

Correct Design of Position

What does this look and feel like?



Part One: Position Is Control

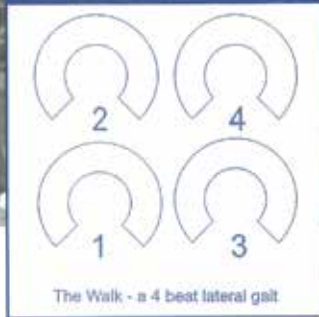
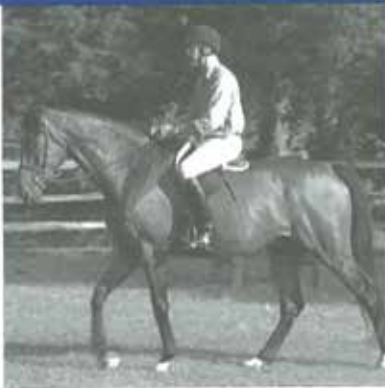


At a standstill:

Your stirrup is parallel to the ground. You want the ball of your foot on the stirrup with the heel down, toe up. The ball of your foot is your balancing and energy point while the stirrup iron is across the knuckles of your foot. Your ankle joint and knee joint are like springs, shock absorbers—loose and flexible. The stirrup leather is perpendicular to the ground. You open your thighs to slide down and around the horse, allowing the point of your knee to push towards the ground. (If you were to drop a pebble off your knee, it would just skim past your toes.) The inside of your thigh, knee, and calf are against the horse's side. Your thighs are open; therefore you are closer to the front than to the back of the saddle. You are sitting over the horse's center of balance at the halt, just behind the withers. Your leg is resting against the horse's side, but your muscles have tone, they are not actively gripping the horse's side or applying any pressure. Any grip is "frictional" and is only the result of the contact between your leg and the horse's body. *(Your eyes are up—focused ahead. You are riding toward the front of the saddle. You should be able to put the palm of your hand flat on the saddle behind your buttocks. If you can't, you are sitting too far back or the saddle is not fitted to you properly.)*

Every beginning rider's first concern is believing that she can have control of this 1000 pound animal that she is about to sit on. Many of you were probably told that you just get on and "kick to go and pull to whoa." While that might work some of the time, it certainly isn't going to be enjoyable for the horse or produce a pleasurable, harmonious ride for the human.

In riding "LESS IS MORE". Your first responsibility is to gain control of yourself and that will ultimately give you true control of your horse. Thus we begin with Position. Every movement you make while sitting on the horse has an effect on his balance and is likely to produce some type of reaction. You want to sit as quietly and unobtrusively as possible so that when you do move your eyes, your upper body, a leg or a hand the horse will be able to interpret your meaning. We will give you the basics of position for the hunter/jumper rider and then provide you with a list of references to give you in-depth ideas for developing your rider's body. Accomplished riders work on position throughout their careers, just as concert pianists never stop playing scales. Practicing position in rhythm with your horse is developing your technique.



At a walk:

(Remember that you are the passenger.

You will help your horse in making his best efforts when you are a balanced load—staying in rhythm with your horse's feet and with his motion is the way to be sure that you maintain your balance together.) The walk has 4 beats. The horse's feet move left hind, left front, right hind, right front. As the horse picks up the hind foot, you will feel your hip rising on the corresponding side. As he lowers that foot your hip lowers. Your hips alternate rising and lowering from side to side as the horse picks up his hind feet at the walk and lowers them in sequence. Your arms work as hinges from the elbow joint and follow the balancing gesture of the horse's head and neck at the walk. *(Remember the use of your eyes. The eyes are up, focused on where you are going. The horse follows the path of your eyes. This is a key to going where you want to go.)*

Some ideas to focus your work on position

Your leg must be underneath you in order to support you, just as it is when you are walking, running, skiing or engaged in any other activity you do while standing. Therefore, while your heel should be slightly lower than your toe as it rests on the stirrup, your primary focus should be on developing a position that keeps your leg underneath your body. Too much emphasis on "depth in your heel" can cause you to brace your leg out in front of you, causing your shock absorbers (ankle, knee, and hip) to become stiff and lose their spring. Have a friend videotape you in profile while you ride so that you can see whether your leg stays underneath you at all gaits and in upward and downward transitions. Exercises 4 and 5 that follow in the next segment will help

