

17 Things I learned While Developing My Seat

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Recently, I was inspired to think about my “journey” in discovering an effective (enough) seat that has allowed me to progress further than I ever thought possible in my own riding. I’ve harped on riding from your seat before (see the links at the end of this article), but thinking back, I remember how I went through so many realizations as I progressed.

Here are some of the lessons learned over the years as I focused on developing my seat.

- **You use muscles you didn’t even know you had.**

I’m not exaggerating! If you’re not used to riding from the seat, the muscles you might feel the next few *days* are deep in your lower abs. Hard to access but evidently clear after a good ride!

- **Your seat is more than just your “seat”.**

The seat includes everything from above your knee to your hips. Your lower back helps a lot too.

- **The lower back is essential in freeing up your seat.**

Speaking of which, if you have a stiff lower back, you’ll tend to have a hard time using your seat effectively and in control. Place one hand in the small of your back to help isolate the region which needs to release and contract as your horse moves.

- **You can develop nerve endings in interesting places.**

As you become used to riding from the seat, you will develop an ability to “feel” the horse - his back, the movement of his hind legs, how round or hollow he is, and even the quality of your contact. Don’t ask me how it happens. I was as surprised as you will be!

- **Your seat bones can be awfully strong when used correctly.**

Try putting a hand under your seat bone while your horse is walking. First off, you’ll know if your seat bone is really moving with the horse. But also, you might actually feel the effect of your seat bone. Dressage saddles are designed to help your horse feel the seat bones through the tree, but really, all the saddles will allow similar communication regardless of style.

- **You can walk on your seat bones much like you walk on your legs.**

Have you ever tried that? As the horse walks, “walk” on your seatbones. Don’t sway your hips side to side though - step forward and back in each seat bone in rhythm with the horse’s belly swing.

- **The horse really appreciates being ridden from the seat.**

My mare, Annahi, was the first horse to “tell” me about it. She changed so much, so dramatically, after my first few attempts, that I was sold immediately. In those early stages, “finding my seat” was quite difficult though, so I would be effective for a few strides and then not again for quite a while.

- **You can see the results of the effective seat more than you can see the seat being used.**

The seat aid is mostly a feeling between you and your horse. While it is a definite aid and you certainly can use it intentionally, it would be difficult for an observer on the ground to actually see what you did with your seat. However, the horse’s response is clearly evident when you know what to look for.

- **Legs come second after the seat aids.**

If you’re used to going to the legs first, you might find it difficult to switch to the seat-leg progression. But when you do, and you feel how well your horse can move underneath you, you’ll get plenty of incentive to work at it. Seat first. Then legs and everything else.

- **There is more than just one way to use your seat.**

There is the passive seat, the driving seat, the restricting seat, the light seat, the heavy seat. I’m sure there’s more. Each takes time to develop.

- **You can shape your horse’s outline from your seat better than from your hands.**

It doesn’t matter how hard you pull or crank or grab with the hands - the “roundness” of a horse comes from your ability to shape the horse’s energy - you guessed it - through the seat.

- **The seat can control the horse’s tempo in a given gait.**

It’s not about the hands. (Did I say that already?) Regulate your horse’s footfalls by either going with the horse or resisting for just a moment longer to slow the legs. You’ll be amazed at how easily a horse will respond if you can be aware of your own tempo.

- **You can use both seat bones together at the same time, or alternate left-right, or focus mainly one just one.**

Well, this took me about two years to master well enough to be able to do it at will. I’m not sure if it takes everyone that long, but it took a lot of concerted effort on my part to be able to “separate” my seat bones at the right time, in the right way. But I’m here to tell you that it can

be done, and both you and your horse will be happier for it. Then your communication can be even more precise.

- **You can invite your horse to swing in the back by lifting your seat.**

If you swing in your back, your horse will have an easier time swinging in his back. I'm not sure if "lifting your seat" is the best way to describe it, but it isn't exactly like you lighten the seat (as in, perch or hover over the top of the saddle). You actually suck your seat up into your body in such a way that you invite the horse's back to come up and forward with the energy created by the hind end. Difficult to learn initially but again, you will reap rewards once you find it.

- **The seat helps you maintain quieter aids.**

The more developed seat is the one that can balance the rest of the body as the horse moves. People often speak of developing an "independent seat" - which means that it can "talk" to the horse without causing a disruption of the other aids. Developing a quiet and independent seat is a prerequisite for being able to turn down the strength of your hands, legs and upper body.

- **There is no replacement to being lunged to develop a good seat.**

I hate to tell you, but this is the truth. There's a reason that the "famous" riding schools lunged their students on experienced school masters. We don't get to see much of lunging these days, but if you are lucky enough to have a horse and instructor willing to do it, jump at the chance! You should be able to develop a basic, secure seat with just one lesson a week over a six month period. It's that powerful. If you can do more, it's time well spent.

- **You can never finish developing your seat.**

I guess it's like anything that takes a lifetime (or two) to master. You will happily celebrate each level of achievement as you develop your seat, but deep down, you'll realize especially as you become better that there is so much left for you to learn and discover.

This last point is probably the most important. Like many other things related to horses, there is no end to the levels you can get to, especially when it comes to riding with the seat. I know I'm at a certain level of effectiveness when it comes to riding from the seat. I also know that I have a whole lot more to learn. (Can I have the second lifetime after I'm done with this one??). I've watched even Grand Prix level riders improve in their seat over the years - I don't think you ever stop learning.