

# Straighten up and Ride Right

*A certified instructor shows you how to keep your horse straight and balanced by keeping yourself in alignment—and taking your time!*

By Lena Wedenmark with D. J. Carey  
Photographs by Susan J. Stickle

**S**tand by the rail at Fourth Level USDF-certified instructor Lena Wedenmark's SEI Stables in Wellington, FL, as she works with student Susan Lang (who's president of the Kansas Dressage and Eventing Association) and Lang's eleven-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding Peter Pan, a son of Samber, the first-ever KWPN-approved pinto stallion. Lang bought Peter in late 2006; the pair earned Second Level scores in the 60s at their one 2007 show and are aiming to compete at Third Level this year—and to qualify for Great American/USDF Regionals at Second.

**The issue: Like many amateurs, Lang tends to ride in less than perfect alignment: to collapse to the inside, displace her seat to the**

**outside, and overuse the inside rein. As a result, she ends up blocking the flow of energy from her horse's hind legs through her body.**

*Wedenmark says:* The first thing to understand is that, just as there is a training scale for horses, there is a training scale for riders. Its bottom level, the basis for everything else, is balance, which must happen between the horse and rider as well as within each of them. The next level is relaxation/suppleness, which you can't achieve until you have balance. Next comes theoretical understanding and knowledge of the aids. At the top, dependent on all those other qualities, is control and execution of the aids.

Lack of balance is the reason for most rider alignment problems,

and it happens because riders are encouraged to ride way too fast for their skill level. They get completely overwhelmed with the horse's energy and end up just hanging on, instead of learning to sit straight and relax and ride in balance.

Making things even worse, many riders spend way too much time riding 20-meter circles! When someone who isn't aligned tries to ride a circle, centrifugal force makes her want to rotate her body inward and displace her seat to the outside—which absolutely does not help her to become aligned. I never let my students ride circles while they're learning to achieve their own balance. We concentrate on straight lines—and we *slow everything down*. You must learn to walk before you can run!

I meet a lot of people who are afraid of riding slower and shorter steps because they think that doing so will damage the horse's movement. The truth is just the opposite, because balance in both horse and rider is the prerequisite to being able to increase power while maintaining elasticity.



OFF-CENTER AND OUT OF KILTER: Susan is out of alignment in the trot (1) and at the halt (2)





Susan's been riding with me for about four years, and she has other good instruction at home, so she's come a long way. (In fact, we had to try very hard to make her sit badly for the "wrong" photos!) But we're still working on alignment issues, in part because she's an amateur who rides only one horse a day, and these adjustments take time.

Our lesson will focus on understanding what goes wrong with rider straightness, and then on making it

right component by component. As one of my favorite sayings puts it, "The shortest way to do many things is to do only one thing at a time."

Susan, here Peter Pan is traveling at a trot that's obviously too fast for your comfort and for your balance (photo, p. 24). Because your seat bones are not aligned over him, you are unable to absorb the push from his hind legs in your lower back. To help yourself stay on, you are leaning back and gripping with your left knee

and thigh (and also with the calf of your right leg). Having no seat bone on the left side, you're compensating by leaning left and pulling on the left rein. As a result, Peter is overpositioned to the left and "forging," unable to engage behind or reach forward.

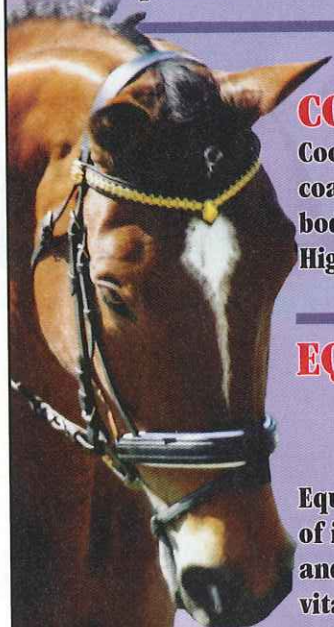
In the "halt" version of the same problem, your left seat bone is clearly in the middle of Peter's back horse and your right one is floating to the outside. Though you probably think your weight is on your left seat bone (the only one you can feel), it's actually displaced rightward; to compensate for not feeling secure across him, you have collapsed in your waist to the left, your left leg gripping like an anchor. That left leg is also drawn up into your hip socket, which makes the leg impossible to use as an aid and also stops any possibility of your lower back moving. To ride forward and straight, you would have to pull on the

