

EXCLUSIVE TRAINING SERIES

# Dressage Puzzlers

We tackle some of the most perplexing concepts in dressage, concluding this month with “use your seat.”

By Shannon Peters with Amber Heintzberger

To most people, “the seat” is the *derriere*—the part of our anatomy that makes contact with a chair bottom.

But to dressage riders, “the seat” means something quite different. Your *derriere* is part of it, but “seat” in dressage terms includes more than the buttocks. And when dressage instructors start talking about “using the seat”—well, that’s where lots of riders really get confused. How do you

ing installment in our “Dressage Puzzlers” series. For advice and insight, we turned to San Diego-based FEI-level instructor, trainer, and competitor Shannon Peters, who is well known for her expertise in teaching correct and effective rider position.

### Shannon Peters says:

Your seat is like the foundation of a house. Everything develops from a correct seat and position in the saddle.

The dressage seat, in simple terms, is the rider’s weight centered over three points of contact: the lower branch of the pubic bone and the two seat bones.

The seat can help to establish a good, solid rhythm in every gait. It can indicate an increase or decrease in tempo, and it can contain the energy of the half-halt. The seat is also the ultimate metronome for the horse: Use of your weight correctly through your seat is one of the most beneficial aids you can give.

A balanced seat must be the first order of business before you can master the different ways to influence a horse with your seat. In the rising trot, you can influence the length of stride, the mechanics of the hind leg, and suppleness of the back through the tempo of your posting, the angle of your pelvis, and the use of your weight aids. The same principles apply in the sitting trot.

Many dressage texts refer to the importance of developing an “independent seat.” An independent seat is the rider’s ability to maintain balance in the saddle, and give an aid to the horse, without the application of the aid affecting how she sits in the saddle. For example, if you give a leg

aid or a rein aid, but at that same moment you tip forward or back, collapse in some way, or shift your weight inadvertently, it has an instant effect on the horse—and not usually a positive one! Core balance, and the ability to maintain the center of balance, is a constant work in progress for every rider. As you and your horse move up the levels, your core strength and ability to sit in balance has to increase to support teaching the horse the very same thing.

### How Does It Look? How Does It Feel?

When I watch riders, I always first look at the whole picture. Do the rider and horse look in unison? Is it a nice picture with a happy horse, or do I see the rider out of balance and a horse behind the aids and out of balance? The rider should look as if she is absorbing the movement of the horse through a supple seat, with an upright upper body that is quiet but not rigid. The rider’s arms should hang softly at her sides without tension, especially in the lower arms and wrists. The fists should be softly closed and the hands upright with firmly closed thumbs. The rider’s legs should be softly on the horse’s sides, with good alignment through the ear, hip, and heel.

A correct seat should feel very supple, with relaxed buttock muscles and engaged, balanced core muscles to maintain your balance. You should feel “plugged in” and connected to your horse’s back muscles, and feel as if your seat and his back move as one.

### Exercises to Improve Your Seat

I always start my first horse with my feet out of the stirrups, and I walk for at least 10 or 15 minutes this way. Now try these exercises:

**Legs up/legs down.** Do this exercise on a horse that’s quiet enough that he won’t be bothered when you move your legs around in the saddle.

At a halt, drop your stirrups and pull your knees up—or, better yet,



ELEGANT SEAT: Shannon Peters rides *Weltino’s Magic*, a 2002 Westfalen gelding owned by Jen Hlavacek

“use” your backside? By squeezing your buttocks muscles? What is “using the seat” supposed to accomplish, anyway?

The seat—getting it (whatever it is), mastering it, and using it to influence the horse as the ultimate invisible aid—is such a big part of a dressage rider’s education that we thought it a fitting topic for this, the conclud-



**LEG LOOSENER:** Keeping your seat bones deep in the saddle, pull both knees up to the horse's withers (1). Drop your knees back down (2) and feel your hip and thigh muscles stretching and lengthening.



bring your legs over the front of each thigh block on the saddle. Scoot your hips forward close to the pommel; then drop your legs back down into normal riding position. Completely

relax your legs on your horse's sides. You may immediately feel places in your hip flexors, psoas muscle, or adductors that are tight. This is a perfect chance to lengthen those muscles and

loosen up before you start your training session. This exercise will help you to find the three points of contact in your seat bones, and the hip and leg stretch will help to lessen the strain on your lower-back muscles.

