

Master the Sitting Trot

A USDF-certified instructor shares her strategies for success

By Karen McGoldrick

Sitting the trot is a basic skill required of every dressage rider who aspires to compete above First Level. However, “basic” doesn’t mean “easy.” After all, if sitting the trot were easy, rising trot would never have been invented!

A rider who sits well—in correct alignment and balance, with supple joints—does not rely on leg and arm strength to stay on. Instead, she can use her arms and legs independently

A good seat helps you to feel your horse’s body and movement, and from this awareness you can learn to influence him in a natural and positive way, using feel and timing. Learning to sit properly is, therefore, just the beginning of learning to ride.

Children learn to ride without much intellectual effort. Put the average child on a safe mount and she will unselfconsciously bebop around in the saddle, perhaps a bit wobbly at the

For the adult beginner, learning to sit the trot can be a daunting task, filled with self-conscious moments, frustration, and physical challenges. Although there’s no substitute for actual saddle time, gaining a clear understanding of human anatomy and rider biomechanics can help the process along. Equally important, adults need to recognize their optimal learning environment. In this article, I will describe the process that I’ve found most successful in teaching riders to sit the trot. I’ll also share some exercises used by my colleague, Balimo instructor Allison Faso, to improve body awareness in the process of developing one’s seat.

The Four Fundamentals

No one takes up dressage in hopes of forever working on the lunge line, and adult students especially feel the press of time. Still, nobody masters the sitting trot overnight. You’ll have to work at it, so work smart and make sure that your saddle time is time well spent. Check the following four points off your list, and you’ll be way ahead of the game.

1. Find a suitable mount. Start your lessons on a horse whose temperament is forgiving of mistakes and that is tolerant of some awkward moves or unintended aids. Choose a mount with average gaits—not too scopey or intimidating. He should be well-behaved and calm on the lunge line in order to build your confidence. However, avoid the very lazy horse, as you can’t relax and learn to sit the trot if you are constantly having to drive him forward.

Stay away from horses that are green-broke or improperly trained, unsound, or with gaits so rough that they make your innards feel like they’ve been put through a mixmaster.

2. Get a properly fitted saddle. Not only is an ill-fitting saddle bad for the horse, but it is also nearly impossible to sit correctly in an unbalanced saddle. If the saddle chafes or tips you forward or backward, you can’t expect



PERFECT PRACTICE: Lunge lessons by a qualified instructor on a trustworthy horse are a time-honored way of developing a correct seat. USDF-certified instructor Karen McGoldrick lunges her colleague, Balimo certified instructor Allison Faso, aboard Piazzano, owned by Charlene Springman.

and in a coordinated and fluid manner. Her relaxed arms, legs, and seat lower her center of gravity, creating that “centaur” look of unity between horse and rider. The rider appears to sit “in” the horse instead of atop the horse.

start but game. Kids watch more experienced riders and absorb their techniques like sponges. If you were lucky enough to learn to ride at a young age, you may not understand the immense difficulty others have in learning to sit the trot.

to develop a comfortable, correct position. Finding a saddle that fits both rider and horse can be a tedious process, but it makes a world of difference.

3. Find a safe place to learn.

Adult riders often have to deal with fear—which, in measured doses, can be a healthy thing. Assess your situation. Is your fear rational? If it is, then find a different situation, one in which you can learn in a safe environment. Tension and fear are the enemies of an upright, relaxed, and supple seat.

Anxiety is different from fear, but it can cause the same problems. I've seen riders lose the ability to sit simply from performance anxiety. At a show, for example, anxiety can cause even a good rider's adductor muscles (inner thighs) to tighten, the shoulders to rise, and the upper body to lean forward.

4. **Find the right instructor.** Because there are no licenses required in this country to teach riding, it can be difficult for the beginner to determine whether an instructor is qualified. That is why the USDF developed its Instructor/Trainer Certification Program. Find a USDF-certified instructor at www.usdf.org.

Choose an instructor who is willing to take the time to give you the foundation you'll need in order to make progress toward your goals (see "Due Diligence" below).

Due Diligence

When it comes to learning to sit the trot, the slow, thorough way *is* the speediest way. "Do the donkey work" at the beginning and you'll avoid having to go back to basics later.

