

The 'only' seat

The horse's choice

"Correct posture leads to the development of correct muscles – a quite ordinary horse can be transformed into a Baroque charger!"

CHAPTER 4 The 'only' seat



When it comes to dressage, there have always been people who talk about the German seat, the English seat, the Portuguese seat and so on – myself included! If, however, we examine these perceptions, it may well be that the differences are not as wide apart as we thought. As already discussed in the last chapter, the rider's seat has to change in emphasis in order to complement the horse – and this applies to flatwork as much as the other disciplines. However, one thing is very clear – there have always been good seats and there have always been bad seats!

Most of the world's best and most empathetic dressage riders sit in a very similar way, whatever their country of origin. Our own Carl Hester is a brilliant example, Kyra Kyrklund of Finland, another. Germany's Isabell Werth or Klaus Balkenhol and Austria's Artur Kottas all generally demonstrate the same proud, upright posture on their advanced, well-muscled horses. In other words, they sit centrally – the result of a vertical pelvis. As a result, their legs naturally 'hang' in such a manner as to give quiet, discreet aids. Even in passage or an extended canter, they seem very much part of the horse. So what's their secret?



ABOVE LEFT and LEFT Isabell Werth and Carl Hester sit centrally, the result of a vertical pelvis. Consequently, their legs naturally 'hang' to give quiet, discreet aids



LEFT
On the ground, it's virtually impossible to balance like this. So why do people do it when they ride?

The 'standing rider' theory

Over 2,000 years ago in ancient Greece, Xenophon, a cavalry commander, wrote: "I do not approve of a seat which is as though the man were on a chair, but rather as though he were standing upright with his legs apart."

These fundamental words sum up all the theory behind the explanations in this book. The theory of the standing rider should be a model for all forms of equitation. The rider must take responsibility for his own weight by tuning into gravity.

For the Greeks, riding was more than just a discipline for war, it was also regarded as an art in its own right. This was a time when philosophers all over the ancient world were in love with the laws of nature. Classical riding, in common with all the other arts and sciences, was embraced because it subscribed to nature's laws. It shared the

same principles of balance and symmetry – above all, it was based on logic.

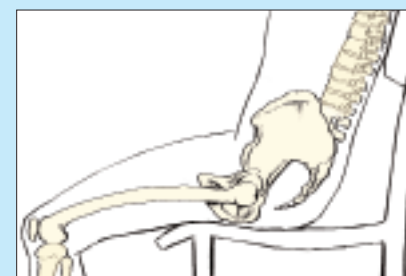
A good seat takes its principles from the standing or moving figure, which means it will be upright or forward of the vertical. On the ground, it's almost impossible to adopt either a chair seat or a collapsed, backward-leaning position without falling over. So why do people do it when they ride?

Most of us know enough about primitive man to realise we were not created to spend our lives sitting down. Instead, we were structured in a practical way to be hunter-gatherers, beautifully engineered to deal with movement. For this, we were equipped with a flexible spine, allowing supreme mobility – standing, walking, jogging, jumping and skipping all come easily to us. It is important to remember this when we ride, as the horse does all of these things, too! For jogging, read trot; for skipping, canter.

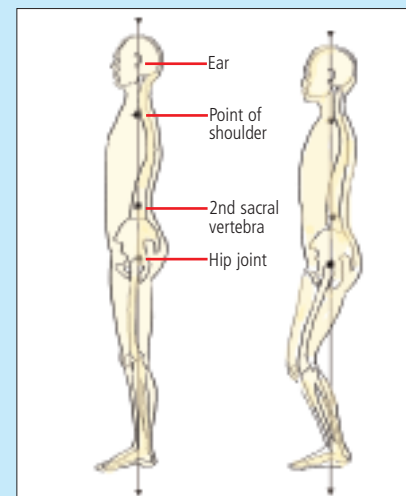
The need for good posture

Despite the fact that so many people have become sedentary creatures, developing problems such as back pain and obesity, our bodies are still highly efficient. Luckily, we have not regressed so far down the evolutionary scale that we can't revert to good athletic posture. In fact, our spines have changed little in the last 100,000 years, but they need to be treated with respect.

Riding classically has empowered many people to move more purposefully, even to the extent of improving their job prospects. There is an air of confidence that goes with good posture. It has also helped those who have always ridden the 'wrong' way, and ended up with aching loins, slipped discs and stiff rounded shoulders.



LEFT
An average person sitting slumped in a chair, with the pelvis tilted backwards



FAR LEFT
An upright position, standing correctly
LEFT
An upright position, riding correctly

BELOW
An unbalanced head can really stress the spine and pull the horse out of the movement you wish to achieve (top). Stay focused and 'with him' (bottom)

Balanced head, balanced body

The increasing popularity of Pilates and the Alexander Technique is very encouraging. Both disciplines complement classical riding. Relying on the correct abdominal muscles for upper body support, there is greater control over our limbs. The Alexander Technique also teaches that no body can be in balance without the correct head carriage – crown uppermost, neck upright, chin down, focus forward.