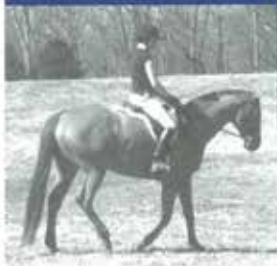
Think about developing your position from your core muscles. Your center of gravity needs to remain over the horse's center of gravity and your center is controlled by the core muscles of your abdomen and lower back.



you in developing the correct leg position over which your body is balanced. Riding in a bareback pad on a quiet, comfortably gaited horse will also aid you in developing a long, flexible, non-clutching leg. Combining this with the exercises using stirrups will go a long way toward helping you understand the three points of leg contact and assisting you in developing a position that is balanced over a leg with functioning shock absorbers.

Think about developing your position from your core muscles. These are the muscles from the bottom of your diaphragm and ribcage that stretch to your lower spine. Sally Swift developed this concept in her book *Centered Riding*. Many riders are finding that Pilates work is very beneficial to the development of a correct design of position because it allows you to become aware of and strengthen your core muscles. Your center of gravity needs to remain over the horse's center of gravity and your center is controlled by the core muscles of your abdomen and lower back. Your legs simply hang out of your hip socket and your weight runs down through your thighs and down the back of the calf to rest on the stirrup. Your upper body rises out of and is supported by these core muscles just as a building rises out of a firmly built foundation. You often hear riders being told to pull their shoulders back, but this generally makes the rider stiffen through the shoulders and arch and stiffen the lower back. If you think about supporting your upper body through the use of your core muscles, you are much more likely to be able to move in unity with the horse.

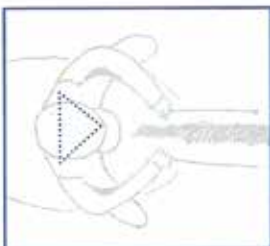
*Sitting the walk
in full seat.*



Three Basic Positions used in the Forward Riding System

- Full Seat
- Half seat (connected 2 point)
- Two point

Full Seat: You are sitting on your crotch and two seat bones. Your seat is composed of all the parts of your body that are in contact with the saddle from your knees upward. The main part of your weight is distributed over a triangle formed by your seat bones and pubic bone.



Seen from above: the triangle of contact: the seat bones and pubic bone

You are more toward the front of the saddle than the back and aware of the pressure or amount of ounces you have in your seat (three points of contact). The majority of your weight is distributed through your legs, not in your seat. It is important to sit as lightly as possible so as not to break your horse's connection in his body

from hind to front. An ultimate goal in the conditioning of a stabilized horse is for the horse to be strong enough physically to allow him to raise his withers. This can not happen if you sit too heavily in the saddle. At the walk in Full Seat you feel your seat bones rise and fall with the movement of the hind feet.

Points of leg contact



Exercise 1

Either while being lunged on your horse or riding on your own in a small enclosed area just allow your horse to walk freely forward and close your eyes so you can feel the connection with his movement through your legs, hip joint, and seat bones. Can you feel the three points of leg contact—upper inner thigh, lower inner thigh and mid-calf.

Notes



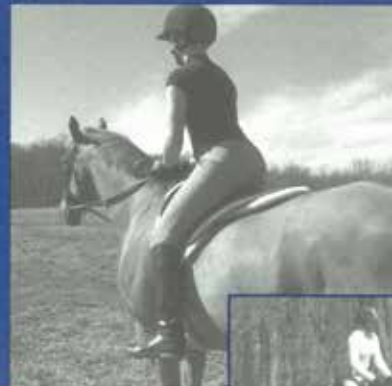
Half Seat

Rider in half seat.

Two-Point

Only your crotch and upper thighs are in contact with the saddle.

Rider in two-point.



