

SEAT POSITIONS

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The correct seat is the basic prerequisite for the effective application of all aids.

The rider has to achieve an independent balanced seat, without any means of artificial support, tension, gripping up, or stiffness.

His aim should be to follow smoothly the horse's movement, keeping his centre of gravity in harmony with that of the horse. This can only be achieved through intensive tuition and practice. Only the relaxed rider can sit in a secure balance, and only when this is achieved can the trainer start to refine the rider's position.

There are three principle seat positions:

The Dressage Seat

The Light Seat

The Forward (or Jumping) Seat

The transition from one seat position to another must be fluent.

The Dressage Seat

The dressage seat is the basic seat. It is used when training a horse and rider for dressage and in executing dressage movements. When teaching a beginner careful attention should be paid to this position.

The foundation of the seat has three points: the two seat bones and the crotch. The rider's seat should rest with muscles relaxed across the saddle. The thighs should lie flat against the saddle and should be turned inwards so that the knee is flat along the saddle. The thighs should be as vertical as is possible without lifting the weight off the seat bones. This will ensure the important deep knee position, which enables the rider to sit deeper in the saddle and closer to the horse, embracing the horse's barrel.

Turning the knee out is a serious fault. Daylight showing between knee and saddle automatically makes the seat insecure.

On the other hand, when the thigh is turned inwards too much, the knee presses against the saddle. The necessary relaxation is thus impossible, and the rider's lower legs are no longer able to feel the horse or to give effective leg aids.

From below the knee, the rider's legs – depending on their length – should slope backwards/downwards, the flat calf muscles keeping a soft contact with the horse's side. The toes should point forwards and only very slightly outwards.

The stirrup should be positioned under the ball of the foot. The rider's weight should be placed on to the stirrup, passing into the heel. The ankle joint should be supple, flexing freely with the horse's movement, causing the heel to sink below the level of the toe. If the weight is other than evenly placed in the stirrup, the emphasis should be on the inside. Tense inward turning of the toe is as faulty as turning it outwards, or fixing the heel in an exaggerated deep position.

The *upper body* should be positioned vertically above the seat bones, which should be level and square. A common fault is to 'collapse' one or the other hip.

The *back* should be held erect, with the muscles moderately firm to enable them to swing in harmony with the movement of the horse's back. Hollowing the back causes a stiff and tense seat and impairs the rider's influence on the horse.

The *shoulders* should fall naturally backwards from the inhaling chest, producing an imaginary perpendicular line from shoulder to heel.

The *head* should be carried erect – without pushing the chin forward, looking ahead in the direction in which one is riding.

The *upper arms* should hang freely from the shoulder, without being pressed against the sides. Elbows pressed against the body result in pulled-up shoulders and fixed hands and wrist joints. Stiff, stuck-out elbows hinder the seat and the sensitive guidance of the horse.

The *hands* should be closed, with thumbs uppermost, and held vertically.

Every single joint in the rider's body must be relaxed to allow the rider to sit in a supple position and in balance with the horse. Only then can the aids be applied effectively.

The Light Seat

The light seat is widely used. It enables a rider to change quickly to the dressage seat or the jumping seat. Therefore, it is especially useful for flat work with show jumpers, and in gymnastic jumping when there are frequent changes between flat work and jumping.

It is also a useful seat when hacking or riding across country, as it combines the advantages of security with lightness. The rider can stay in balance with the horse over uneven terrain and still be light on his back.

The light seat is also of great value when breaking and training young horses. The back muscles of a young horse need strengthening (through gymnastic exercises) before he can carry the full weight of the rider with ease.

As the purpose of this seat is to lighten the burden of the rider's weight on the horse's back, the stirrups should be worn two holes shorter than for the dressage seat. The rider should lean his upper body slightly forward, thus lessening the pressure of the seat bones in the saddle. More of the rider's weight should be carried by his thighs and knees.

His seat, however, should not leave the saddle, and it is important that his lower legs should not slip backwards. His pelvis must follow the horse's movement with suppleness, and all the joints (hip, knee and ankle) must move like a spring to absorb his weight with every stride.

The light seat has to be independently balanced, with hands held still and free of the neck. The reins, the back of the hand, and the lower arm should form one straight line.

The Forward (Jumping) Seat

Only when the rider has acquired a safe, balanced dressage and light seat can the forward seat be developed. Its purpose is to give freedom to the horse's back and to enable the rider to follow swiftly all changes of the horse's balance, while retaining most of the aid-giving influences of the dressage seat.

This seat should therefore be practiced only on horses which have learned to obey the aids in their dressage training.

It is necessary to master the forward seat when show jumping or galloping horses.

In jumping, it is most obvious over a fence. Between fences the rider will probably change to the light seat.

In order to learn how to apply the aids with short stirrups, you must first practice at the walk and the trot.

The stirrups should be worn considerably shorter than for the dressage seat, depending on the individual physique of the rider. A jumping or multi-purpose saddle should be used, because its knee roll will help to keep the knee steady. The foot may be pushed slightly further into the stirrup to ensure firmer contact of the lower leg. Pushing the foot all the way into the stirrup is not correct, as it immobilizes the ankle joint.

When cantering in forward seat the forward driving aid should be applied by the calf, which should be in steady contact with the horse's side. A lower leg which is sliding backward and forwards inhibits this movement.