As you embark on this journey, know that, unless you commit to regular training sessions, progress will be slower and more frustrating than you'd like. No one can get fit or skilled with sporadic attempts. Although developing core strength, cardiovascular fitness, and flexibility will add greatly to your riding program, you'll have to do the time in the saddle if you want to learn to sit well. ➔

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It's best to begin on a lunge line with a grab strap attached to the saddle D-rings for security. With a steady lunge horse, a good instructor, protective headgear, and a grab strap at the ready, you'll be able to focus on your riding and not worry about the horse. Just as in the gym, think about doing your sitting-trot work in "sets" so you do not work past the point of fatigue. Fatigued riders resort to gripping the saddle.

The Question of Balance

The trot is a two-beat gait in which the horse's legs move in diagonal pairs. The horse moves forward, of course, but there is a lot of up-and-down motion in the trot as well. Each hind leg alternately swings under the rider's weight as the propulsive long muscles of the horse's back contract and relax, which cause the sides of the back to rise and fall. To sit this gait,

the rider must be able to maintain balance and follow the motion with supple joints, keeping her center of gravity in sync with the horse's movement.

The key to remaining balanced and "with" the horse's motion is the stability of the rider's trunk over her pelvis. Think of a male ballet dancer lifting his partner. He can lift the ballerina only if she is erect in her torso. If she were to go limp like a sack of potatoes in mid-lift, the man would certainly drop her and probably would injure himself. A stable trunk not only helps you find your balance; it also helps your horse to maintain his own balance.

Stability, however, does not mean rigidity or stiffness in the back and hips. The muscles of your back and abdominals must be free to make mini-contractions so small you're not aware of them, and your chest must be broad and relaxed so that you can breathe normally. Your shoulders should hang relaxed. If you try to hold

yourself in position, you'll prevent yourself from moving with your horse and you'll wear yourself out! What you're going for is "positive tension"—a state between slackness and contraction. It's a confident, erect, correctly aligned posture ("Ride arrogant," as one instructor told me). And it can be difficult to achieve if you frequently succumb to poor posture, such as slumping over a computer keyboard or the steering wheel of the car.

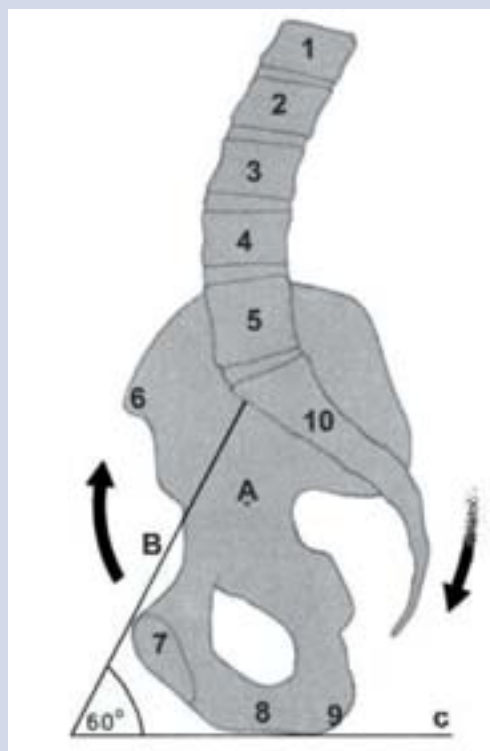
Sitting Specifics

Here is a biomechanical look at how skilled riders sit the trot.

The rider must balance her stable trunk over her base of support. In sitting trot, that base is the bottom of the pelvis. Dressage texts frequently refer to the so-called three-point seat: the two sitting bones and the pubic bone. However, many riders misinterpret this concept. The top of the pu-



IN BALANCE: *Stretching both arms straight up stretches your torso and stabilizes it. Start with one arm at a time, holding the strap on the front of your saddle, until you feel secure enough to lift both arms, as Allison is doing here. This is a fairly advanced exercise that builds confidence and balance—and teaches you not to rely on the reins for support.*



Lateral View of the Pelvis, Normal Position, Seen from the Inside

- 1-5. lumbar vertebrae;
- 6. anterior superior iliac spine;
- 7. pubic crest;
- 8. superior ischial ramus and pubis;
- 9. ischial tuberosity;
- 10. sacrum

NEUTRAL PELVIS: *In a balanced and upright position, the pelvic crest forms approximately a 60-degree angle, as shown in this side view. Illustration from Anatomy of Dressage, co-published by USDF and Half Halt Press (halfhaltpress.com). Reprinted by permission.*



HIP WORK: *Taking the legs away from the saddle momentarily is a great exercise that deepens the seat and relaxes the legs. Lift from the hips, not from the knees. You'll feel this one right away, so hold for a couple of seconds and then relax and repeat.*

bic bone actually makes no contact with the saddle. It is only the lower part of the pubic bone (after it divides and runs at an oblique angle toward the seat bones) that forms part of the dressage rider's seat.