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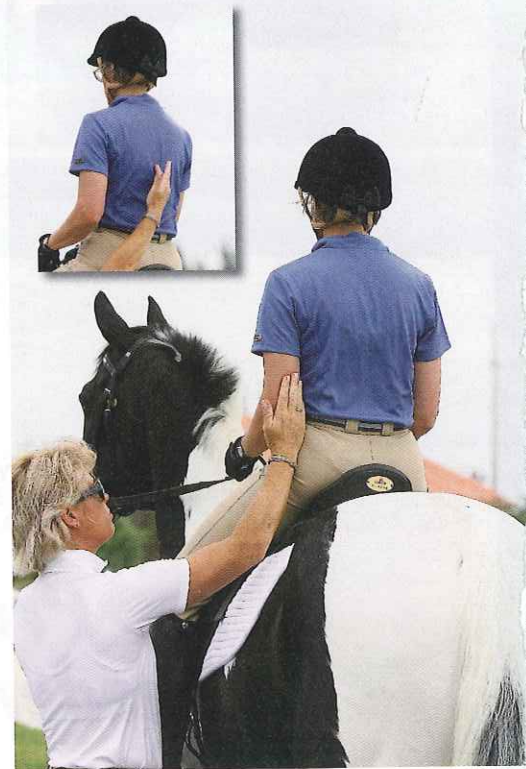
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REIN-AID AND POSITION FIX: Drawing the shoulder blades together and down helps to align the upper body and correct the rein aids. In the inset photo, I'm touching Susan's spine between the shoulder blades to help her locate the connection point.



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A CORRECT HALT AND A "NOT-SO-QUICK" FIX: Improved alignment in the halt and in a slower trot

inside (left) rein—because the rest of your body is telling Peter to go right.

To begin helping you to correct your alignment, Susan, I place my hand on the back of your elbow and ask you to press against the hand (which won't yield to the pressure), move your other arm in parallel, and feel the tips of your shoulder blades coming together and connecting (photos, p. 26). Then I ask you to relax the pressure without leaving my hand. This lets you feel how to use the rein aid without separating your shoulder blades and while staying supple in your shoulder socket and elbow. It also gives your lower back the correct angle, which helps you to drop your legs—and now your leg aids and lower-back aid can start agreeing with each other. Two bonuses: Giving the rein aid this way is a really nice feeling, and the effort of connecting the shoulder blades builds core strength.

Susan, let's try that halt again. With your upper body straight, your shoulder blades connected, and your weight evenly distributed over the "triangle" of your seat bones and pubic bone, you can allow both legs to hang freely from their hip sockets—the only position in which it is possible to give a proper leg aid. Maintaining this position in motion will enable you to let your lower back absorb the energy from Peter's hind legs without losing your balance.


And what a difference a slower trot makes! It isn't flamboyant and big, but it's clearly very balanced, and so are you, Susan. Aligned both laterally and vertically, you're relaxed and supple, which enables Peter to maintain his elasticity. He's clearly still thinking forward, and he's very correct into his reach and over his back. As you show me that you're relaxed and supple, with no tension to block your horse's throughness, I'll encourage you to ask for more "forward."

### Exercise 1: Straight on the Second Track

Now let's go on to a very useful exercise: traveling down the long side on the "second track," just inside the track along the fence, and *proactively* riding straight: not waiting for the horse to pull out of line and then correcting him, but taking responsibility for keeping him straight, hind leg following directly behind front leg. And doing that means never allowing his shoulders to drift.

The complication? Not letting the shoulders drift doesn't always mean simply keeping a horse absolutely straight. To stay straight in the shoulders, some horses have to position their necks a little to the left or right. So the goal to aim for is always to feel your horse's outside hind leg in your outside rein. To do



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FOCAL POINT: Susan practices riding straight along the second track

this, you must give your rein aids from the back of the elbow, as I showed you earlier, because only when your shoulder blades are connected can you truly absorb the hind-leg energy and send it forward to your connection in the bridle.

When you're successful doing this second-track exercise at the walk, try it at the trot and canter.

To travel straight along the second track, you need a focal point to ride toward. (In the photo at left, I'm serving that purpose; working alone, Susan might put a piece of tape on the fence's top rail.)

