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## **Three Powerful Exercises to Develop Your Equestrian Skills**

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As with any exercise or riding program, if at any point during your workout you begin to feel unwell, faint, dizzy, or have physical discomfort, you should stop immediately and consult a physician.

These exercises may not be for everyone. Take the ones

Exercise and horseback riding are not without its risks and this or any other exercise program may result in injury. The exercises and advice outlined in this book are meant to be fun and performed on suitable horses under supervision of a knowledgeable instructor/coach. You are performing these exercises at your own risk.

that fit into your personal program and can safely perform with your horse. Do not perform these exercises if you or your horse are not suitable for the exercises. This program is meant as a guide to help riders develop their position and trying to reproduce the actions may result in injury. Do these exercises at your own risk.

# Basic Riding Position

## Introduction

To become a better rider you have to have a good base. This means a secure leg and a strong independent seat.

We've all seen those riders who magically get their horses to seamlessly perform without any effort. It may be a beautiful hunter round, jumper course, dressage or western reining or pleasure. How do they do it?

Most of us have all the tools to become a good rider in our first year of riding. We have, if we have instruction from a qualified and knowledgeable coach, most of the key skills any rider will need.

A riding instructor can teach a rider the basic requirements

of a correct riding position in about a year. It is the practice and determination which determines your success.

Take car driving for example. I know how to drive a car and dare say I learned most of the technical parts of car driving within a single 'drivers education' course.

The basic skill of car driving is taught through different programs and most conclude within a year. The basics of driving can be taught within that time. The skill required for me to be a world class race driver or rally driver, however, takes years and years of skilled practice. As they say:

*"Practice doesn't make perfect, perfect practice makes perfect".*

## What is a Good Basic Position?

Riders should not make up basic riding positions. Instructors use a classic form and model their students after the correct classic form. The basic, safe, secure, [riding position](#) is fundamentally the same in each of the equestrian disciplines. The underlying fact is you have to be in balance and stay in balance with your horse.

*You have to **be** in balance and **stay** in balance with your horse.*

To [improve your position](#) your separate body parts have to move independently from each other. Your left arm has to be independent from your right arm and independent from your left leg.

Here are two tips to help you keep your body in balance on a horse:

1. **Straight line - ear - shoulder - hip - heel.**

By keeping this straight line you will be in balance with your horse. The weight from your head drops right down into the deepest part of your position, your foot and heel. This will provide you with a good base and keep you balanced and secure in the saddle.

If you tip forward in front of the vertical, you will disturb the ear, shoulder, hip, heel balance and you will put the horse off balance and also put yourself off balance. When you tip forward you put your weight onto your thigh thus making the weight come off your seat and out of your legs.

When you lean back behind the vertical you distribute the weight onto the weakest part of the horse, the loins,

just behind the saddle and, usually, use the bit/reins/horse's mouth to balance and get your seat out of the saddle.

2. **Straight line - elbow - hand - horse's mouth.**

It is important to have a straight line from your elbow to the horse's mouth to ensure a correct and secure contact with the horse. Having hands which are too high will act on wrong part of the horse's mouth and will put the rest of your position out of balance.

Hands which are too low, below the line from your elbow to the horse's mouth will also act on the wrong part of the mouth, usually the bars of the mouth, and carrying your hands down low will cause other riding errors such as hunched shoulders and straight arms with no bend at the elbow.

## Develop a Solid Base

A rider's base of support is the first and fundamental aspect of the riders tool box. It is essential that all riders have a good foundation. Just like a building structure needs a foundation to build on, a rider needs a foundation for their [basic riding position](#).

The foundation of a rider's position is their leg and seat. Without a strong leg and seat your position will be weak. From heel to pelvis the rider has to be balanced and secure. A rider which stays in balance and has a good base of support and secure leg will rarely become unseated.

To begin you should sit with your seat in the deepest part of the saddle, legs are hanging down and relaxed at the horses sides.

The joints of the hip knee and ankle are supple with the stirrup resting comfortably on the balls of the feet. It really is that simple!

It is not just "put your heels down" that makes for a strong leg, it is the balance and form of the leg that determines the strength. You can have your heels down and not be effective or secure. Lowering your heels is important as this allows the weight to be distributed throughout and lowers the weight to its deepest part.

*The foundation of a rider's position is their leg and seat.*

## Correct Leg Position

A good leg position is characterized by a deep and secure heel with the toes pulled up. The leg has to envelop the horse in a secure but relaxed fashion with equal tension resting throughout the leg in contact with the saddle.

The leg should hang naturally from the hip with the toe pulled up and the heel comfortably under the riders seat. Some common problems are:

- the heel shooting out in front of the rider, a chair seat
- the leg slipping back
- loose leg

Sometimes when people ride and hear 'heels down' they jam their heels down and forward and stick their heels out in front of them. Your leg should remain in place approximately 1 hands breadth behind the girth. If you put your leg further back your horse will let you know it is too far back as it may cause a sensitive horse to kick out or run away and will cause a rider to tip forward with a pinched knee.

