1

Components of a Good Seat

The seat is the rider's primary and most important point of influence with the horse. The rider's weight in the seat and the pressure of his legs on the horse are considered the initial driving aids to determine the forward movement of the horse. The horse will immediately feel any movements initiated from the hips and/or legs. The arms and hands governing the reins are considered secondary aids, assisting in the regulation of movement and stabilizing the gait and the direction of the horse. When you are comfortable with your seat and legs, then you can relax your upper body. This posture allows you to be steadier with your hands and have a good contact with the horse's mouth via the bit.

Developing a Good Seat

For a comfortable seat, the rider should sit with his back straight, centered and balanced in the seat, and only supported by the stirrups. The rider should allow his legs and arms to work independently from his torso.

The seat is the first area to develop if you want to enhance your riding experience. A good seat helps you with your balance while in motion regardless of the horse's gait. In order to attain a good seat, you need to develop strong *core muscles*, meaning strong abdominal and back muscles, which help you keep your balance much more easily. Keeping your abdominal muscles engaged, meaning slightly contracted, will allow you to relax the rest of your pelvic muscles; there should be no muscular stiffness in the pelvic area. Your inner thigh should rest against the saddle and the inside of your calf should rest against the horse's chest (barrel). Your feet should rest securely in the stirrups with the toes positioned nearly parallel to the horse's sides. Your seat should be

relaxed, with flexible hips, slightly bent knees, and supple ankles. This particular combination allows both legs to work as shock absorbers in order to better handle the horse's gait.

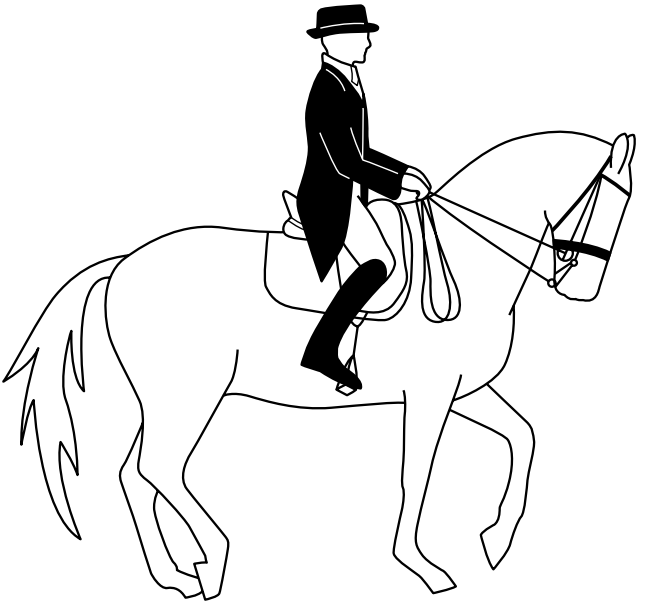
Also, strong core muscles help you integrate your pelvis and shoulder girdle so your torso and spine move in sync with the horse's gait. Your head should be balanced on the top of your shoulders and should not tilt forward or back. Keep your arms along the sides of your body with your forearms and hands relaxed. This upper torso position secures a good contact with the bit via the reins. Understand that you should not use the reins for support or balance, nor should you squeeze your legs against the horse's sides. These actions would interfere with the horse's movement and you would lose your seat.

The correct use of a good basic position that is centered, aligned, symmetrical, balanced, and relaxed creates an evenly conditioned body and prevents tension buildup and injuries. Physical fatigue during practices or training causes postural changes that make you use your legs and arms more. Keep in mind that when you are physically tired, you are mentally tired and you will start to make mistakes. Therefore, developing a good seat helps you save energy and seriously decreases the risk of making mistakes.