It is critical that the pelvis rests in the saddle in its "neutral" or middle

Recommended Resources

Susanne von Dietze's book and companion DVD, both entitled *Balance in Movement*, are treasure troves of valuable information for the rider who wishes to improve her seat.

—Karen McGoldrick

Sit the Trot Without a Horse

Imagine a horse that never changes tempo and that can make a medium trot on a diagonal that never ends. He never gets tired, goes lame, or gets bored or grumpy. No matter what you do wrong in the saddle, he'll never spook, bolt, or buck.

This miracle mount is a riding simulator, and it's being discovered by equestrians everywhere as a safe, humane alternative to real horses for teaching riding.

Living just a few hours away in Georgia, I've had the opportunity to check out "Amerika," a Racewood riding simulator that resides at the facility of certified John Lyons trainer Beth Collins in Shelby, NC. Amerika can trot and canter while the rider observes herself from all angles in real time, and the instructor can literally be hands-on. There are other simulator models as well, including a dressage-specific version, a racehorse, and a polo pony. Wouldn't it be wonderful if every new rider had the opportunity to master some basics on a simulator before sitting on the real thing?

These machines are currently few and far between, and their five-figure purchase price makes them prohibitive for most facilities. However, as with all new technologies, I expect prices of the simulators to moderate over time.

—Karen McGoldrick



THE PERFECT HORSE? *Dressage simulator will happily trot all day so you can learn*

position (except for certain deliberate movements, such as a half-halt). Riding with a constant anterior or posterior pelvic tilt (by arching the lower back or tucking the hips under) disrupts the entire body's alignment and can be injurious to the back. A neutral pelvis and spine allow flexibility.

A good instructor will help you to find your neutral-pelvis position.

The hip sockets lie above the base of the pelvis. The ball of the hip joint should float in the socket, with the thigh bone hanging freely. Many riders impede their ability to sit the trot by gripping with the adductors (inner



Improve Your Body Awareness: Exercises

BY ALLISON FASO

What do successful riders have in common? They're confident, correctly balanced and aligned in the saddle, and at an ideal level of mental and physical relaxation. There is a certain look to a rider who is truly connected to the horse. Steffen Peters, Edward Gal, Courtney Dye, and others sit deeply "into" the horse in an unforced and seemingly effortless manner. Their movement follows the rhythm of the horse so elastically that they appear to be sitting still.

As an instructor who teaches juniors, young riders, and adult amateurs, my first job is to teach my students to sit. This is not an easy task for either instructor or rider. In 2004, I attended my first Eckart Meyners seat symposium. I was impressed by the immediate improvements he was able to make in riders' seats and positions. I soon enrolled in Mr. Meyners' Balimo (Balance in Motion) instructor-training program.

Eckart Meyners is a professor of sports physiology and body movement at the University of Luneburg in Germany. He has developed a performance-improvement system that works for all athletes and that can help riders to achieve balanced muscle groups and to influence the horse in a confident, relaxed, and elastic manner. The system is so effective that it's been incorporated into the program at the German Academy for Professional Trainers in Warendorf. Here is a brief overview of the Meyners principles, followed by four simple exercises that you can use to improve your own body awareness, both in and out of the saddle.

The system. Mr. Meyners' system seeks to enable participants to regain freedom of movement and the natural mobility of the spine, joints, and muscles. The goal is to be able to use the body effectively and without negative tension. His system and corresponding exercises focus on six areas: head and neck, sternum and shoulder girdle, tendon and muscle reflexes, spine and sacroiliac joint, pelvis and hips, and legs.

Before you try a new exercise, it's important to do a baseline assessment (called a test) so that you can tell whether the exercise is effective for you. The process goes like this:

1. Perform a simple exercise (the test), paying attention to how your body feels.
2. Do a second exercise, which is designed to



HARMONY: Correct position enables the rider to sit balanced and upright with relaxed, supple joints. USDF-certified instructor Karen McGoldrick rides Ronaldo, owned by Susanne Miesner.