***Tips to Stay in Balance With Your Horse:***  
***Straight line - Elbow – Hand – Horse's Mouth***  
***Straight Line - Ear – Shoulder – Hip - Heel***



## Three Powerful Exercises To Develop Your Position

Riding exercises while on horseback has been a tried and true method of developing an independent seat. Take a look at these 5 compelling reasons to spend 5 minutes at the beginning of your training session dedicated to strictly improving your riding position:

1. Develop your independent seat.
2. Get your horse used weight shifts on his back.
3. Enhance your flexibility.
4. Increase your strength.
5. Lower your chance of injury.

Each time you ride dedicate a portion of your 'on horse time' to improving your position. Take 5 minutes at the beginning of your ride and enhance the development of your riding position.

It may be as simple as incorporating position corrections into your ride. Try something as simple as doing a few toe touches or more challenging work like riding without stirrups.

***Dedicate 5 minutes of each ride to develop your position.***

## Safety First

Before beginning any mounted exercises please ensure:

- The **saddle fits the horse** correctly.
- The **saddle fits you** correctly.
- The **horse is suitable** for mounted exercises.

For safety considerations, have a friend or knowledgeable horse person with you while starting these exercises. If you are concerned your horse may not accept your performing these exercises, please be sensible and perform them on a suitable horse.

### **Safety Tip**

***Make sure :***

***The saddle fits the horse correctly***

***The saddle fits you correctly***

***The horse is suitable***

## Exercise 1 – Develop Your “Heels down”

Balance in your stirrups with your bum just touching the saddle. You can use your two-point or jumping position. Perform this at the halt, walk, trot and canter. Be sure that you are not leaning on the horse’s neck or worse, using the reins and the horse’s mouth or reins for balance.

It is an easy exercise and I know you may find more difficult exercises to do. This exercise, however, will develop your ability to balance and control your balance while on the horse.

1. First stand up in your stirrups with your seat hovering and lightly brushing your saddle.
2. Then let the weight drop down past your foot right into your heel. Keep this position while at the halt, trot and canter.

This exercise will also develop your strength in your quads/thighs and core necessary to help to keep you sturdy and secure on the horse. You may find this exercise hardest to perform at the halt!

*Balance in your stirrups to enhance your balance and strengthen your legs*

## Exercise 2 – Improve Your Flexibility with Toe Touches

While halted remove your feet from the stirrups and touch your right hand to your right toe.

Stretch your right hand above your head with your fingers pointed upward and then bending from your waist, reach down and touch your toe. It is imperative that your left leg remain completely still. When bending down to touch your toe, keep both legs still by stretching your heels down and forward.

Do not allow your leg to swing back but control the position of both legs. Repeat 10 times on each side.

*It is imperative to keep your leg still when reaching down to touch your toes.*

## Exercise 3 – Find Your Centre In The Saddle

To perform this exercise, remove your feet from the stirrups and lean forward to touch your chin to the horse's mane. Then, sit up correctly and in one motion lean back on the horse's back.

Just as in the above toe touch exercise lean forward until your chin touches the horse's mane. While doing this find the 'tipping point', the point where you can no longer hold yourself up. This is the front extension of your balance.

Now, sit up straight and feel your balance in the centre of the saddle.

Next, lean back as far as you can. In the golden days of yesteryear I could have leaned way back and had my head laying on the horse's rump. However, these days and many years later I lean only enough to find my centre and my balance point.

If you can, lean back far enough to touch your helmet to the croup of the horse or as far back as you can. Some riders get enough of a feeling from leaning back at about 45 degrees. Please be aware of your horse, some horses may not want you to lean back on their rumps.

It is important to keep your legs in the correct riding position. When leaning back keep your legs under your seat. Most riders allow their legs to swing out in front of them when they are leaning back.

Once you have leaned back, then sit up again. This is a great exercise for strengthening your stomach muscles. Laying back on your horse and sitting up again isolates the core muscles you need for riding.

Control your legs by stretching your legs down and back underneath your seat. These exercises will help develop an independent seat necessary for riding.

This exercise has two main functions:

1. To show you where your “tipping point” is.
2. To stretch and strengthen your muscles you need for riding.

*Leaning forward and back in the saddle will help you  
find your centre and help strengthen your legs.*

## Summary

Including these simple exercises will help you improve your riding position. Incorporate work without stirrups and exercises at the beginning of your training session to warm up yourself before your ride. If you find that your horse will not stand, then try doing these stretches during the cool down of your program.