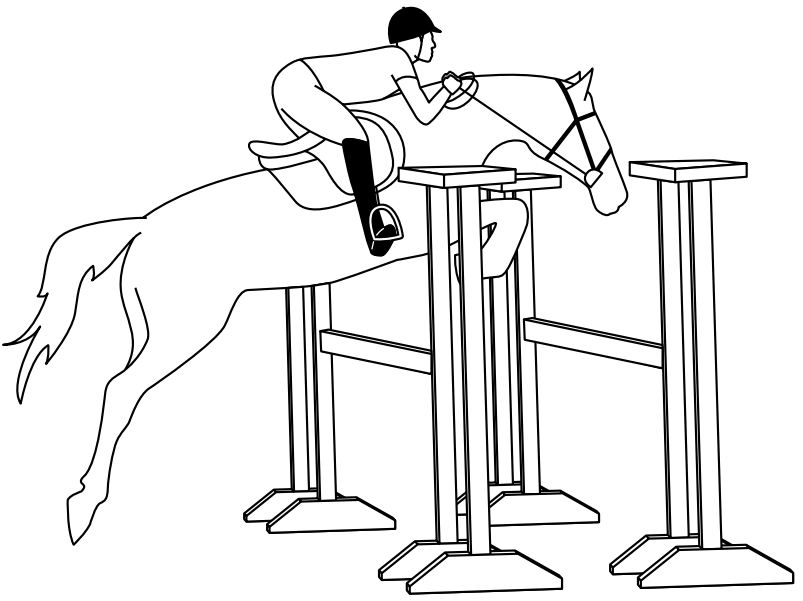
Becoming aware of the muscles involved and responsible for a good seat helps you understand the importance of developing core-muscle fitness and maintaining flexibility. This fitness will result in an overall better posture, leading to a more harmonious and effortless contact with your horse, allowing him to work at his best. The exercises presented in this book will help you improve your core strength, flexibility, agility, and economy of motion. Regular practice of these exercises also will help you alleviate back pain and other chronic ailments.

Finding Your Center of Gravity

When riding, you sit directly over the horse's center of gravity. If your center of gravity moves in sync with the horse's center of gravity, your ride becomes harmonious in all riding situations, whether the horse moves forward or engages in both upward and downward transition. Please take the time to observe the various riding disciplines in figure 1.1 to appreciate how the rider's center of gravity is always above the horse's center of gravity.

