

We all have quirks in our riding position
- it's what you do to improve that counts!

A position of influence

How we sit on our horses has a huge affect on their way of going, but you can address positional faults, as biomechanics expert Russell Guire explains

Vertical line through ear, shoulder, hip and heel

Straight line from elbow to the bit



Horses are amazing creatures, but by getting on their backs we place real physical demands on them - horses aren't designed to be ridden, and we aren't designed to be riders.

When considering how we affect our horses, it's important to remember that horses want to stay upright and balanced - for a prey animal, falling over is something they really don't want to do.

Horses also don't have a collarbone, their scapula and, therefore, the forelegs are only attached by muscle. We sit right above this area, which means we can have a huge influence, both negative and positive.

A simple way to picture how easy it is for us to influence our horses is to imagine you've got someone sitting on your shoulders. If they sat or tipped to the right, you'd need to move to the right or you'd both fall over, and our horses have to do exactly the same.

Often people think they are straight or even in the saddle but it's very rare for someone to be straight, and their horse will have to adjust for every stride. We're all asymmetrical - it's nothing to be afraid of, it's what you do to improve things so you can help yourself and your horse that matters.

Four common position faults

While everyone's position is individual, there are four major areas where problems commonly appear. I designed my Visualise jackets to help riders identify and address these issues - the lines help highlight any imbalances or crookedness. If you've not got mirrors in your schooling area, why not ask your trainer or a friend to video you so you can take action today?



OUR EXPERT

RUSSELL GUIRE is an expert in equine and human biomechanics, and is the founder of Centaur Biomechanics, which specialises in horse and rider performance analysis. He works with top riders through the British Equestrian Federation, as well as helping riders of all levels. Read more at www.centaurbiomechanics.co.uk

Tackle poor pelvic control

Good pelvic control is vital for interacting well with your horse. I think of the pelvis as a bowl of water, which has to go through various planes of movement as your horse moves to prevent it all spilling out. A common problem is riding with the pelvis tilted forward, which creates a hollow in your lower back, spilling the water out the front - riders who do this often have lower back pain.

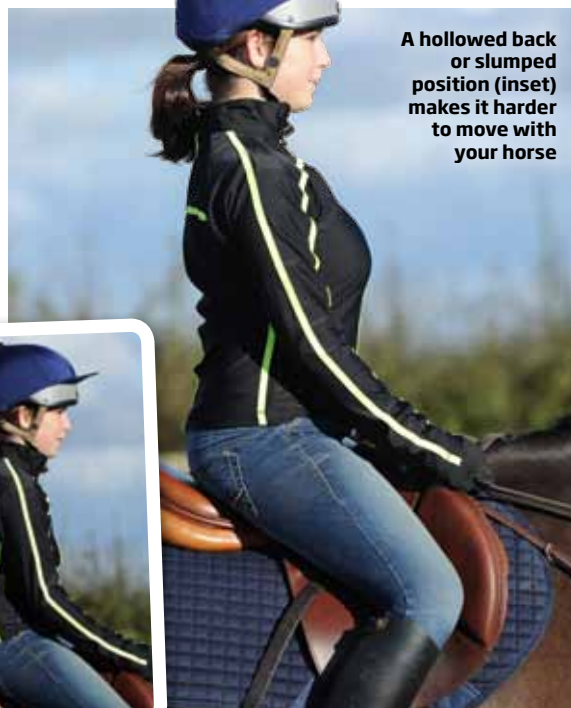
If you find you're riding like this, think about drawing your belly button in towards your spine to relax your pelvis. A great way to get your pelvis moving is to ride without stirrups, thinking about relaxing and letting your legs drop so they hang long.

Another problem is tipping forward in the saddle, which really affects your horse. His weight is naturally split 60/40 between his forehead and hindquarters - if you're slouched forward your weight falls onto his

forehand, whereas for most disciplines you want it carried behind.

In tackling this, we need to understand how everyday activities such as working at a desk create body asymmetry. Riding is just one hour out of our day, so if your posture is poor the rest of the time you'll be fighting a losing battle. Concentrate on good posture throughout your day, and take active steps to improve yourself - pilates, yoga and physiotherapy are all great.

Postural weakness is often the cause of riders collapsing through the core but it can also be the result of fear - I call it the ejet position. Your brain is the most important thing in riding so it's important to try to understand the psychology.



A hollowed back or slumped position (inset) makes it harder to move with your horse



Improve arm and hand position

How you carry your hands and arms has a huge impact because it's actually invasive for your horse - via the bit - if you get it wrong. Just as the ideal body position should see a straight line drop through your ear, shoulder, hip and heel, the correct arm and hand position should see a straight line run from your elbow to your horse's bit, with your hands positioned so your thumbs are on top.

If you carry your hands like you're playing the piano, or have your elbows stuck out or tucked in, you're applying negative pressure to the bit, you get ineffective rein contact and can end up bracing against your horse and setting up a restriction - instead aim for soft arms, with your elbow relaxed and carried level with or slightly in front of your body, not behind.



Incorrect arm or hand carriage will interrupt your communication with your horse

Identify and even out crookedness



Unevenness can be subtle or pronounced, but always has an effect on your horse

Collapsing to one side, or sitting with your weight uneven between your seat bones, has an effect on you and your horse. He'll become less flexible, and your muscles will become shorter on your collapsed side, leaving you permanently crooked. To assess yourself, in a safe space take your feet out of your stirrups - ask a friend to pop you on a loose lead rein if you prefer. Close your eyes and see where your horse goes - his direction indicates the side you're over to.

Lunge exercises are very useful. Take your stirrups away and ride with your arms out, your hands on your head or behind your back - these all open your upper body and help improve suppleness through your seat, too. The more you do to be strong in your body, the better, so consider working on imbalances out of the saddle - again, yoga and pilates are both great.

Gripping with the knees

Lower leg position affects your security and effectiveness in the saddle. Your leg runs from your hip to your foot, but if you grip with your knees (often shown as your toes pointing down) you lose the use of lower part of your leg, which you need to use to encourage your horse to engage his core, lift up through his belly and back and work properly.

Loosen stiff knees by lifting your leg up and bringing it out away from the saddle, making a circle motion with your knee while you're walking - ask a friend to lead you or practice on the lunge. This will also help if you find your toes pointing out instead of forwards, or imagine pointing your toes towards your horse's ears. 🐾

LEARN MORE

Check out our winter warm-up feature on page 44 for some great exercises that will get you supple and help you be strong in the saddle