**Above all, have fun.**

**Do you have an exercise you would like to share with us? I'd love to hear from you. Please send me [an email](mailto:thistleridge@hotmail.com) to [thistleridge@hotmail.com](mailto:thistleridge@hotmail.com)**

**Thank you,**

**Laura - Thistle Ridge Stables**

*If you dedicate some time to just your position your horse will thank you for it.*



## Extra - Equitation Tips

### What The Judge Is Looking For

The judge has a few precious minutes to make a decision on the winner of a class. When I judge an equitation class the first thing the I zeros in on is the lower leg and heel.

If your heel is up and insecure then there is no need to look any further. Unless there are other major issues in the class I will avoid using a rider which has an insecure lower leg.

A secure lower leg is characterized by a deep heel which anchors the riders body on the horse.

### From the Judges Perspective

When judging, the judge wants to see a deep secure heel. When I judge, I look for a rider with an educated leg and secure heel. If your heel isn't down and secure I will pass over you and look for the next person with a deep secure heel.

**The heel must be down** and lower leg securely on the horse's side without the leg 'clamping' against the horse's side. If your weight is on your toe, with heels up, it is not secure and your leg will be loose at the trot and canter.

**Less is more for the equitation ring**. If your leg is moving and you are losing your stirrups it draws attention to your leg. If I notice your leg wiggling, it means, to me, your leg is insecure and I, as a judge, will look for a person with a secure-independent leg.

**Pay attention to turnout**. Your jacket, breeches and boots need to be clean and in good repair. they do not have to be new and the latest style. Loose hair and floppy braids attract unnecessary attention. Use a hairnet or keep your hair neatly stowed in the overhead compartment (aka your helmet!)

## **Ride!**

Ride! Judges hate seeing riders pose on top of their horses. You should be effective and ride your horse. Bending, smooth transitions, and being aware of what is going on around you are all part of the picture. It is more than getting the correct diagonal. Looking around corners, collecting and/or lengthening your horses stride are all part of the picture. As a judge I would like to see riders show me what they can do. At the local and introductory levels it is about being on the correct diagonal and looking around the corners. At the higher levels judges want to see riders RIDE!

## About the Author - Laura Kelland-May

Owner of [Thistle Ridge Stables](#) and developer of the [Thistle Ridge Skill Builders Show Clinics](#). Thistle Ridge Skill Builders on Facebook is a Top Ten Finalist in the Equestrian Social Media Awards. I know that is a mouthful, but it's important! Living in rural a rural area where neighbours are spread out, there were few opportunities for local riders to show and bring along young horses, or for students to learn how to show.

Not to let the grass grow under her feet Laura developed a Skill Builders series so local riders would not have to trailer significant distances. To teach competitors what the rules of showing and to enlighten them regarding what the judge was looking for, the Skill Builders format offered direct comments back from the judge.

“A clinic with ribbons”, is what Laura calls it and the [Skill Builder Series](#) was born. Here competitors rider their courses and receive comments back from the judge as to why they placed. Over the years competitors, coaches, trainers and parents have benefited by knowing and learning [what the judge is looking](#) for.

To back up the Show Clinic Laura has 20 years of [Senior Judges experience](#) having obtained her Senior Status in 1989 and continues to judge at local shows as well as National Competitions.

## More of Laura's Books Available

### **20+ Exercises to Improve Your Riding Position**

Do you want to be a better rider in 30 days? Learn the secrets that top trainers know. Perform some of the easiest and effective exercises to get your riding position where you want it to be. Follow the simple program outlined in this book and you will be a better rider in 30 days; or possibly sooner!

We've all seen those riders who magically get their horses to seamlessly perform without any effort. It may be a beautiful hunter round, jumper course, dressage or western reining or pleasure. How do they do it?

With this simple outline I hope to offer you some important strategies to improve your overall riding ability and get noticed for your riding style. If you've got 30 days then this book will help you enhance your riding skills.

Get these 20+ exercises and variations of exercises to add to your arsenal of horseback riding techniques.

### **Take Charge of Your Circles – Discover an Easier Way to Supple Your Horse**

Discover powerful exercises which will straighten your horse in 15 minutes a day or less. Unleash your horse's power by riding your horse correctly.

With our hands, legs and seat we can develop and train our horses to make them strong and supple. By creating exercises for our horse, and performing these exercises, we will supple, strengthen and develop our horses to become stronger, better athletes.

### **Gymnastic Jumping – Discover the Secrets, Improve your Horse Over Fences**

Gymnastic jumps are a series of poles and obstacles set at certain distances to allow horses and riders to develop their

ability and form over fences. By using poles and jumps at set distances riders can develop their form, balance, position, strength, feel, balance, straightness and suppleness.

Gymnastic jumping tests riders of all levels and abilities. From beginner riders and advanced horsemen, systematic gymnastic progress can build up a green horse into a grand prix contender.