The rider's upper body should be positioned in front of the vertical. With 'elastic' hip and knee joints, the seat should be lifted slightly out of the saddle so that it is no longer in but close to the saddle. In this position the seat bones bear no weight. The rider should push his hips well forward while holding his head erect. If necessary he can sit into the saddle to use his weight as an additional forward driving aid.

The important points of the forward seat are the deep heel and knee positions, as well as quiet, steady hands, held low on both sides of the withers. The horse has to canter into the rider's hands, which keep a soft but steady contact. Relaxed shoulder, elbow and wrist joints ensure that the rider's body movements are not transmitted into his hands. They should be completely independent of his seat. An independent and effective forward seat can only be acquired through practice.

A lot of work in forward seat on a comfortable horse will give a young rider the chance to develop the balance and endurance necessary for jumping and riding across country.

In forward seat the rider has to master turns and circles, as well as changes of speed, over any terrain, including jumps. When riding turns, it is especially important to have a steady contact with the outside rein, so as not to let the horse fall out on the outside shoulder.

As the name indicates, this seat is primarily used in showing jumping or in training show jumpers. In show jumping, the forward seat is most obvious over a fence. Between fences, the seat will probably change to the light seat.

Only after long and thorough training will a rider be able automatically to adapt his seat to different horses' movements and bounciness. But the work will eventually be rewarded, as only someone with a perfectly balanced independent forward seat, in full control of his body, will be able to adjust to every change of balance and be guaranteed constant success in show jumping. Anything else will remain patchy, and will not give the pleasure which is derived from mastering show jumping.

The forward seat is equally important when taking part in cross-country events. Since different muscles are used in this seat from those used in the dressage seat, they have to be developed by training. If the rider neglects this and gets tired during the steeplechase or cross-country phases, he will put too much weight on the horse's back, thus placing an unnecessary burden upon the canter movement.

Incorrect Seat Positions

Tension

Tension is the most common fault in the rider, either throughout or in one part of his body. It makes the seat insecure, causing a lot of unnecessary body movement and diminishing the rider's influence over his horse.

Chair Seat

The rider's weight is not balanced over his heels; instead he sits back in the saddle. Thighs and knees grip up, and the lower leg is much too far forward. In this position the rider cannot apply the aids correctly and therefore lacks control.

Split Seat (more correctly known as Fork Seat)

In this position the rider transfers too much weight on to the thighs and too little on to the seat bones. The lower legs slip too far backwards. There is thus no secure foundation for a balanced seat.

The cause of most seat faults is the rider's failure to relax. Therefore the first thing that a rider has to learn is a completely relaxed seat. Only when he has achieved this can he be taught position.

The individual position depends on the rider's physique and on the horse's conformation. Any irregularities in the rider's figure (hollow or rounded back, rounded and heavy thighs, weak tummy muscles, etc.) can be improved upon or even eliminated by specialized gymnastic training.

In the light or forward seat the most common faults are to go either too little or too much with the movement; or a lower leg which moves too much or is in the wrong position.

It is important therefore that the rider's lower leg (with deep supple knee and ankle joint) should have a firm contact with the horse's side – approximately the same leg position as for the dressage seat, except that the much shorter stirrup necessitates a more acute angle in the knee.

Standing too straight in the stirrups – especially when jumping – or leaning forward to one side of the horse's neck, are just as bad as not getting out of the saddle at all, or even pulling backwards with the hands.

Causes of Incorrect Seat Positions

RIDER AHEAD OF MOVEMENT

Stirrups too long.
Lower leg too far back.
Heel drawn up.

RIDER TOO HIGH ABOVE THE HORSE

Seat too far away from the saddle.
Heel drawn up.

RIDER BEHIND THE MOVEMENT

Upper body too far back.
Lower leg too far forward.
High hand position, acting backwards.

The following are suggestions for improving a rider's seat position:

- Rotating arms, forward, sideways and backwards.
- Stretching arms sideways, or folding them behind the head while swiveling the upper body sideways.
- Growing tall while sitting in the saddle, stretching both arms sideways/upwards.
- Bending upper body forward and backwards, while stretching arms downwards/upwards.
- Bending upper body forwards/downwards.
- Crimping both knees together.
- Stretching legs far backwards.
- Stretching upper body, bending it slightly backwards.
- Rotating arms while stretching upper body upwards.
- Stretching one leg sideways, lifting it sideways away from the horse's side.
- Bending upper body forward with a slightly hollow back.
- Relaxed arm rotation.

See also the *USDF Lungeing Manual*, pages 17-22, for exercises to improve the seat position.

Gymnastic Exercises

These are designed to give a rider a safe, relaxed seat, independent of the reins. They should also be used to correct faulty seat positions.

The beginner first learns these exercises at a halt, with the horse tacked up with side reins and held by a responsible person. Later, the pupil may carry out the exercises on the lunge. On very quiet horses, the exercises may also be practiced during a class ride. The reins have to be knotted so short and evenly that the rider can, if necessary, take up immediate contact with the horse. The leading file rider keeps the reins in both hands, the other horses following closely, head to tail. The exercises should not be prolonged. They should be practiced first at a walk, then at a trot and also in slow can-

ter. When riding without stirrups it is advisable to remove them from the saddle and to tack the horse up with side reins.

When lungeing a rider to improve his position it is important to use a correct dressage saddle with long flaps.