Notes

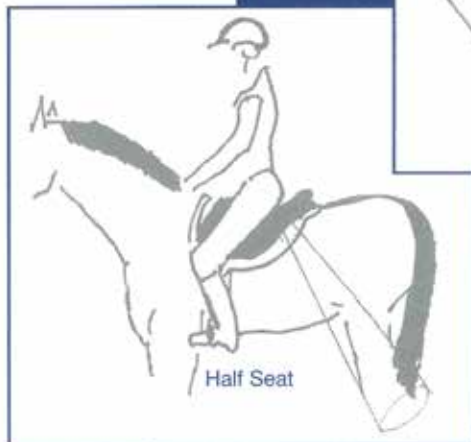
Two-Point: Raise your seat bones and your crotch out of the saddle by opening your knee angle and closing your hip angle a few more degrees.

Half Seat

You disconnect your seat bones from the saddle by opening your knee angle and raising your upper body. This closes your hip angle slightly. Only your crotch and upper thighs are in contact with the saddle. Allow the redistribution of your weight to slide down your leg, pushing your knee towards the ground, then down the back of your calf to the ball of your foot on the stirrup, heels down, toes up.

Exercise 2

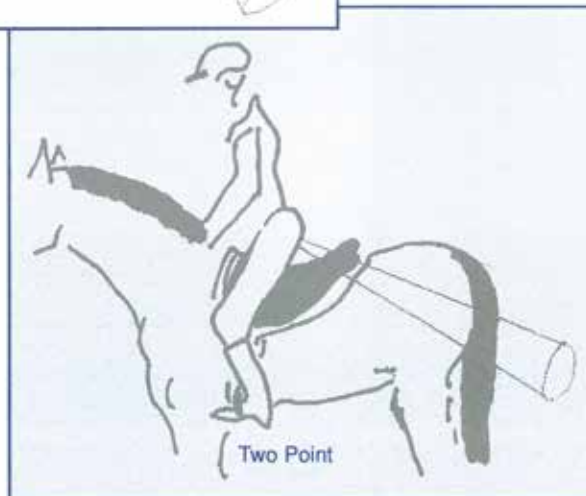
While riding at the walk without stirrups or on a bareback pad, reach your arms forward about six inches and allow your hip angle to close slightly as your upper body follows your arms. You will feel your weight slide down through your thighs as your knees move closer toward the ground. Imagine that your seat bones are like the headlights on some cars with covers that open as they turn on and close when they are off. When you are in full seat your headlights are off, but as you disconnect your seat bones from the saddle your headlights come on low beam. (In two point they will rotate to high beams). When you are comfortable in this position at the walk, try it at a slow trot. If you have difficulty maintaining your balance, hold the mane to stabilize your position so you do not pull back on your horse's mouth. Gradually lengthen the time you can hold your position without holding the mane.



Half Seat



Full Seat



Two Point



Half Seat

Exercise 3

You want to be able to differentiate the three seat positions clearly, so practice being in full seat for six trot strides,

adjusting your hip angle and arm position and shifting to half-seat for six trot strides, and then raising your seat bones slightly off the saddle (disconnecting your seat) as you hold the two-point position for six strides. Reverse the sequence going to half-seat for six strides and finally return to a full seat. Your changing of positions should be so fluid and subtle that it does not disturb the horse's balance and he maintains the same pace and rhythm of the trot throughout the exercise. Be sure you can differentiate the subtle changes that your body makes to achieve these three different positions. Make sure you can remain comfortably in balance with the horse's movement in all three positions. If you find that you tend to lose your balance forward while you are in half seat or two-point then you may be allowing your lower leg to drift behind you or be gripping the saddle with your lower thigh and inner knee. If you lose your balance by falling back, then check to see whether you have locked your ankle joint or braced your lower leg by pushing it slightly ahead of you. This causes both your ankle and your knee to lose their shock absorbing capacity. Remember to keep your arms forward with your hands in front of the line of your shoulders. Your eyes are up and focused on where you intend to go. Again, use the mane to stabilize your balance if you need to do so. Once you become proficient at this exercise at the trot, practice it at the canter.



Exercise 4

Exercise 4

Stand above the pommel of the saddle opening your knee and hip angles all the way. This allows you to feel the varying effects of the different positions that opening of the knee and hip angle can create. This exercise is also a good check on your balance. You should eventually be able to do it in all three gaits.

Exercise 5

Try to stand rhythmically above the pommel for four trot strides and then take two-point position for four trot strides. Going back and forth between these two positions in this rhythmic manner will help you create depth in the leg while maintaining a functional spring system.