**Upper-body twists.** Rotate your upper body to each side, trying to keep your hips symmetrical in the saddle and allowing just your ribs and shoulders to rotate side to side. Maintain one hand on the reins for safety. This exercise will help to loosen your oblique muscles (the muscles on the sides of your abdomen), which will in turn help to loosen your lower- and mid-back muscles.

**Shoulder rolls.** Scrunch your shoulders up to your ears and then roll them forward, down, and back. After a few shoulder rolls in this direction, reverse the direction. This exercise helps to open the chest and relax the shoulders, which will help you to relax and find "heavy elbows" that connect in an elastic way to your seat. ⇨

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**Lunge lessons.** Work on the lunge without stirrups is one of the best ways to improve your seat. However, care needs to be taken that this is done with balance and attention to proper use of the rider's core. It is far too easy just to grip to try and stay in saddle, and that won't produce positive body awareness.

### Use Your Seat to Influence Your Horse

As I've explained, a balanced rider with sufficient core strength can begin to learn to use her seat to influence the horse. In the sitting trot, I have riders think about bouncing on a gymnastic ball to help create more lift in the trot. Slow and elevate the bounce to create more lift in the stride, or cadence; bounce the ball more forward to create a bigger collected trot or medium trot.

Bear in mind, however, that the bounce does *not* happen through the rider's core; it happens in the pelvis.

## Meet the Expert

**S**hannon Peters is a USDF bronze, silver, and gold medalist and a three-time USEF national-championship competitor: on Luxor in 2007, winning the Intermediaire I reserve championship; on Flor de Selva in 2009, placing fourth in the Intermediaire division; and on Odyssey in 2011 after winning the Grand Prix Special at the CDIs Del Mar and Burbank (CA). She also earned a reserve-championship title aboard Weltino's Magic in 2008 at the Markel/USEF Young Dressage Horse Championships.



A native of Michigan, Peters grew up riding Western and saddle seat. After college in Colorado she moved to San Diego in 2002, where she started her own dressage-training business. Her dressage education began with Nancy Baker and USEF "S" judge Debbie Riehl-Rodriguez. For the past two decades, her mentors have been Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame member Karl Mikolka and her husband, Olympian Steffen Peters. Together the Peterses operate the dressage training facility Arroyo del Mar near San Diego.

The rider's seat and pelvis should always mirror the horse's pelvis. Just think: If your horse were "wiggly in the middle," what would happen? Nothing good! A strong and stable core creates the ability to have influence with your seat.

If a rider's pelvis truly mirrors the horse's pelvis, as it should in the sitting trot, each side of the rider's pelvis would move independently, just as the horse's does. Riders who can do this are the ones who are truly connected to their horses' long back muscles and look united with their horses' movement. They sit *with* their horses, not against them.

In the canter, the "scooping" movement of your pelvis should mirror how much engagement your horse has, and you should be able to use the "scoop" to create more engagement when desired. You don't want to overdo the scooping action, but the seat helps to create the engagement when the lower leg asks for more. Conversely, when the seat stills, and thus lessens the swing phase in the canter, it is an aid to collect.

### Foundation of Effective Riding

If you do the simple exercises I've given you in this article, you may well feel a centering and balance over your seat bones and a good place to start working from. A balanced seat creates a place where tactful and soft, "feeling" aids can be given from the legs and hands.

I often find that riders try to use the seat to influence the horse before they have done the work to achieve an independent seat. One of the things I try to impress on anyone who rides with me is that developing a good seat is a lifelong process; it is not something you "get" and then move on. My teacher, Karl Mikolka, with whom I have been riding for more than 18 years, still works on my seat to this day. Each time I am fortunate to have a lesson with him, I am amazed at the little nuances I learn. As a dressage rider, your position—your seat—is the most important thing you can work on. A balanced, correct, independent seat will bring a sense of security and effectiveness that cannot be accomplished any other way. ▲

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