

BODY POSITION AND GAIT

PART III

ENTER THE RIDER

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If horses use certain body positions to do certain gaits what does that mean to the average rider? Very simply, it means that if a rider can somehow cause a horse to use the right body position, he can make that horse do whatever gait he wants. Naturally, there will be some limitations in what any given rider can do with any given horse. As we have seen, conformation will play a large part in which gaits a horse will be likely to do, as will muscle/tendon/ligament flexibility, condition and mental willingness. I sincerely doubt that anyone could have made Secretariat do a rack, even if he had wanted to do one, simply because he was not built and muscled to do that gait. Similarly, I am not sure that all hard-core pacers can be convinced to do a fox trot, rack or running walk since they are built and mentally "wired" to pace. However, the majority of gaited-bred horses, if they are willing and able to respond to a rider's cues, can do the gaits requested of them. The trick is for the rider to use the cues that produce the body position needed for the gait he wants to do.

THE TOOLS OF THE TRADE -- AND HOW TO USE THEM

What can a rider use to position a horse's body? The major tool available to any rider is his own body. The way he sits, the way he holds and uses his hands, the way he uses his legs, even the way he leans his weight, these are called the "natural aids" and can work for a skillful rider to affect the way a horse holds himself. In addition, a horse's position is affected by the use of different bits and different types of saddles. These can either complement or work against the way a rider uses his body, depending on design. How can a rider use his body to influence the position of a horse?

1. THE SEAT: It is pretty obvious that a rider sits on a horse's back. As we saw last time, the position of a horse's back changes from gait to gait. In some gaits, such as the pace and rack, the back is hollow. In some others, such as the fox trot and trot, the back is neutral, tending to round. Since the whole of the horse's back, from withers to lumbo-sacral junction is somewhat flexible, the exact position of the rider's weight on that back can make the horse either more or less hollow.

Leaning back: We have all heard that the strongest part of the horse's back is just behind the withers. The weakest (and most likely to sag downward under weight) is the loin area, also called the lumbar span. This is the area stretching from the last rib to the sacrum. The more weight a horse carries over this span of unsupported vertebrae, the more likely he is to travel with a "hollow", concave back, and the more likely he is to do a lateral gait in the pace family or a rack. So, if a rider sits back on a horse, either physically placing his weight backward or sitting in a saddle designed to place his weight towards the rear, he will encourage the horse to do one of these gaits. The gait he will get from the horse will depend on how he shifts his weight backward, and the conformation and inclination of the horse.

HOW TO DO IT: You can shift your weight to the rear in a couple of ways:

You can lean your whole upper torso backwards, with your legs "on the dashboard" in front of you.

You can keep your torso more or less vertical while you rotate your pelvis forward, tucking your buttocks a bit under you and sitting with your tailbone pressed to the saddle in a position sometimes called a "braced back."

If you lean back with your torso you will cause more of a hollow in the horse's back at the lumbar region than you will if you simply tuck your rear under yourself, and you are most likely to get a rack or a pace if you sit leaning back. This is the position you often see used on Icelandics at the tolt, on racking horses, and on big lick Walking horses. It is usually combined with high hands to produce those gaits. It can work well on those horses as long as they are not too strongly inclined to
pace, in which case shoeing techniques may come into play to get the right gear.

The rear tucking method of displacing weight to the rear is less likely to produce a pace, but is more difficult since you need strong lower back muscles to shift into it. This only works when the muscles of the back and loin of the horse have been strengthened through exercise. It is used by some Dressage riders to encourage a horse to push harder with his hindquarters in the extended gaits. This position can be used to ask for longer stride in Walking Horses and Fox Trotters if they have been physically conditioned to respond to it. Shifting the weight to the rear is usually made easier by using a cut-back saddle designed to put your legs in front of your seat, or by using a western saddle with stirrups hung forward and a padded hump in the front portion of the seat. If you want to ride a rack, big lick running walk or pace you will have an easier time of it if you use a saddle that helps you shift your weight to the rear.

Sitting in the middle: If, instead of sitting with his weight shifted to the rear, a rider sits in the middle of the horse's back, just behind the withers, with the support of the rib cage to help keep the back from sagging under his weight, he will be in a position to cue the horse to round his back or to travel with it in a neutral position. Sitting in that position, with his own weight aligned so that his head, shoulder, hip and heel form a straight line, he is most in tune with the natural balance of the horse, and least likely to make the horse's back hollow. This position, which is difficult in saddles not designed for it, is most useful for riding the running walk, fox trot, and some of the paso gaits.

HOW TO DO IT: To sit straight in the saddle you need to carry your weight evenly on your seat bones, with your chest and shoulders raised and your legs hanging straight under your body with an open angle at your hip, a slight bend in your knees, and a relaxed ankle, keeping your toes just slightly higher than your heels. This position is sometimes called the "balanced seat" or the "dressage seat". It is also the one most often used in western equitation. In addition to placing your weight over the strongest part of the horse's back, it allows you to slightly shift your weight to the front by tilting your pelvis so that the front part of your crotch touches the saddle, or to shift it slightly to the rear by straightening your lower back and tilting your pelvis forward so that your buttocks are tucked a bit under you. (Not as strongly tucked under as in the weight to the rear position.) This versatility allows you to ride in a slightly weight forward position if you need to make your horse move more diagonally (make him more "trotty" to overcome a pace) or a slightly weight-to-the-rear position if you want to make him move more laterally (less "trotty" or less square to move him into a running walk or fox trot) or to extend his stride. The straight seat works well on a horse that tends to both pace and trot, since from it you can shift either forward or back to change his back position to one either more or less likely to produce a lateral or diagonal gait. It is most often seen on Paso Finos, Fox Trotters and Plantation Walkers, but because of its versatility, it can be used with success on any gaited horse. It is easiest to use this seat in an English all-purpose saddle or dressage saddle, an "equitation" cut-back or in a western "balanced ride" style saddle with a flat seat. Jumping saddles, most cut-backs, and western "cutting style" saddles

make this seat difficult to use, since they are specifically designed to put a rider's rear towards the hindquarters of the horse.