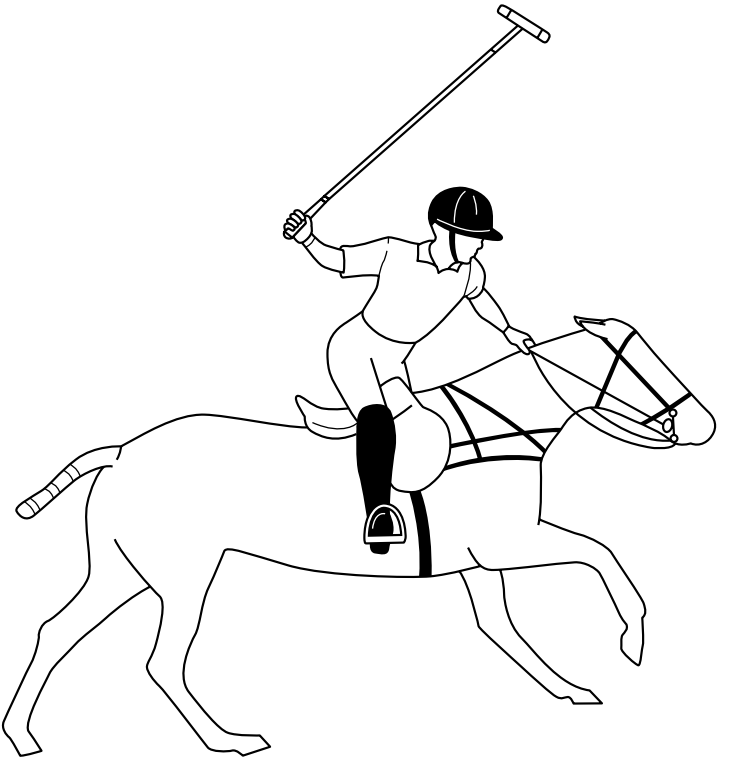


Dressage

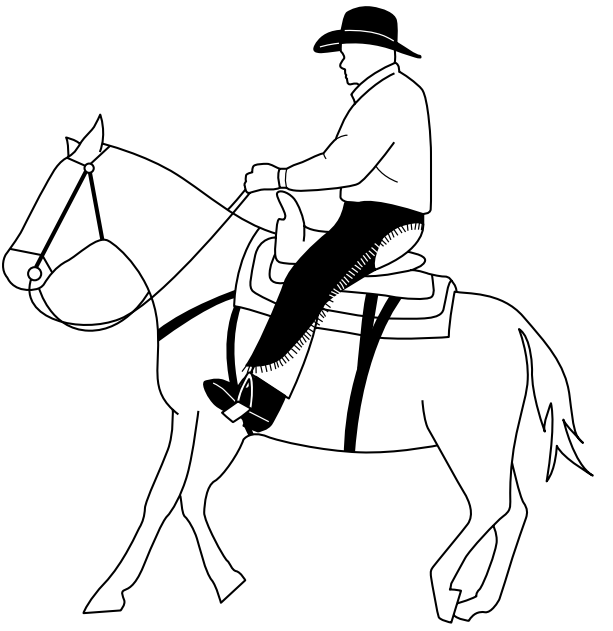


Jumper

Figure 1.1 Six riders with good seats.

