Get it Straight

April 2010 NANCY WESOLEK STERRETT

Our horses cannot move straight, whether on a straight line or bending along a circle, unless we riders assume the responsibility for being straight ourselves. When your horse seems to be crooked or his hindquarters drift off to one side or the other, check your own body position before you apply aids to correct the horse’s position.  
 Do you really know where your body is as you move through space? You may feel ‘straight’ as you stand and walk. You may have a mental picture of yourself with your back straight and your shoulders square. The reality, however, may be that you carry one shoulder held a little higher or a little farther forward than the other. One foot may point straight, the other at an angle. You may literally lead with your chin. Or you may pull your chin toward your chest in a way that tilts your eyes down. Or, like many people, your shoulders slump because you sit slumped in a chair most of the day. When riders have incorrect posture on the ground, they often ‘feel’ straight when they mount a horse even though they are sitting crooked.  
 Stand in front of a mirror and look to see if your hands hang at the same height, whether one hand hangs a little more forward or back than the other, whether you are toeing out with one foot, or other indicators that your posture is not 100 percent correct. Stand sideways to the mirror and assume a posture that feels liking your riding posture. If your lower back is hollow, you probably tip forward onto your pubic bone when you are in the saddle. If your lower back is flat or rounded, you probably collapse your upper body to some degree.  
 If you look in the mirror and see both hands hanging evenly by your sides, try this little experiment. Stretch one arm for about 20 seconds. Do some shoulder rolls. Bring the arm across your chest, take the elbow in your other hand, and gently pull to stretch your shoulder and upper back. Now hold the arm above your head, take the elbow in your opposite hand, and apply pressure until you feel a gentle stretch. Let your arms hang at your sides again. Do you see a difference in length now? Usually you will, which shows how much tension we can carry in our bodies without even realizing it. This tension can cause uneven weight in your seat bones.  
 Feedback about your upper body position from an instructor or a ground helper is invaluable when developing straight posture. Videotaping your riding sessions is an excellent way to notice subtle postural habits that may be affecting your riding. Slow the motion and pay attention to the position of your upper body, the position of your lower back, the position of your legs, the position of your seat from left to right (viewed from the back) and to whether or not your hips are following the horse’s motion.  
 Once you develop a feel for ‘straightness’ in your upper body, you need to develop a feel for ‘equal weight’ on both seat bones. Beginning riders typically sit heavier on one seat bone than on the other, placing more weight on the left or the right side. As you sit on your horse in a ‘neutral’ position, distribute your weight evenly from left to right so you feel equal weight on both seat bones. Imagine your nose, chin, belly button, and spine in alignment with your horse’s spine.  
 Keep in mind that the middle of your saddle may not necessarily be the middle of your horse. Sometimes, a crooked horse will move the saddle off center. If the rider sits crookedly or puts uneven weight on her seat bones or into her stirrups, she will move the saddle off center. Even if the saddle slips to one side of the horse’s midline, you must still sit in the middle of the horse.  
 You can practice putting equal weight on both seat bones when you are off your horse, too. Sit in a firm chair or on a large exercise ball and a practice how it feels to maintain your straight upper body posture while weighting and unweighting each seat bone without dropping your shoulder. This will help you develop ‘muscle memory’ and overcome bad habits that may be holding back your advancement up the riding tree.  
 In the beginning, getting equal weight on both seat bones may feel ‘crooked’ to you. I sometimes ask riders to pick their seat up out of the saddle shift to the right or left in order to get their weight centered on their horse’s back and equally on both seat bones. Your brain senses this is ‘wrong’ and it can take hours in the saddle to retrain your body’s perception of where it is in space. Most people have a stronger or weaker side and this causes the unevenness when mounted.  
 Again, feedback from a ground observer is helpful. Pay attention to your horse’s feedback, too. If your horse starts out moving straight but then begins to carry his head or hindquarters off the track, evaluate how your position changed. Try a position correction and observe how it affects your horse’s position.  
 Uneven weight on your seat bones can affect any gait. However, it becomes obvious at the canter. When I ask someone to put more weight on their inside seat bone at the canter, they often lean in that direction or drop their shoulder on that side. If your horse is bowing to the outside or does not want to turn to the inside, you must literally pick yourself up and reposition your weight slightly to the inside. Some riders brace in their inside stirrup at the canter, which pushes their weight to the outside. Instead, think of kneeling on the ground with your inside knee to lengthen your thigh and bring your inside seat bone deeper into the saddle.  
 If your horse is crooked, it becomes more important than ever that you are straight and do not allow horse’s crookedness to put you wrong. Continuing to work in a forward manner while staying straight fixes many problems. But it takes time to retrain muscles to give up old habits. Be observant about your position, be patient, and just keep putting time in the saddle.