Susan, as you ride toward me, keep me between Peter's ears and point your belly button straight ahead. This will help you to ride him straight proactively, maintaining the line—not waiting for a drift and then trying to “fix” it. If all you do is correct your horse after he's drifted, you are not working proactively, maintaining your alignment by telling him “please do this,” but just reacting, saying “no, don't do that” after he's made the error.

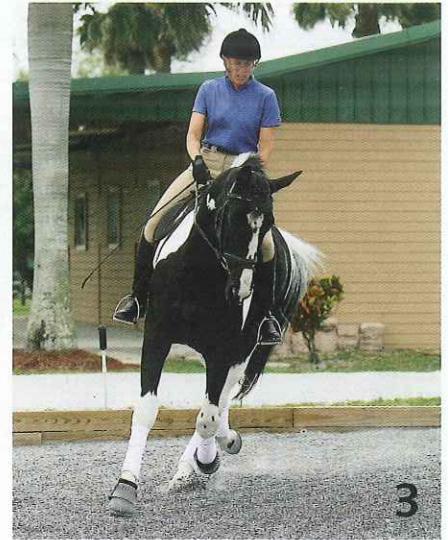
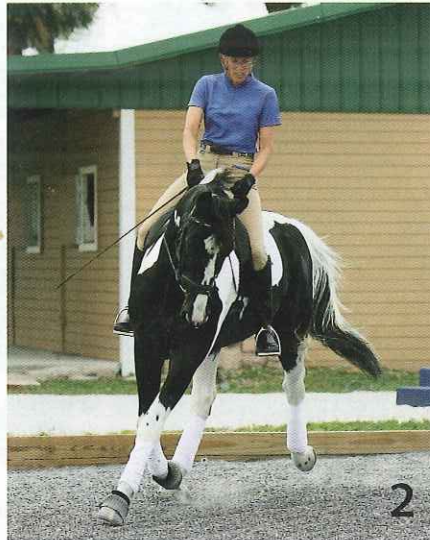
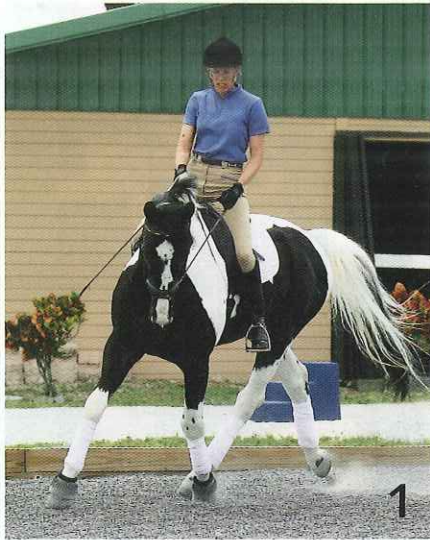
You can see from Peter's legs in the photo that he is traveling straight with his shoulders perpendicular to the track, yet his neck is very slightly to the right. A lot of riders will object, “But he's looking to the outside!” My response: Don't worry about the horse looking out. Just make sure you feel the connection on the outside rein,

## Practice Pointers

**H**ere are some of certified instructor Lena Wedenmark's tips for achieving and maintaining correct alignment in the saddle.

1. **Spend time on the lunge line.** If that is not an option, and if you don't have mirrors or an instructor available, make an alignment checklist that you can use on your own.
2. **Look straight ahead and always have a focal point.** You'll quickly become aware if your horse starts “wandering.”
3. **Keep each hand on the proper side of the withers.** Never allow a hand to cross to the opposite side. If, for example, you notice that your right hand wants to cross to the left side, do a position check. You're likely to find that you've let your upper body collapse and rotate to the left and your seat bones shift to the right. (It's OK to look down briefly once in a while if you are unsure what is going on with your hands.)
4. **Check your leg position.** At the halt (if you have a sensitive horse, ask a friend to hold him while you do this), move both your legs in front of the saddle flaps; you'll feel your seat bones on both sides. Now quietly lift both legs up, trying not to allow the seat bones to change location, and then let your legs just fall down from your hip sockets. You want to see that your legs are falling down at the same angle on both sides, forming a perfect V.





**A TURN FOR THE WORSE:** Using only your inside rein and overturning your body to the inside while entering the corner (1), Susan, caused Peter to lose alignment and engagement and to fall on his forehand (2). Coming out of the turn, you have to pull on the outside rein and then “push him over” with your inside leg (3), which leads to further loss of balance.

keeping his outside hind leg coming straight behind the outside front. If Susan focused on straightening Peter’s neck instead of keeping his shoulders straight, they’d probably end up going to the right.

