

Seat and Feet for Classical Performance Riding

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Where and how we balance on our seat or feet will determine the security of our balance and the positive performance in our horses for whatever style of riding we choose. I use the term Classical because for eons good technicians on riding had figured out where you needed to sit and how out of necessity for the survival and execution of complicated and high-speed maneuvers whether in battle/working stock/exhibition/equestrian fine arts.

Long ago the Spanish/Portuguese mounted bullfighters would taunt bulls in the arena, which required incredibly explosive movements to avoid their charges and prove the mettle of their horses. It was imperative that their seat be totally balanced as to not interfere with the maneuverability of the horse or death may have resulted. The old masters of Classical Dressage also found themselves in a very similar balanced position to perform Dressage or High School movements. Curiously the balance point in high-speed riding in Western or jumping in the English discipline has to be at the same point as well, otherwise safety and performance is compromised.

The bullfighters found they needed a saddle with a level seat that allowed them to balance on the horse's centre of gravity. This is where the girth and stirrup leathers needed to be as well. Sure enough the position that we need to be to ride the most effective -- Dressage or even High School -- needs to occur in the same position. These riders found that by having a more level seat they could ride on their isheals (the two bony points, not the softer back part of your posterior) and more easily balance over the horse's centre of gravity. English or Western riders who have figured out how to balance over the horse's centre of gravity, whether on their seats or their feet, have also found that their ride is much more secure and allows a higher degree of performance by not impeding the horse's athletic movement.

Our problem arises with the design of saddle-makers and the desire of riders wanting them built for comfort not ease of balance. The simplest way of describing where your balance needs to be is by using the analogy of the teeter-totter. If you stood right over the fulcrum no matter how much either end was moved you could stand very securely as the greatest action occurs at the peripherals. As you move farther away from the fulcrum things get more exciting. The centre of gravity on a horse is not as static but the principle still applies. Another good example of this in action is bull/bronc riders at a rodeo. They will balance on their seat bones right above their mount's centre of gravity. If the rider keeps his centre of gravity in this position you will see combined poetry in motion. Of course bulls have a nasty way of throwing a wonderful twist into this which can make it very difficult for riders to stay centred. What happens at the peripheral ends of the rider's body means very little other than flare to the ride if both isheal seat bones stay grounded in the correct position. In any type of riding if you are behind or ahead of the fulcrum you get into the launch effect. With some of the saddles out there if your weight is on your butt rather than your seat bones that nice high rise at the end of your couch ... I mean saddle ... acts like the raised edge of a spoon, increasing the catapulting force.



From the position I am riding in you can see I can't just sit back in this saddle it has a level top.

This principle applies to other types of riding as well. Barrel racers whose horses seem to be off-balance around the barrels, find it is often related to this and lean. Jumpers also while in a two-point need to stay above the fulcrum and move with it otherwise if they get in front of it or behind it the horse's jump is really complicated, never mind the rider's safety. This is true for the seat in High School maneuvers such as the Capriole. This original airs above the ground fighting move would lead to a similar destiny of the bullfighter losing his ride in a less than graceful fashion with an incorrect seat.

In more controlled movements such as Dressage/Reining the end effect in most cases is not a dislodged rider. A poorly seated rider may cause a decreased quality of performance. The movement may be stiff or poorly engage the rear; transitions will be tight because the rider is pounding the back, or clenching their seat and legs while off-balanced. Often these horses will be heavier on the front end and in the reins as it is very difficult for such a rider to stay out of the way of the horse's movement. Horses may become unhappy never mind not performing close to their potential; many may actually become injured because of impact or muscle strain bracing against the restricted movement or impact.

The goal of this article is to cause riders to realize the importance of how we ride and the tack we choose. Secondly this is also an introduction to a future article discussing how to improve our seat or feet so we can more safely balance, facilitating a happy athletic performance from our equine partners.

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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!