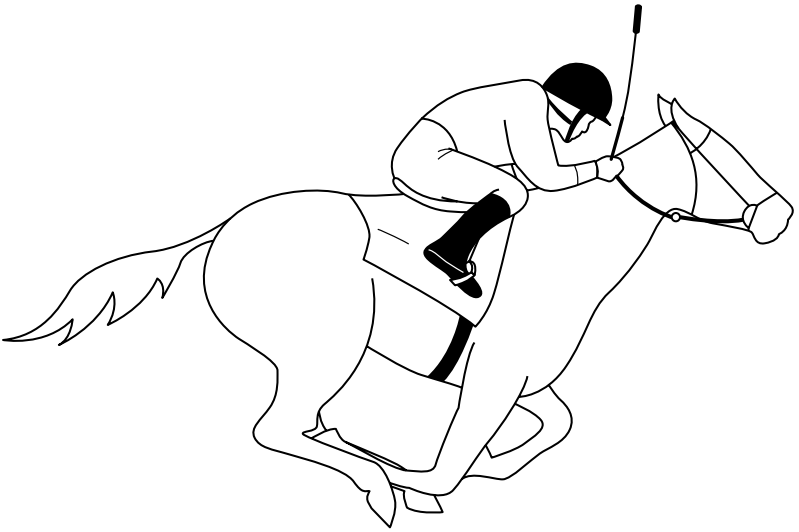


Polo

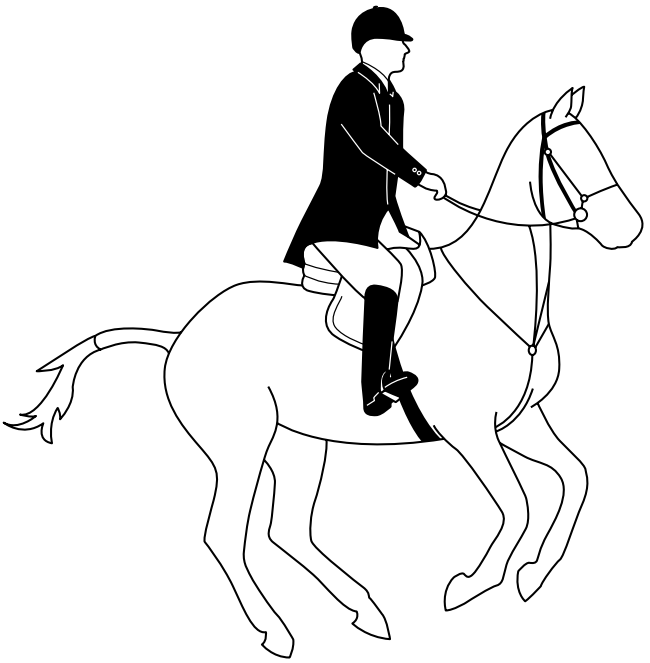


Western

Figure 1.1 Six riders with good seats (continued).



Racing



Hunt

Figure 1.1 Six riders with good seats (continued).

The *center of gravity* is that point where an object balances perfectly. The *line of gravity* is the line that passes from the body's center of gravity toward the center of the Earth.

In a human being standing in an upright position, the center of gravity can be found low in the pelvis, slightly above the second sacral vertebra, at about approximately 55 percent of a person's height. This point is located where the spine curves forward the most, as shown in figure 1.2.

Keep in mind that the center of gravity varies between males and females. A female has a larger pelvis, which results in her center of gravity lying slightly lower than in a male. It is only a minor detail, but worth mentioning.

A horse's center of gravity is located in mid-thorax at the level of the eighth rib, as shown in figure 1.3.

Riding over the horse's center of gravity in a relaxed manner allows you to gently control any movements by leaning sideways, forward, or backward to displace the alignment of the two centers of gravity, thereby influencing the horse effectively and without much effort.

The sooner you become aware of your center of gravity, the sooner you will reach that harmonious feeling with your horse. Developing strong core muscles will help you to feel your center of gravity.

Finding Your Center of Gravity: The Rocking Exercise

In most martial arts disciplines, discovering one's center of gravity is one of the first teachings, as it helps to build a solid foundation. The Rocking Exercise is used to help martial arts students discover their center of gravity. This very simple exercise will help you to discover and feel your own center of gravity, too.

Starting Position

Stand relaxed, arms at your sides, with your feet spread approximately at shoulder width so that you are standing solidly on your legs, which should be aligned with your hip joints. Your knees should be slightly bent. Keep your back straight throughout the entire exercise.

