

Seat and Feet for Classical Performance Riding

Paul Dufresne,
Training for Courage Clinician

Part 2 – How to Improve it

One of the easiest ways to improve our seat is to get a saddle that allows us to sit on our seat bones (two-point) as well as irons right above and beside the girth/cinch area. The girth should be fastened

real close to where the centre of gravity is on the horse. In most cases if you take a picture of your horse standing square you could cut it out and then put a pin on the topline of your horse to the point where it balances level. Usually this will be the best area for the girth. Some horses are conformed in such a way that the shape of the barrel may make it difficult for the girth to stay positioned there, this is where a crupper and/or breast collar may be of use.

If we have the leathers to the stirrups hanging in the same line as the girth, as we balance on our feet in two-point it is much less difficult to balance correctly. **If you are not centred you will find yourself easily falling forward or backward**, especially as there is speed changes, or extensions of gait. This balancing will have to be practiced in a more flexed position such as in jumping or a longer leg such as in stock seat.

Where it gets trickier is when we sit on our seat bones, assuming we have a fairly level seat on the saddle. We have to balance on our isheals (seat bones). To do so we have to have some flexibility to open the hips and (if we had a tail) tuck our tails under us in a pelvic tilt. This flattens our back, allowing our weight to rest on our two seat bones with practice. It can be very challenging to maintain this position without tightening the rest of our torso. It requires a strong core. So core exercises on the big balls, crunches, pelvic tilts will all facilitate this. To ride well you have to get yourself into a good degree of fitness. Much easier to do this off a horse as you will have to ride a lot of horses to manage to get fit riding.

This being said the balance portion is best practiced on a horse as the balance is dynamic and not static. Balancing on a ball is good but it doesn't quite have the same motion as a horse. **If we have a good schooling horse and instructor it is easier to practice this on a lead line.** Please keep in mind that this discussion is a brief synopsis how to improve your seat and yes, you could write a short book on it. As for the horse we teach it to go at a steady walk, later a steady jog, later a working trot, then a lope, and then a canter. The rider can keep one hand on the cantle. If the balance is very good and the horse staying consistently in the desired gait you could later do it with no hands.

- 1) Have the horse stationary
 - a) practice kick-downs, right, left, both together, then practice in a randomly instructed order;
 - b) practice kick-ups, right, left, both, then practice random order;
 - c) bicycling right, left, both, then practice random order; and
 - d) using a whip, baton, bamboo stick, touch four corners of horse, shoulder presses, bench press, behind the back.
- 2) Same as above but at a walk



- 3) Same as above at a jog
- 4) Same as above at a trot ... to extended trot
- 5) Lope to canter

Now when you start to feel that balance point on the isheals, you can practice this on a ball if you are watching TV which is more effective once you know where you should balance, as well as developing your core muscles.

The reason we practice these movements is to strengthen our core, improve our flexibility so we can learn to balance on the seat bones while still managing to stay quite relaxed. This is no easy feat at first. **These are also great ongoing training exercises to keep doing to make sure we remain fit to ride with confidence.** As we learn to balance with minimal negative tension we also stay out of the way of the horse by not clamping on it or throwing it off-balance as we lose our balance. We learn to adjust our balance as the horse's position, gait and energy changes thus facilitating the horse's athletic performance and staying in unison with the horse movement rather than opposition.

To gain a good seat or feet in performance riding it requires proper fitness, flexibility, body control or kinesthetic feel, and lots of good practice where we pay attention to what we are doing and feeling. Guidance in this quest to get a good seat is often very useful.

Someone cannot tell you where a good seat is, but they can guide you to finding your own. When you find it you will know, the eyes of the rider usually light up as they find that secure balance point where they feel they are very stable no matter what the horse does. Again remember we want to balance on the fulcrum of our horse teeter-totter so the ends can move and the rider very little. It takes effort, experimentation, guidance, fitness, practice and patience to find a good seat. A good saddle always makes this easier.

Finding your seat is always made easier when you understand your horse and know how to lead it so you can control any emotional outburst, thus not necessitating the quality seat of a rodeo bull rider. When we own horses we also have the responsibility of getting educated so we can better understand them by their rules.

Enjoy your journey!