Notes

To develop the ability to keep your horse on the track, you need to begin to create the mental picture of sustaining the horse's track by sending the energy created by your inside leg to your outside rein and that created by your outside leg to your inside rein.



Position Exercises for Isolating Body Parts

These exercises should help you develop your position and help you prepare to pass the assessment tasks but they aren't requirements for the assessment process. As a rider it is your responsibility to stay centered and through the use of your aids keep your horse on track. To develop the ability to do so you need to create the mental picture of sustaining the horse's track by sending the energy created by your inside leg to your outside rein and the energy created by your outside leg to your inside rein. This diagonal feeling actually creates an "X" through the rider's body. The center of the "X" is over the horse's center of balance, just behind the withers.

Lunging Exercises for position

(See page 50 for information on general lunging techniques)

Exercise 1 • Reposition

Hold the front (pommel) of the saddle with your inside hand and the back (cantle) of the saddle with your outside hand. This position turns your shoulders and body from the waist up in the direction of the bend and aligns your shoulders with the horse's shoulders. From the waist down your hips are also parallel with the horse's hips. Your inside knee is pushed down, and your inside seat bone and inside leg are slightly forward, creating a correct holding leg that supports the bend and directs the energy created from this leg forward and over to the outside



Once again remember the eyes...the horse follows your eyes...head up looking around your circle.

Exercise 2



shoulder. The outside knee is also down to help keep your body centered in the saddle.

The outside leg is slightly back in the displacing position. It will allow you to catch the horse's haunch if it falls to the outside of the circle and guide the horse back on the track of the circle by redirecting his energy.

Remember the "X". You are learning to feel how your body position and different leg aids affect the horse. If the person on the ground lunging the horse has a good enough eye, she will be able to guide you in position corrections, as well as applying and timing aids to help keep the horse moving forward and straight around the circle.

- a) Once again remember your eyes—the horse follows your eyes: keep your head up, looking around your circle.
- b) Practice counting the rhythm of the hind feet. If this is difficult, keep your head up and close your eyes for a moment—just feel the push of each hind foot with your respective hip.
- c) Keep a running picture (like a video playing behind your eyes) of what you want to happen. The horse will often pick up the energy of this mental image.
- d) Vary your upward and downward transitions: halt to walk, walk to trot, trot to walk, walk to halt, etc.

Exercise 3



Exercise 5



Exercise 2

As you become more secure, you can place the inside hand, on the knee, waist, behind the back or on top of the head. Gradually you will be secure enough to let go of the front of the saddle and do the arm exercises with both arms.

Exercise 3

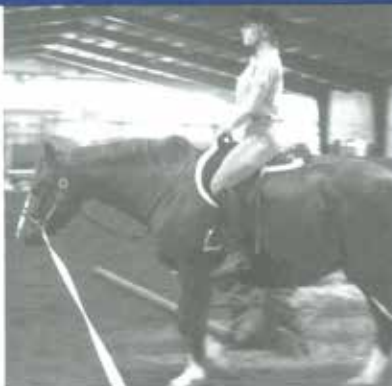
Now, add turning the upper torso, bending to touch the toe on the same side, then the opposite side, then turning to touch the horse's croup then his poll. Move only as far as you can while maintaining your position. Through all the preceding, check the stability and independence of your seat and leg.

Exercise 4

Practice Half Seat and Two-Point and Standing Above the Pommel. Name how the hind feet are falling while in all three positions while being aware of your "X" that is supporting the horse's straightness and forward movement.

Exercise 5

Start with the walk on the lunge. Bring your knees up in front of the pommel of the saddle and see how this connects your seat bones to the saddle. Then ask the person lunging you to encourage your horse into a slow trot. As you feel your seat bones being pushed up forward and then lowering back with the two beat rhythm of the horse's hind feet, slowly push your knees down and sit lightly in the saddle, hold the



Exercise 8

pommel and keep your hip angle open and your seat bones connected to the saddle. The sitting trot has a slower cadence than the regular trot. Anytime you feel your seat begin to bounce or lose your balance or stiffen, return to the walk. Feel the horse's hind feet and relax into their rhythm. It works best to do short, correct sequences of sitting trot to help you remain relaxed and confident.