**Exercise 2:  
Straight on a Curve**

Alignment isn’t just for straight lines, of course—and you have to turn sometime. So now we’ll work on

maintaining alignment going through a corner or riding a curved line.

**Exercise 3:  
Turn on the Forehand**

The turn on the forehand (photos, p. 35) is a very helpful tool for teaching coordination of aids because you use everything: both reins, both legs, and the seat. You’re not traveling, so you don’t have to worry about going forward; you can just focus on doing the turn correctly. Though the turn on the forehand is somewhat forgotten in this country, in Europe it’s included in lower-level dressage tests because it’s so great for establishing lateral work and an understanding of straightness.

**Alignment at the Canter**

In the canter, as in the trot, the key to alignment is to go slowly until you’re balanced and comfortable—because if you’re out of balance, you’ll be sitting “against your horse’s motion” instead of following it. That’s what’s happening, Susan, in this right-lead canter (photo 1, p. 35). Your inner (right) hip is pulled back, causing your right seat bone to land in the middle of your horse. Your left hip is forward and hanging to the outside, unable to

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follow the motion of Peter's outside hind leg. Each time he pushes off from that outside hind, its energy pops you out of the saddle and throws you forward, causing you to rock back and forth and feel as if you're "riding the canter backward." You're being forced to compensate by gripping with your inner leg and pulling on the inner rein. As a result, you're unable to give proper aids because you're preoccupied with one task: hanging on.

In canter, the horse pushes off with the outside hind leg. Prepare for that push by putting your outside elbow back until you feel the tip of your shoulder blade meet your spine and rotating your torso slightly to the outside. This action will allow your inside hip to go forward and rightward and will invite your outside hip to align in front of Peter's left hind leg. This position will help you to absorb and follow the motion of his depart and not be popped out of the saddle. Now that

you no longer need to grip and hang on, your legs and arms are free to be used as aids—and because you're united with the motion, you'll use them at the appropriate moment. From Peter's straightness and engagement, I can tell that you can actually feel the canter, Susan (photo 2, p. 35). Much



**A TURN FOR THE BETTER:** (1) Here we see a correct outside-rein connection on a curved line (except for a wrist that's a little overbent; the elbow-to-bit line should be straight). Even in the middle of a corner, Susan, you are keeping your horse perfectly aligned. And here's the full picture (2): You've entered the turn with an aligned seat and proper outside-rein connection (although, again, we'd like that outside wrist straighter). As you and Peter head for the long side (3), both rider and horse are straight. You have brought back your outside shoulder blade and are maintaining the outside-rein connection; you're aligned over your seat bones, with weight in your left stirrup—and Peter is obviously moving in much better balance.



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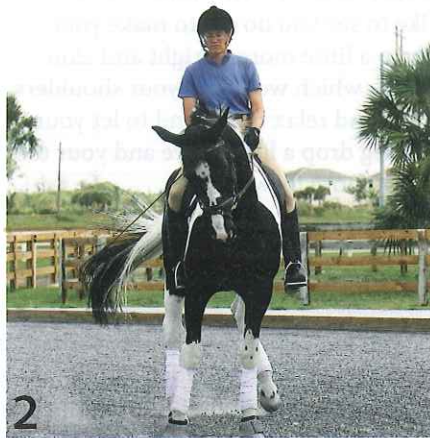
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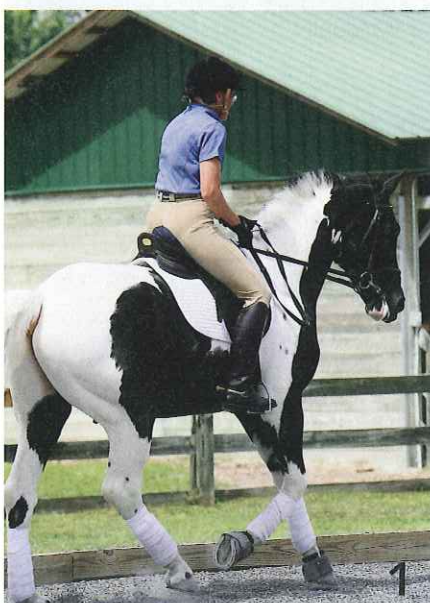
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**TURN ON THE FOREHAND:** After making sure you are sitting aligned over your seat bones at the halt, Susan (1), I tell you to take a connection on the outside (left) rein, explaining that this “non-allowing” rein is how you must prevent Peter from stepping forward when you use your inside leg. I also advise you to prepare not to let her yourself lean to the right when he starts moving.

