

SECRETS OF THE

Independent Seat

A dressage instructor learns some lessons of her own on her path to certification.

BY SUSAN EOFF

At 4:30 a.m., as the second alarm goes off, I have to remind myself why I want to get up at this hour on a cold, dark, wintry morning for a riding lesson. I used to do the same thing when I was ten to ride to my Pony Club lesson. Now, at 35, I am driving myself and my horse to the lesson instead of riding. The focus of my childhood lessons was "survival riding," and the focus now is the refinement of my position and the application of my aids. So it's off to another longe lesson.

I know that, as a rider, I will never be able to fulfill my potential—or my horse's—without a truly independent seat. When I enrolled in the preparation workshops in 1999 and 2000 and underwent testing for the USDF Instructor Certification Program, I was motivated to work on my own riding with a renewed intensity. When I passed the certification (through Second Level) last year, I paused briefly to congratulate myself that I had accumulated some new tools and effectiveness in my dressage career, but I also was acutely aware of many holes in my own riding and education—areas in which I wanted to improve.

One of those areas was the ability to sit on a moving horse without tension—only controlled relaxation. Eight years ago, hoping to unlock the mystery of the seat, I had gone to Austria to work for the number-two rider at the Spanish Riding



USDF certified instructor Sue Eoff

School of Vienna. A few ideas and educational moments resulted, but there were no big breakthroughs. I watched him ride and saw what I was striving to achieve, but I still didn't know how to get there. I could stay on a horse on the longe without stirrups or reins, but my seat didn't have that "connected" look.

Frustrated, I took up ballroom dancing in hopes of gaining a better understanding of my body—to isolate and then integrate its parts so that I might piece together an effective whole. My dancing developed, as did my body awareness in the saddle; but the independence of my seat continued to be compromised by moments of tension or gripping.

Later, while I was taking lessons with California-based USDF Certification

Examiner Lilo Fore, I acquired a beautiful Thoroughbred schoolmaster who is quite wonderful, except for his jarring trot. As Lilo put it, "If you master sitting his trot, you should be able to sit anything."

The universe had finally lined up the horse to help me to fill in the holes in my position, and the teacher to coach me through the process. So back I went on the longe line, holding the strap at the front of the saddle for balance. It took me seven lessons to develop a sufficiently independent seat to sit my horse's trot with stirrups and without holding the strap. Those seven lessons seemed like an eternity; in truth, said Lilo, it was a remarkably short time to restructure my entire riding position—thank you, dance lessons.

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First Lessons

The first thing I had to learn was what the contact of the external seat should feel like. Lilo took away my stirrups and asked me to allow my legs to hang freely from my pelvis. I felt like a clothespin balancing on a line. Next, she had me lift my leg slowly as she supported my leg from the bottom of my foot so that I could feel the change in contact of my seat as the weight of my hanging leg changed. I gradually felt a fullness in the contact of my seat with the saddle. The goal was to find my maximum leg length without compromising that full-contact seat feeling when the hanging leg is slightly drawn up and connected to the trunk of my body.

After we found my correct leg length, I adjusted my stirrup leathers accordingly. My seat stayed open and "filled out." Then, by flexing my toes up and my heels down and out, I positioned my leg so that my feet were parallel to my horse's sides, with elastic ankles to help absorb and allow his motion. As a result, I could feel an easy connection between my ankles and my seat bones, with my knees relaxed and my legs angled gracefully.

Adding Stirrups

My goal at this point was to maintain the feel I'd learned, but with stirrups added. I tried to keep my legs feeling as if they were "falling" into the stirrups without pushing, reaching, or bracing. My legs floated between my pelvis and the stirrups without tension, only relaxed, controlled placement; and I felt the easy connection between my ankles and seat bones. I let go of the strap and learned that the finished product isn't simply the result of my leg and seat position but that the inner working of my pelvis also had changed to absorb and allow the action of the horse.

The "Bicycling" Exercise

How can the seat remain poised yet connected and quiet without the rider's having to grip with her legs? To point me toward the answer, Lilo asked me to "bicycle" with my legs in a gentle, controlled manner as my horse walked and then trotted. It was impossible for me to grip as I bicycled; the only way for me to stay secure and centered in the saddle was to find my balance. I could feel my seat bones alternating contact while the

floor of my pelvis had no choice but to relax. At last I could feel that triangle between my two seat bones and crotch settling down onto the saddle without tension and with a flatness that I hadn't experienced before.

The next hurdle was keeping that feel of flatness while bicycling *and* letting go of the strap—ugh. After losing my balance quite a few times, I became aware of the two columns of muscles in my "trunk"—my upper legs, pelvis, and abdominals. In dancing, I had conceptualized the feeling of the trunk muscles as a continuation of the supporting leg up into the rib cage. I had come to think of the actions of the leg as beginning at the rib cage rather than at the hip. When I dance, I initiate the action of my free leg from that point on my rib cage; then my supporting leg creates the position that allows my free leg to move. I can feel my trunk muscles if I stand on one leg, without holding on to anything, and really swing my free leg back and forth. I can balance only if I stabilize the muscles between my rib cage and the pelvic area beneath my supporting leg. The bicycling exercise created the same awareness, except that it "attached" my trunk muscles to the supporting seat bones—

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right, left, right, left, in concert with the action of my horse's hind feet. Focusing on the up-and-down action rather than on the back-and-forth action quieted my seat until I could feel its independence.

Next, Lilo asked me to place one hand on my stomach and the other on the small of my back while I was bicycling. Still bicycling, I pushed with my hands to anchor my pelvis down into the saddle while holding my stomach and back. I used my lower abs to pull me down and secure my seat vertically. Wow—a major breakthrough! The unlocking of one of the great mysteries of my world was beginning to unfold: a truly independent seat in riding.

Rope-Climbing

For my next exercise, Lilo had me pretend to climb a rope slowly with my hands while bicycling as my horse walked and then trotted. Talk about independence! This exercise really freed up my upper body and hands. After "climbing" back down the rope, I placed my hands in riding position and used the weight of my elbows to pull my shoulders down to help stabilize my pelvis. Result: an independent seat,

quiet hands, and a flexible and calm look to my position. The elbows-down position felt like a lowered version of my dance position, which I use to set an exacting framework for connecting to my dance partner. The feeling of connection from my elbows, through my seat bones, to the balls of my feet began to create a picture of elastic balance and connection throughout my body.

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Off the Longe

One of my first big breakthroughs after attaining a more independent seat was that I was able to use it to influence my

horse's tempo instead of just sitting on his back and feeling him move under me. The right-left action of my seat made me feel as if I were dancing with my seat instead of my feet. Some horses cha-cha, others foxtrot, and so on. My job as a rider is first to feel how to connect with my horse's way of moving and timing and, later, to begin to change that movement to an unhurried, regular tempo—or, to use a dance analogy, to go from follower to leader.

My path to a more independent seat was humbling but gratifying. The experience has enriched me as both a rider and an instructor. My students hear me talking about my learning experience; now, most of them ask me for longe lessons. And I expect to return to the longe line myself from time to time, for riding is always a work in progress. The USDF Instructor Certification Program and testing framed a moment in that progression, but the work itself is continuous. □

Susan Eoff is a USDF certified instructor through Second Level. She trains with Certification Examiner Lilo Fore and is a competitive ballroom dancer when she's not riding. She lives in Vallejo, CA.



USDF members, and friends, Kathryn Barry and Heather McCarthy. Photo by Kirsten Barry

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