Riding Responsibly

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The ‘riding tree’ we use to teach students progressive horsemanship skills begins with relaxation, then adds balance, following the horse’s motion with the seat, and proper application of the aids. When they master this combination of skills, riders can coordinate their aids to influence their horse correctly. They have achieved the rider’s holy grail of an independent seat. Think a bit about those last two statements. Their flip side implies that riders without an independent seat cannot correctly influence their horses. From the horse’s side of the riding experience, the rider’s aids create a feeling in the horse’s body of a shape the rider would like him to take. If the rider does not have an independent seat, the feeling the aids create may be more or less ‘off’ and the horse may be more or less confused by the rider’s request. Most riders progress up the riding tree somewhat haphazardly. For example, they may easily achieve balance relaxation and be able to follow the horse’s motion at the walk only to find they have none of the above when they move to another gait. They may have loose, relaxed joints but be unable to keep their hands steady because of balance issues. They may be able to coordinate their aids at the trot while still struggling to follow the horse’s motion at the canter. Until they have an independent seat at every gait, the likelihood that they are giving incorrect or confusing aids to their horses is very real.  
An independent seat means that:   
 • All of the rider’s joints are sufficiently relaxed to allow the rider’s seat to follow the horse’s motion at all three gaits.   
 • The rider’s hands are independent of his or her seat. The rider’s hand position is steady at every gait without any up/down bouncing motion, regardless of how the elbows, shoulders, or other joints flex.  
 • The rider can use either both legs together or each leg independently of the other to drive the horse forward. Similarly, the rider can use either both hands together or each hand independently of the other and the rider can use both seat bones together or each one independently of the other.   
 • The rider can drive the horse forward with the legs without locking up the hip joints.

Many riders, for example, can follow their horse’s motion with their legs and hips but their hands bounce up and down at the trot and canter. Others find that when they put their legs on to drive the horse forward, their hips lock up because they squeeze with their inner thigh or buttock muscles, popping their seat out of the saddle.  
Physically, an independent seat requires much of riders. It requires muscles that are strong and yet flexible at the same time to enable joints to move independently of one another. It also requires strong core muscles to support and steady the torso so that shoulders, hips, and legs can do those independent movements as they combine their influences in hundreds of subtle ways.  
 The core muscles include the lower abdominal muscles, the upper abdominals and the oblique muscles that connect the back of the torso to the front. Strong core muscles support the torso so that the rider can maintain balance without gripping.  
 Any exercises that use your legs (such as leg lifts) work the lower abdominals. Any exercises that require lifting the upper body (such as crunches) work the upper abdominals. Any exercises that require twisting the upper body (such as pointing an elbow to the opposite knee while doing a crunch) work the oblique muscles.  
 Riders who want to check just how close they are to achieving an independent seat can try some of these ‘tests’ at each gait:  
 • Raise and lower each hand independently of the other.   
 • Point one knee, then the other, toward the ground. If all of the rider’s other joints are relaxed, the hip and ankle joints flex easily. The hips should continue to swing and follow the horse’s motion as each knee drops down.  
 • Swing the lower leg forward and backward from the knee. Focus on using the hamstring muscles to move the lower leg from the girth to behind the girth and back without touching the horse’s side. Swing each leg independently, then alternate them in a rhythm with one forward while the other is back (this is the same movement dressage riders use in asking their horses for one tempi changes). If the rider tries to swing the leg while tightening the thigh or gluteus muscles, the hip joint will lock. If the rider’s hips lock, their legs cannot swing like a pendulum. The movement will be jerky.   
 • With the toes and knees pointing straight ahead, grip hard with the inner thigh then relax and feel the difference in the seat. The rider’s seat pop ups when the thighs grip, then sinks deeper into the saddle as they relax.   
 • Repeat the above exercise but this time tighten and relax the gluteus muscles and observe how this affects the seat.   
 • Practice putting both legs completely on and completely off the horse’s sides in a ‘driving’ rhythm. Then practice placing both legs lightly against the horse’s sides in a ‘keeping’ rhythm. Keep the knees and toes pointing forward. Some riders point their toes out at an angle and take their knees away from the saddle so that they can grip with their calves in order to drive with their lower leg. This locks their hips, tips them forward and pops them out of the saddle.  
 • Now alternate a few strides using an active driving leg and a few with a quiet keeping leg. If the rhythm of the rider’s legs matches the rhythm of the hips, the rider should feel the horse surging forward when the legs say ‘drive’ or holding a steady pace when the legs say ‘keep.’ Try dropping a stirrup for five strides and then picking it back up again without any loss of position. The rider with an independent seat can ride without stirrups and maintain a good position  
  
 In order to make clear, fair requests of the horse, riders must strive to achieve an independent seat—that point where relaxation, balance, and correct muscle memory allow them to use every body part independently of each other. A responsible goal for any rider is to be physically fit enough to ask fair questions of the horse. A horse, even a schoolmaster, can only be as good as its rider.