

How to Find the Right Position

Riding position is the most important part of riding. The more correctly we sit, the easier it is for the horse to do the job we ask him.

The rider should give the impression of being tall and elegant. All signals from the rider to the horse should be invisible to the spectator so that it appears the horse performs the movements asked as if by magic.

The rider must sit in the deepest part of the saddle with a comfortable stirrup length. Too short a stirrup makes the rider sit to the back of the saddle, putting the rider's weight in the one spot which will eventually make the horse hollow his back.

A stirrup length that is too long puts the rider forward in the saddle with their weight again in the wrong place, overloading the forehead and making the horse go deep in front (on the forehead). The stirrup length should be even.

The stirrup iron sits on the ball of the foot with the rider's toes pointed towards the horse's nose. The heel should be lower than the toe. The ankle joints act as a shock absorber for the lower part of the body so there has to be very slight movement as the weight goes down the rider's heel. The foot should be quiet. To use the word 'still' would mean stiff, and stiffness there would affect the rider's overall position.

The upper body should be tall with a flat, slightly arched back. Too much arch again causes stiffness and the rider loses all power in the seat and back and puts too much weight forwards, sending the horse deep in front.

If the rider rounds their back and collapses in the waist, more of the weight will go to the back of the saddle, again causing a hollow in the horse. It would be impossible for the rider to ride with the correct and essential suppleness needed to gain the most from the horse's movement.

The waist should be supple and swinging gently back and forth with the movement of the horse. The waist absorbs the movement of the horse as do the rider's ankle joint. A stiff waist and stiff ankles are a good recipe for disastrous results. For the comfort of the horse and rider you must be supple.

The rider's head should be carried tall and erect with the neck touching the back of the collar, not dropping down or forward. Look in the direction you are travelling.

The shoulders should be back, not stooping or drooping forward. The inside shoulder has a habit of rolling forward especially at the canter, so make sure the inside shoulder is slightly back. The elbows should be carried slightly forward of the body, with the inside of the elbow gently brushing your shirt. There should be a straight line from the rider's elbows to the horse's bit. The thumbs should be on top with a slight curve inwards with a soft wrist. The hands should be very giving and held as far apart as the bit in the horse's mouth.

In the Walk

The walk is four time. The walk is a marching pace and should be active with even, ground covering steps. The rider allows this to happen by firstly, sitting correctly. The rider should follow the movement of the horse's head with their hands, keeping a light contact with the horse's mouth. Imagine the rein as a silk thread that if used too firmly would break. The horse needs his head and

neck to balance itself. If a rider fixes their hands, the horse is obliged to compensate by stepping short and showing other forms of resistance.

In the Trot

The trot is a two time. The horse springs from one pair of diagonals to the other. In the trot there is less movement in the horse's head, so the hands remain quieter. Not still, as still means stiff. In the rising trot the rider should rise on the correct diagonal.

The upper body should be inclined very slightly forward to allow the rider to go with the movement of the horse. "Inclined slightly forward" does not mean lean forward or round the shoulders. You incline forward from the hips. If you are too upright in the rising trot you will be left behind the movement as the horse moves forward and land heavily back in the saddle. It would not be long before the horse would tense his back and come off the bit. The back of the saddle should not move up and down as the rider sits and rises. It so, he is landing too heavily and in the wrong place.

In the Trot – Sitting

This is where supple waist and ankle joints are essential. Any stiffness will cause the rider to bounce. The rhythm should not alter from the rising trot to the sitting trot.

In the Canter

The canter is three time. The rider should flow with the movement all the time, being aware of maintaining the correct position.

In the Gallop

The gallop is four time. In the gallop or hand gallop, which is about three quarters pace, the rider should shorten the reins and move forward in to the half-seat with a nice flat back and look in the direction they are travelling. When complete, melt gently back in the classic position.

Why does the correct position matter?

It is a pleasure to watch a rider and horse who seem to be as one. The horse looks great, the envy of all, ears pricked, back swinging, paces showing spring and life. The horse accepts the bit without tension and accepts the aids because they are clear and precise.

BUT watching some (not all) novice riders, especially on a sensitive horse, can show a very different picture. Involuntary movements caused by the rider's lack of balance can make him bump in the saddle causing the horse to stiffen and raise his head.

Similar irregular movements with the rider's hands and legs will upset and confuse the horse. He will be unable to tell between the true aids and involuntary ones. Eventually the horse becomes used to the continuous irregular movements from the rider and becomes dead or desensitized to all normally applied aids.

The rider then resorts to force – sticks – spurs. We owe it to our horse to sit correctly!