Exercise 6

Once you are comfortable at the sitting trot on the lunge without your stirrups, then practice with your stirrups. Many riders find it more difficult to sit the trot with their stirrups than without because of tension in the ankle or a desire to brace against the stirrups. Still we must ride with our stirrups so this is an important skill to master. *(You should begin to feel that you are actually following the horse's movement forward with your seat bones.)* As your seat bone rises and comes forward with the horse's hind foot, that thigh will feel as if it stretches and the knee actually moves lower. This feeling will alternate between each seat bone, leg, and thigh as you follow the horse's hind feet forward.

Exercise 7

When sitting the trot without stirrups becomes comfortable, then practice dropping your stirrups and picking them up without looking down or disturbing your horse. As your balance and security develop, practice this exercise at the posting trot and canter.

Exercise 8

Now you will use the reins while being lunged at all gaits.

- a) Two separate hands in front of the body. Remember: a "sheet of glass". *(See page 32)*
- b) Elbows: oscillating, following the motion of the neck.
- c) Opening or leading rein, eyes looking, outside leg encouraging movement towards the leading inside rein. Remember to "give on the outside rein what you took on the inside rein." (This is the "X" again.)
- d) Practice looking ahead and seeing what your horse sees. Think like a horse. You can ride out of trouble by being aware and catching an incident before it happens and directing the horse's energy elsewhere.

Notes

...focus on your position and don't worry too much about controls.



Exercise 3



Free work in a small confined area to develop position

Work in a round pen or other small fenced area of 60' to 80' diameter so you can focus on your position and not worry too much about controls. Try these exercises without your reins. Knot them so they stay within your reach on your horse's neck.

Exercise 1

Transitions: Pretend you are on an imaginary lunge circle and work on upward and downward transitions within the gaits and between the gaits, i.e., ordinary trot rising to slow trot, back to ordinary trot rising; walk to slow sitting trot back to walk; slow sitting trot to canter to ordinary trot rising, then back to sitting trot, etc.

Exercise 2

Turns: Turning off your legs and opening rein, walking patterns (crossing the center of the ring, keeping the same direction and changing direction) adding transitions to trot, trotting the pattern, transition to walk, to halt, all variations, using all the positions

Exercise 3

Begin to work over ground rails at the trot in half-seat, and two-point positions. Try this exercise with arms folded over your chest or hands on your hips. Add poles around your lunge circle or round pen and just "let them get in the way." How "straight" your horse is to the pole will make all the difference in how he is able to negotiate the obstacle.

Exercise 4

Go back and do lunging exercises 2, 4, and 8 with the poles just "getting in the way." For a detailed explanation of this type of free work in a confined area you should read the following articles on "Passenger Lessons" by Linda Parelli.
www.parelli.com/literature/newsletter/2003/apr-june.htm
www.parelli.com/literature/articles/fluidity.htm
www.parelli.com/literature/articles/riding-naturally.htm

Notes

Practicing with a very short stirrup will challenge your balance just as the "standing above the pommel" exercise did, and it will help you find the ability to balance over the stirrup without gripping through your thigh or knee.



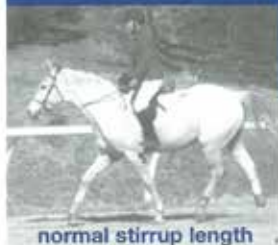
2 holes shorter



4 holes shorter



4 holes shorter



normal stirrup length

Riding a calm school horse

(Ride in a larger riding arena on loose reins at all gaits.)

Exercise 1

Work particularly on developing all three seats at each gait.

(Remember, the canter comes when the rider is proficient at the trot.)

