Seat Balance at the Walk
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WAVERLY, WV--Following the horse's motion is a prerequisite to using your aids correctly to influence your horse. Strong yet relaxed muscles are a prerequisite to following the motion.
 Your lower back and abdomen need the support of firm core muscles so that your hips can follow the movement of your horse's hips with an upward tipping or swinging motion.
 You need a balance between hamstring strength and hip flexor stretch to achieve the long, relaxed thigh muscles that allow your hips to tip. Simultaneously, all of your lower body joints must stay relaxed and flexible. Any tension in knees or ankles will also lock your hips, leaving you bouncing in the saddle.
 Achieving the complementary strength and stretch from hips to toes that allows you to follow the swing of your horse's hips requires many hours in the saddle. Start by developing a feel for a 'neutral' hip position at the halt. Your spine should be straight, your back flat. If your lower back is arched, your hips are tipped forward. If your lower back is rounded, your hips are tipped backwards. Your ear, shoulder, hip and heel should align perpendicularly to the ground.
 As he moves forward in a four-beat walk, try to feel the forward and backward swing of your horse's hips. As his hind foot leaves the ground, your hip on that side will feel a slight 'up and forward' lift. As the hind foot hits the ground to swing forward again, your hip on that side will feel a slight 'down and back' drop. Relax your hips and allow them to swing with the horse's hips.
 Try to maintain a long, relaxed thigh. If you grip with your thighs, it will be hard to feel and find the swing of the horse's back as his hips move 'up and forward' or 'down and back.' Close your eyes and focus on this feel as your seat bones move with the horse's hip swings.
 As your hips follow these forward swings left and right, try not to 'sit left' and 'sit right'. These seat pressures will shorten the horse's stride and slow the walk. Without any muscular tension, allow the left hip to swing forward followed by a right hip swing forward to encourage a forward, marching walk. Most people can eventually feel and follow the horse's motion at the walk. The walk does not have a moment of suspension so the rider never bounces and, therefore, does not feel the need to grip with the thigh to hold her position.
 Once you find and can follow this swinging motion at walk without any interference that slows your horse down, try to push him more forward by moving your hips faster or 'bigger'. This exercise helps you discover which muscles control your ability to swing your hips, something that will become even more important when you try to follow the horse's motion at the trot.
 When you can successfully use your hips to push your horse into a more forward walk, (you might have to help the 'forward' with leg as well as seat) try pushing him right into the trot by exaggerating your hip motion even more. Do not stop swinging your hips as the horse moves into the trot. At first, you may only get the swing at the trot for a moment or two before you start to grip and lose the feeling of it. Go back to the walk and try the exercise again.
 The point of this exercise is to gain a feel for how to move your hips at the trot by using the same swing as in the walk, with a few adjustments. The horse's hip swing at the trot is essentially the same as it is at the walk (with the exception of the moment of suspension). So, if you can exaggerate your hip motion at the walk until the horse feels like trotting—then hold that feeling without gripping—you will be able to follow the horse's motion at the trot as well as at the walk.
 The 'frog position' helps you get your seat in the middle of the saddle with equal weight on both seat bones. It also helps you to feel how to keep your pelvis tucked under (that is, taking the hollow out of your back). It demonstrates how it feels when the rider opens and closes her hip and knee joints without gripping with the thigh. Start at the halt with your feet out of the stirrups. Draw your knees upward while keeping your back straight. You should feel equal weight in both seat bones. If your horse swings his head to the left or right to adjust his balance, your weight is probably uneven.
 Now ask someone to lead your horse forward at a walk. As the horse moves forward, raise your knees again. If your horse slows its walk, the weight in your seat bones is probably burdening without moving. Continue to focus on relaxing and following the swing of the horse's hips as they move forward while you try to keep your knees up.
 The 'dog position' is an exercise that can help riders who tend to grip with their thighs or who may not be able to feel what a 'neutral' position feels like. It can also help riders feel their horse's rhythm and the motion of the joints. With your feet out of the stirrups, alternately lift one leg away from the saddle, then the other, then both legs. Do this at the halt and, again, with someone leading your horse forward at the walk.
 When you can follow the swing of the horse's back in a relaxed, 'neutral' position without interfering with the horse's rhythm or forward motion, you become capable of using your seat as an aid to communicate subtleties of direction and speed to the horse. You are on your way to truly influencing your horse with perfect clarity.