In riding, an unbalanced head really stresses the spine – with lower back pain not uncommon. The movement of the horse is generally blamed for bad backs in riders, but it would be more accurate to lay the blame on the rider's own position. In hunting, we often see a 'dowager's hump'. In dressage, we see countless riders sitting far behind the vertical, displaying a 'turkey nod' – both are sure recipes for back problems later in life.

Quite apart from detracting from the beauty of the horse, a rider's bobbing head position is extremely unbalancing. It is usually caused by a collapsed chest and dropped waist, which subsequently causes the spine to round and lose its elasticity. This effectively causes jarring in just about every stride. Unfortunately, however, the horse can also suffer from these rider inadequacies. A harsh seat, for example, will impact on his back, and since the rein has to make up for the lack of support in the rider's body, the horse's mouth may be abused all at the same time.





Eyes front

Keeping your neck to the back of the collar and looking between the horse's ears is also a good way to improve posture. It ensures your core is lined up with that of the horse. Remember, our eyes tell our brain exactly where we are in space, and adjustments to balance are generally made unconsciously. You may tell yourself to be in balance, but this does not mean you will be!

On the other hand, if you look where you want to go and make sure your horse is looking that way, too, you have a good chance of success. But don't forget, this needs to be done all the time. I see many riders expecting their horse to do a particular movement, but making it virtually impossible. If your gaze is not central to the horse, you won't be, too!



The horse is not an armchair

From now on, let us forget about sitting chair-like in the saddle and begin to picture the rider in a perpendicular position. Xenophon makes it quite clear – "...upright with legs apart". This is what is meant by the classical seat. Its hallmark is a proud verticality – you do not have to be a rider to recognise this. The non-equestrian visitors to the Spanish Riding School of Vienna often remark on the beautiful position of the riders.

Another important feature of the Xenophon seat was its effect on the horse. A cavalryman depended on the horse for his life – it was clearly in his best interests to make things easy for his mount. A balanced seat allowed the horse...

To use his back fully and correctly – which in turn...

- Improved his gaits, leading to greater impulsion and flexibility, which in turn...
- Made him more obedient, leading to...
- Sensitivity and immediate reactions

From the rider's point of view, a balanced seat allowed...

- Greater safety from greater depth, leading to...
- Greater control, leading to...

- Real effectiveness, leading to...
- Increased confidence

A by-product would be an appearance of ease and elegance – someone who is at one with his horse, himself and nature. You may or may not care what you look like when you ride, but there is nothing more beautiful than a correct classical seat, so that horse and rider together appear as one. It should be a case of the rider enhancing the horse and vice versa.

Health and fitness

Having had the misfortune to suffer from a seriously bad allergy all my life (I'm allergic to horses!), I spent much of my youth in and out of hospital. For a time, I gave up horses to get myself better, but I couldn't stay away for long. However, it was only when I started classical riding and learnt how to balance properly that I started to improve.

Today, I still need desensitising drugs, but my health and general fitness have improved immeasurably. My breathing is now under control and I sing in a choir. Years of teaching has also no doubt helped, especially throwing your voice down a 60-metre outdoor arena in an east coast wind! However, most of it's to do with 'opening' the upper body, which keeps the back correctly supported and allows the limbs to act easily and without tension. I put it all down to my horses and the classical seat.

So you see... There's nothing old-fashioned about it, even though it was first



written about 2,000 years ago. It's thoroughly modern and very successful. It's there for you as well as me! What's more, you don't have to have an Iberian horse to do it, nor have studied with the late Reiner Klimke, Nuno Oliveira or an Olympic gold medallist. But you do need an image in your head of how you want to ride and a desire in your heart to give yourself the time to claim it for your own.

Remember...
Riding in the classical manner not only improves your horse's posture and your own, but I strongly believe it will reflect itself in your general attitude to life. I have received many letters from people over the years, around the globe, saying how much it has helped them generally. All these things are ours for the taking – it costs nothing to change your life.

So close your eyes to the bad, look to the good and start to practise the logical. In the spirit of John Donne: "Aim for the stars and you might yet touch the moon."



ABOVE
Once you open up, the horse will round up to meet you. Think of riding the crest of the wave and feel the lightness!

LEFT
Never forget that the classical seat is a very practical seat. What's more, it is used by some of the world's most practical horsemen and women out there today – Western riders herding cattle, Spanish vaqueros on the plains, a whipper-in working his hounds