In photo 2, you are maintaining the “non-allowing” outside rein as you use your right leg to move Peter’s hind legs to the left without pulling on the inside rein. He’s straight and balanced, and you’re staying in the center of him.

At first, I ask the two of you to do just a quarter-turn (3) before taking a break. We’ll build up to a half-turn as you become able to ask for more steps without losing your alignment and Peter’s straightness. (We’d go even more gradually, just doing one step at a time, if Peter were really behind the leg, or if you fell to the inside when he started turning.)



**LOST AND FOUND:** Susan’s body is misaligned in the right-lead canter (1) but improves greatly when she engages her outside elbow (2)







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better now! The only other things I'd like to see you do are to make your torso a little more upright and elongated, which would let your shoulders drop and relax more, and to let your left leg drop a little more and your toe point more forward. ▲

*D.J. Carey is a frequent contributor to USDF Connection.*

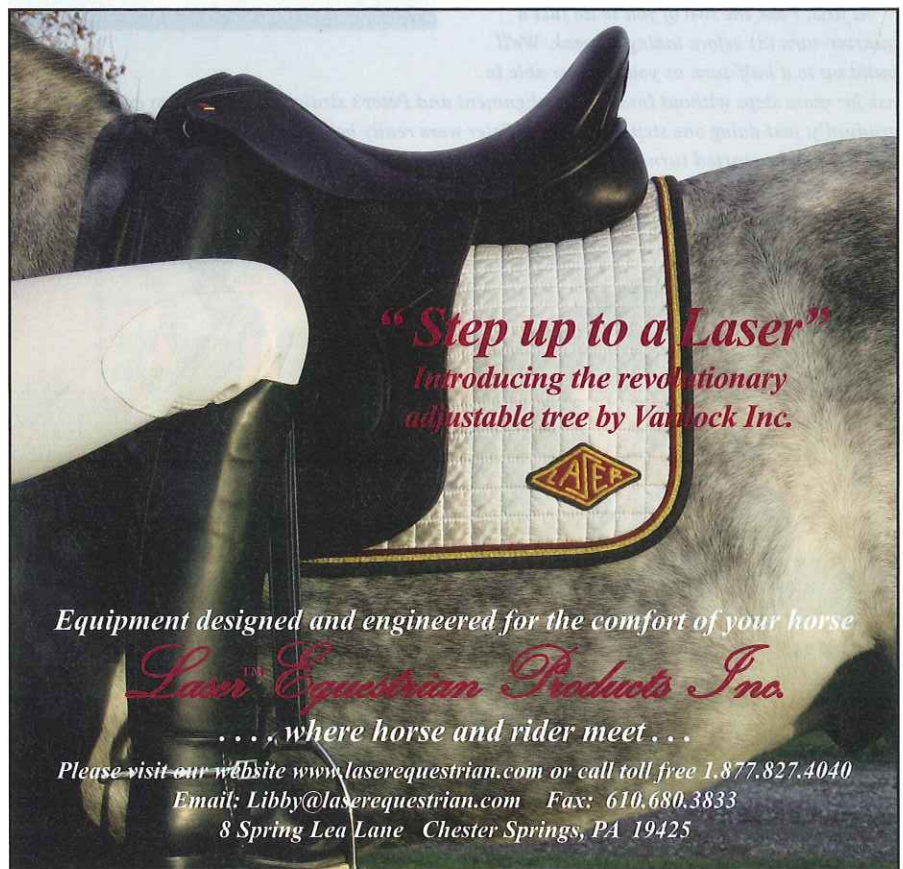
## Meet the Instructor

In her September 2007 "Meet the Certified Instructors" profile, **Lena Wedenmark** mentioned that she was doing more showing than in several previous years. Specializing in horses of the PRE (Pura Raza Española) breed, she rode the stallion Hielo MOR to a 2007 National Championship and another stallion, Cartucho VII, to the top score at the Dressage at Celebration show in Las Vegas.

Besides teaching and training at home in Florida, Wedenmark travels extensively to give clinics, including regular stops in Texas, California, Oklahoma, and Barbados—whose national equestrian team she has coached to two Pan American Games and an FEI World Cup Dressage Final.



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