscular tools within your body. So, on the following pages I will talk about the anatomy of your spine and pelvis, as well as the surrounding muscles. Throughout, I’ll present exercises to improve your awareness of spine alignment and to strengthen muscles that support posture—known as the “core” muscles.

EXERCISES to Align Your Spine

Find Neutral Spine

By lying on the floor, you can feel the alignment of the vertebrae and perceive the normal curves in your spine.



1 Lie on the floor or a mat, knees bent, feet flat on the floor, hip-joint width apart (fig. 2.9). You can rest your arms by your sides (this model has her arms folded for clarity).

2 Release the muscles of your back and let the weight of your body sink onto the floor (without pressing or forcing any part of your back onto the floor).

3 Note where you feel the weight of your body touching the floor. When the spine is in neutral alignment with its normal curves, the weight contacts the floor in three places: at the back of your pelvis (sacrum), around your shoulder and shoulder blades, and at the back of your head. There is usually little weight contacting the floor behind your waist and your neck.

This exercise describes the normal curves of your spine. Everyone is slightly different, but the point is that your back is not completely flat.

Pelvic Rocking Supine

To explore changing your spine alignment with small movements of your pelvis.

1 Lie on the floor or a mat, knees bent, feet flat on the floor, hip-joint width apart, in neutral alignment (fig. 2.10 A).

2 Take an easy *inhale* breath, breathing into your lateral rib cage.

3 On the *exhale* breath, scoop in your abdominal muscles to move the top of your pelvis toward the floor (posterior pelvic tilt or pelvic tuck) flattening your lower back (fig. 2.10 B).

4 On the next *inhale* breath, move the top of your pelvis away from the floor (anterior pelvic tilt), arching your back slightly so that your lower back comes off the floor (fig. 2.10 C).

5 Slowly alternate flattening and arching your lower back 6 to 8 times, *inhaling* as you arch your spine, *exhaling* as you flatten your spine onto the floor.

6 Gradually decrease your range of motion until, like a pendulum moving more and more slowly, your lower back comes to rest. This position is likely very close to your *neutral spine alignment*.

7 When your spine is in neutral alignment, the plane defined by three points—your pubic bone and the ASIS on the right and left sides of your pelvis—will be parallel to the floor. When you stand, or sit in the saddle, this plane is perpendicular to the floor.

Once you have found neutral spine alignment, you need to keep your spine in this position despite being on a moving horse! Support of good posture on horseback not only keeps your spine in a healthy position but also provides the most efficient position from which to achieve balance.

Next, I will look at the array of muscles around your midsection that support your posture. Often referred to as your “core” muscles, these muscles of the abdomen and back provide elastic support of spine alignment. Engaging these muscles stabilizes your posture.



2.10 A-C Photo A shows neutral spine alignment—the normal curves of the spine are allowed. A plane defined by the model's right and left ASIS (the front prominent part of the pelvis) and pubic bone is parallel to the floor.

Photo B shows a posterior pelvic tilt, or pelvic tuck, with the spine rounded in flexion. The back is now flat on the floor; there is no space between the lower back and the mat. A plane defined by the model's right and left ASIS and pubic bone slopes toward the model's waist.

Photo C shows an anterior pelvic tilt with the spine arched in extension. The space between the lower back and the floor is greater than in Photo A. A plane defined by the model's right and left ASIS and the pubic bone slopes toward the model's pubic bone.