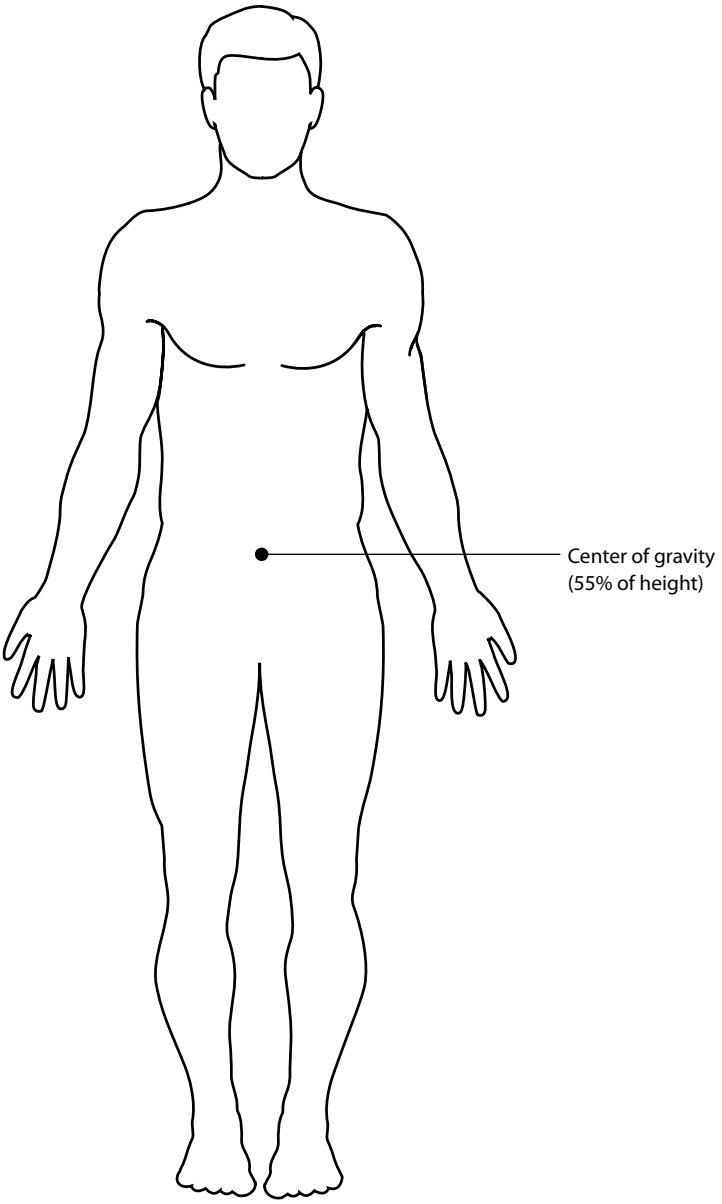


Figure 1.2 The human center of gravity.

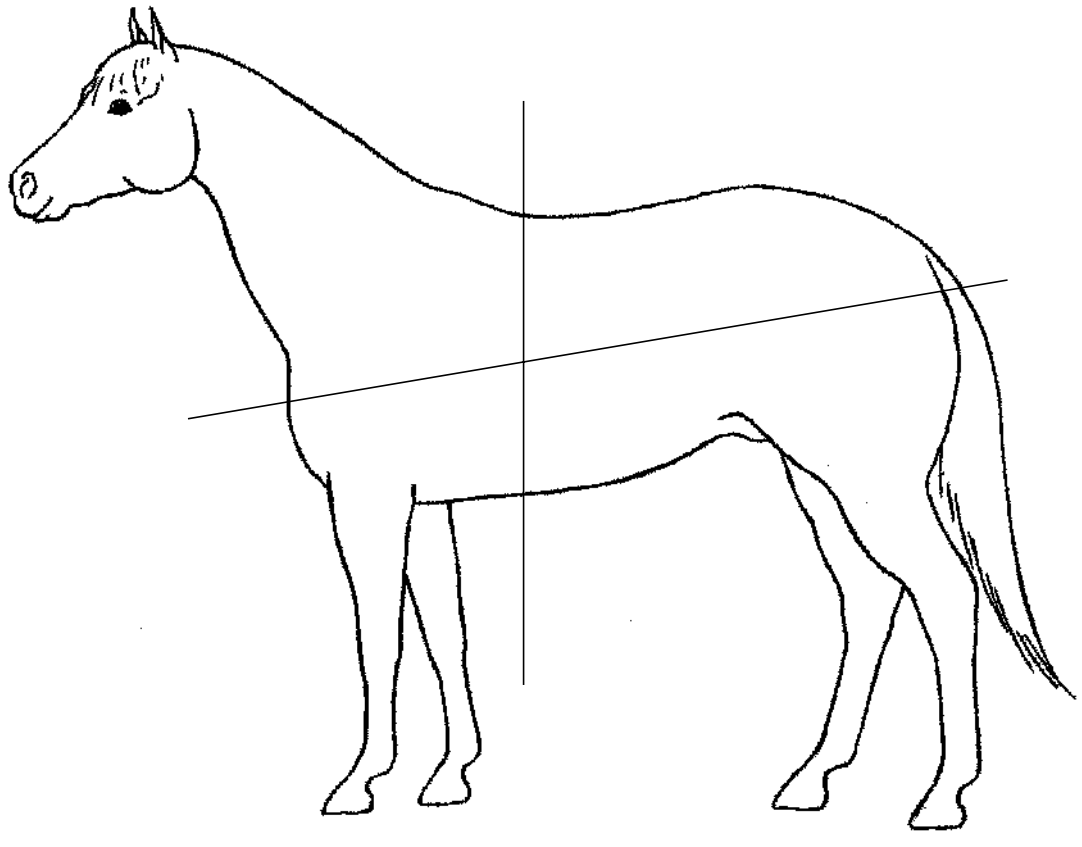


Figure 1.3 The equine center of gravity.