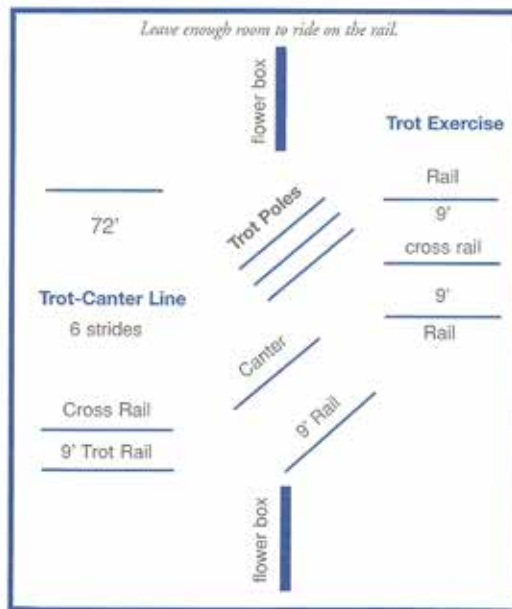
Exercise 2

Scatter poles around your arena and practice turning to the poles and being "straight." There are three parts to a turn. The first part of the turn asks your horse to keep his weight on his outside shoulder and bend slightly around your inside leg—the second part you ride straight and forward for a moment and breathe—the third part of the turn you ask your horse to come off your outside leg, then catch him with your inside leg when he is "straight" to the pole. Use your legs around the horse's barrel as if you are passing a beach ball back and forth between them. This is a chance to practice isolating your body parts and learning to use each aid independently.

Exercise 3

Work over ground poles with a variety of stirrup lengths so you can see how stirrup length affects your security and spring system. Try a stirrup length two holes longer than normal, and you will notice that while you may feel more secure with a longer leg around the horse, your spring system is not as effective. Next try a stirrup length that is two holes shorter than normal, and then four holes shorter than

normal. This will increase your springs but decrease your security. Practicing with a very short stirrup will challenge your balance just as the "standing above the pommel" (page 12) exercise did, and it will help you find the ability to balance over the stirrup without gripping through your thigh or knee.



Exercises that can be done using ground nails—straight lines, bending lines, poles on the end of the ring, across the center at angles. Any combination that you would find in a course can be set using just poles, making it easy for you to learn how to steer and at the same time saving the jumps in the horse. Try setting up your work area with a variety of exercises such as those in the diagram.



Riding bareback will help you develop balance not grip or strength.



Exercise 4

Double posting is a great balance and rhythm exercise. Instead of posting "up, down," "up, down" as we traditionally do, vary the posting rhythm. First try the waltz tempo of "up, up, down" and see whether you can maintain your balance over your stirrup on the second up beat. When you are stable over your leg, try other variations, such as "up, up, down, down", or "up, up, up, down". Any and all of these challenge your body control. *See DVDII: Position Exercises*

Exercise 5

On a calm horse in the company of one or two other riders, go trail riding. Work at the walk and the posting trot, taking two-point when going uphill. Downhill open your hip angle and push your knees down as you step into the stirrups using the ball of your foot as your ground. It is wonderful to be able to follow and observe and imitate the path of an advanced rider who is proficient at turns and straightness. Stay several horses lengths back from your leader. Work on your downward and upward transitions to keep the desired distance.

Exercise 6

Ride bareback using a bareback pad. Start in a small enclosed area and graduate to larger areas if the horse is calm and quiet and as you develop balance and suppleness. Work at the halt, walk, and trot until you feel balanced and secure and then begin to add the canter. When you are comfortable riding in the bareback pad in all gaits, work to perfect Exercises 1 through 4 listed under "Free work in a small confined area." Riding bareback will help you develop balance, not grip or strength. We highly recommend that you try riding in a bareback pad like those developed by Pat Parelli (available through www.parellicollection.com) They are expensive, but they are durable and will provide you with a secure seat that will help your bareback riding progress rapidly.

Notes



*Jumping in a bareback
pad over a 2' jump.*

*Though the horse is a bit
flat and reachy in his
style, note how the rider is
with the motion.*

Suggested References

These books will assist you in your development of a quality working position.

- *Centered Riding* by Sally Swift
- *Fitness, Performance and the Female Equestrian* by Mary D. Midkiff
- *Ride with your Mind Essentials* by Mary Wanless
- *Passenger Lesson* by Linda Parelli (see p. 19)
- *Yoga for the Equestrian* by Linda Benedik and Veronica Wirth
- *Schooling and Riding the Sport Horse, A Modern American Hunter/Jumper System*, by Paul D. Cronin
- *Horse and Rider, From Basics to Show Competition*, by Judy Richter