THE TEST: Balimo certified instructor Vicky Busch demonstrates testing her head-and-neck range of motion at the 2008 Adequan/USDF National Convention

make changes to your body.

3. "Test" again by repeating the original simple exercise and note any changes in your body, such as an increased range of motion.

Exercises 1 and 2: Head and neck. Sit on the edge of a chair and "test" by turning your head left and right, using your full range of motion. Don't force anything; just notice how far you can turn your head each way. Now gently shake your head, like a small vibration, for about five seconds in the following positions: twelve o'clock (straight ahead), ten o'clock (a little to the right), two o'clock (a little to the left), and again at twelve o'clock. When you're finished, "test" again and notice any changes.

Here's a second simple exercise: Gently turn your head in one direction and your eyes in the other (e.g., eyes to the left, head to the right). Switch (eyes right, head left). Do it very softly, without force, eight to ten times. Test before and after and note any changes.

Exercise 3: Pelvis. For your test, look left and right, noticing the range and ease of movement.



CHECKING THE PELVIS: *Busch demonstrates the hip-rocking exercise*

Now sit forward on the edge of a chair and let your hands relax on your knees. Keeping your feet on the floor, move your hips from side to side eight to ten times. Now recline against the chair back and repeat the hip movements. Then lean first to the left and then to the right, again moving your hips. Return to the original position and “test.” Notice any changes?

Exercise 4: The inner eye. The Meyners system recognizes the importance of the mind-body connection in athletic performance. In riding, fear and anxiety are two of the biggest roadblocks to learning and performance.

Fear or anxiety issues involving basic safety need to be addressed with a knowledgeable, patient instructor and a safe and appropriate horse. Other types of fear and anxiety, such as “show nerves” or overly self-critical thinking, can also hinder performance. The

Meyners system helps to develop what Mr. Meyners calls the “inner eye”: an accurate, nonjudgmental mental picture of one’s performance strengths and weaknesses. From this calm mental state and self-awareness, a rider can use her strengths effectively and work to correct weaknesses without the crippling critical self-talk that can lead to tension and anxiety.

Here’s a “mental practice” technique that you can use to help develop your inner eye:

Sit in a quiet, comfortable place. Mentally shelve the worries and concerns of daily life for a few minutes. Take several deep breaths and feel yourself relax. Bring forward in your mind what you wish to learn (say, following your horse’s trot with your pelvis) or overcome (say, anxiety about what people will think if they see you bouncing around in the saddle). Engaging all of your senses, feel and see yourself doing what you wish to work through or learn as if you are actually doing it at that moment.

The next time you get on your horse, go through your mental training; then try riding the skill that you rehearsed in your mind. See if you can carry what you “felt” in your mental training forward into the actual performance.

For more information about Mr. Meyners; his program; and his book, *Effective Teaching & Riding*, visit balimo.info.

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thighs) or their knees. To learn to sit with the desired low center of gravity, practice lifting your thighs away from the saddle for short moments and releasing your legs downward.

Novice riders tend to be tight in the hips and to ride with a too-high knee. However, a thigh that is forced too far down and back can rock the rider onto the pubic bone and crotch. Lunge-line work without stirrups on a trusted horse can help you to relax your hip flexors and lower your knees.

Tight inner thighs and buttocks push the rider away from the saddle and raise the center of gravity—almost “pinching” you off the saddle like a clothespin. I tell my students to make their muscles like wet clay or to “sit heavy.” Other helpful images are to spread the buttocks or to widen the backs of the thighs.

For You and for Your Horse

Although fitness is an asset to riding, merely being trim does not make one a good rider. I have seen horses move light-footed under some mightily “beer bellied” men because the riders sat and balanced well. I have also seen some petite, athletic ladies be a burden for their horses to carry, thumping their mounts’ backs with each stride.

Our sport is not about strength. If you’ve ever carried a small child on your back or a loaded backpack, you know how important it is to have a balanced, secure load—one that does not bounce or shift. The same holds true of our horses. Taking the time to master the sitting trot is not only a gift you give yourself for your entire riding career; it is a gift you give to each horse you put your leg over. ▲

Karen McGoldrick is an award-winning freelance writer and a USDF-certified instructor through Second Level. She teaches and trains at her Prospect Hill Farm in Alpharetta, GA. She is a USDF “L” graduate and a USDF bronze, silver, and gold medalist. Her Web site is phfdressage.com.