The Exercise

Slowly rock your body forward from your ankles until you feel your heels lifting and without losing your balance. Then rock backward in the same fashion until you feel your toes lifting off the ground, again without losing your balance. Repeat a few times until you are comfortable with your balance. Now, at the end of your last movement backward, when you reach the point where you feel the balls of your feet almost lifting off the floor, hold your position for one second. Feel the tension in your lower back, buttocks, and thighs.

Next, slowly move forward until the sensation of tension disappears. At that very point, you have reached your center of gravity. Stay there for a moment. Then twist your shoulders back and forth around the axis of your spine. This action will engage your core muscles and help you further define your center of gravity as you hold your posture.

I recommend you practice this exercise several times so that being aware of your center of gravity becomes almost second nature. The sooner you learn this technique, the sooner you will improve not only your riding seat, but your ability to do other kinds of physical exercise. Your center of gravity is also your center of energy, from which springs most of your hip and leg movements.

Maintaining Your Balance with the Horse

If an area of your body comes out of alignment, other areas will compensate in an effort to maintain a general sense of balance. The major areas of the body that can become misaligned when riding are the head, shoulders, back, and lower legs.

For example, when the head of the rider goes too far forward, the seat and torso move forward and the legs go too far back. The overall alignment is lost because the building blocks of your body are no longer supportive and in harmony with the horse's center of gravity. Leaning sideways, forward, or backward will displace the alignment of the two centers of gravity. Maintaining good alignment is essential in order to influence the horse effectively and without much effort.

The rider compensates in his shoulders, torso, back, and legs for misalignment in order to maintain his balance. The horse will also compensate for misalignment by shifting his weight to keep the

rider's weight balanced comfortably over his center of gravity while maintaining his course. All of this compensation and realignment creates extra work for your body and will tire you and your horse out more quickly, leading to a less enjoyable ride for both of you. But if you maintain good physical fitness, you are much less likely to lose your balance and can therefore avoid compensation problems.

Achieving Symmetry and Balance in Riding

A good seat requires symmetry between the sides of your body. To quickly evaluate your own posture, stand in front of a full-length mirror. Observe if your body is symmetrical or lopsided. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are my shoulders level?
- Are my hips and knees aligned?
- Are my toes facing straight ahead?

How do you rate? If your body shows some serious asymmetry, it might be time to consider contacting a physiotherapist or massage therapist to further assist you. A few good massage sessions will help you regain proper lateral symmetry. Remember that any asymmetry in the rider's body will affect the horse's training and muscular development. So, first address your posture before correcting your horse's posture.

Observing your overall balance while riding is very useful, too. If mirrors are available where you ride, you can evaluate if your body is evenly distributed on the horse by facing a mirror in the arena. Notice if the same areas of the body are level and if the stirrups are even. If no mirrors are available, have somebody take pictures of you or film you while you are riding.

Keep in mind that other factors can cause you to be off balance. An unbalanced saddle can be the cause. Also, a horse's own asymmetry can be a factor. Therefore, always make sure none of these factors are affecting your balance.

Conclusion

A good seat allows you to be relaxed, centered, aligned, symmetrical, and balanced. Developing strong core muscles creates an evenly conditioned body and prevents the buildup of tension and injuries, and reduces the incidence of mistakes.

But most important, a good seat allows you to work better from your center of gravity. This in turn helps you to align better with your horse's center of gravity. The secret of a harmonious ride is for the rider's center of gravity to move in sync with the horse's center of gravity, a position that should be maintained in all riding situations.