Sitting forward: While the straight seat and the backward leaning seat allow the rider to influence the horse's back position with his weight, the forward leaning seat is designed to get his weight off the back of the horse as much as possible. In the forward position, a rider's body is carried over the shoulders of the horse, allowing the horse a great degree of freedom in his use of his back. With a rider in this position a horse may round his back or travel in a neutral position, but he is very unlikely to travel with a hollow back unless his conformation determines that he must. On gaited horses, the forward seat almost always produces the hard trot. It is useful for working a horse that prefers to pace, since it helps condition his back, and it is also useful for conditioning a horse for longer stride.

HOW TO DO IT: The forward seat is the one used by hunter/jumper riders and by those who do competitive trail and endurance riding. They use it because it frees up a horse's back, helping him jump well and carry weight with less fatigue. To use it, you will need slightly shorter stirrups than used for the straight seat, adjusted so that when you stand in them you clear the saddle by about four inches. Rotate your pelvis so that you are sitting on the front part of your crotch, with your upper body inclined forward from the waist. Your legs stay under your hips, but your shoulders should be almost over your knees. This position is not seen much in gaited horses, although some people ride Fox Trotters while leaning forward, with their legs straight, and their heels behind their hips. This position is only useful during the training of some gaited horses.

2. THE HANDS: The way a rider holds his hands and the bit he uses determines the way the horse will carry his head and neck. As we saw last time, the position of the neck and head are an important element in the different gaits, a high head and a hollow neck being required for the pace and rack and a lower head and rounded neck being necessary in some other gaits. This is not a discussion on bits, but it is important to remember that the use of a curb or gag bit will make a horse likely to carry his head high in the air and less likely to show a rounded, stretched neck. He may tuck his nose down and arch his neck at the poll in one or those bits, but he will usually show a dip at the base of his neck where it attaches to the withers, a sign of a hollow neck. A snaffle, on the other hand, will usually cause a horse to lower his neck and stretch it out, a position which may or may not reflect a rounded body position.

High hands: The old phrase is "high hands, high head" and it is true. If a rider holds his hands at his waist or above it in the classic "saddle seat" position, his horse will necessarily have a high head and a hollow neck. This is useful for the rack, pace (stepping pace), most paso gaits, and the big lick running walk, which we have already mentioned as being done in a hollow position. It is not so useful for riding a fox trot or true trot, or for riding the running walk.

Low Hands: Obviously, if high hands give a high head and neck carriage, low ones produce a lower head and a neck that is more likely to be rounded in position. Hands held below the pommel of the saddle are useful for changing a horse from one of the hollow gaits into either the fox trot, trot, or running walk, since they allow the rider to put the horse in a neutral to round body frame. Low hands are not much good for the rack, most paso gaits, the pace, or the big lick running walk.

Medium Hands: Most riders hold their hands at a height just above the pommel of the saddle, about even with their hip bones. This height is useful for many gaits since it allows the horse to carry his neck in a neutral to round position, but can, combined with weight cues, allow for a hollow neck position and a high head as well.

3. THE LEGS: For gaited work, leg cues are usually confined a brief squeeze from the thighs and calves to ask the horse to "move forward" although there are plenty of other signals possible from the legs of a rider to a receptive horse. What is often missed in using leg cues is that the placement of the legs while they are given can either help a horse to round his back by tightening his abdominal muscles, or encourage him to travel hollow by failing to make him use those muscles. The way leg cues are given depends directly on the seat you are using. If you use the "chair" backward leaning seat, your legs will contact the horse forwards on his torso, moving him forwards but leaving the abdominal muscles unstimulated. If you use the forward seat, your legs will also tend to work on the front part of the horse's torso, again leaving the abdominal muscles alone. In the straight seat, however, your legs will contact the side of the horse just at the point where the abdominals attach, and the squeezing action of the thighs and calves will cause them to tighten, helping the horse to round his back and upper body.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

When you ride a horse, you use your weight, your seat, your legs and your hands all at once. By using these aids you can ask your horse for degrees of hollowness or roundness, depending on what gait you want to do. You can raise his head while asking him to keep his back neutral and get him to do a running walk when he had been fox trotting. You can lower and round his neck, keeping his back neutral, and change him from a running walk into a fox trot. You can keep his head high, shift your weight to the rear to make him hollow in his back and change him from a running walk to a rack. You can keep his head high and his neck hollow, dipping just before the withers, shift your weight forward to lessen the hollow in his back, and convert him from a largo to a paso corto. You can lower his head just a bit, keep your weight centered, moving neither forward or back in the saddle, and change the corto into a paso llano or a running walk. Not all horses will be able to do all of these gaits, since not all of them will be physically able to respond to these cues, but you should be able to see by now how you can get a horse to stop doing a gait you don't want and start doing one you do by teaching him to use the body position for the preferred gait.

Now all you have to do is learn to tell one gait from another, learn the body position necessary for the gait you want, teach your horse to understand the cues necessary for that body position, and condition him so that he can respond when you ask for that gait. And you thought riding gaited horses was going to be easy?! In part IV we will identify the gaits and the aids for each.

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