

Lunge your way to a better seat

Greater balance, suppleness and a more effective position are just a few notable benefits of riding on the lunge. Biomechanics expert **Russell Guire** reveals the exercises that will transform how you sit

IF YOU LEARNT to ride several decades ago, you'll remember having a lesson on the lunge. Going around in circles at all paces, without stirrups and raising your arms in the air. Feeling aching limbs as you dismount, but instantly finding an improvement in your position. Yep, that's the one.

These days, riding on the lunge isn't used so much, despite it being a valuable tool. Russell Guire from Centaur Biomechanics is keen to change this and encourages everyone to have a lunge lesson.

"There's so many benefits to having lunge lessons," he says. "It improves

the rider's seat, balance and stability in the saddle. By taking away the reins and stirrups – I like to call these your 'stabilisers' – you have to focus on using your core to maintain a better position."

Russell adds that a lunge lesson should be kept to a maximum of 20 minutes long and both you and your horse should warm up off the lunge first. Use your usual warm-up routine to ensure your horse is loosened up and on your aids before lunging.

Russell also recommends using side-reins to encourage your horse to maintain a consistent outline. Once attached, your horse's nose should be on the vertical – ask an instructor for help initially, because it's important they're used correctly.

“Imagine your pelvis is a bowl full of water. Your aim is to keep the water in the bowl”

Adopt the Spanish way

Having a good seat is simply a way of life for riders at the Spanish Riding School (SRS). The core of its programme is a focus on improvement, and lunge lessons are at the heart of achieving this.

The rider must be supple and effective with his aids and be able to move each body part independently. All work is done without reins and once a new rider has mastered rising trot, the stirrups are taken away too. They'll then spend two years riding without stirrups or reins.

We appreciate that riding for a few years without stirrups and reins sounds unrealistic, but if you could do just a small fraction of this think how much you could improve. The SRS produce the highest standard of classical riding and have been doing so for centuries. So they must be doing something right!



Perfect your pelvis position

The secret to maintaining a good position in all paces is a soft and supple seat, allowing your pelvis to follow the movement of your horse.

Imagine your pelvis is a bowl full of water. Your aim is to keep the water in the bowl. If you tilt your pelvis forward, the water will tip out of the front of the bowl. If you tilt backwards, the water will pour out of the back of bowl.

As you work through the exercises on the following pages, your focus needs to be on maintaining your pelvis in a neutral position.

LEGS AND SEAT

Slip your feet out of the stirrups and cross them over so they sit just in front of your horse's withers. Before you start any of these exercises, spend a few minutes in walk with your legs hanging loose. Feel the movement of your horse and that you're sitting equally on both seat bones.

Exercise 1 ▶

Knees away

This will improve your feel in the saddle and relax your knees. Note which side is easier and which side you find harder, as this will indicate the side you tend to grip with.

How to do it:

- Maintain your pelvis in a neutral position
- One leg at a time, lift your knee up, out and back down
- Repeat with your other leg
- Repeat five times before having a rest and letting your legs hang loose



◀ Exercise 2

Thigh burner

This mobilises your hips and engages your core. It's quite difficult, so don't do too much at once.

How to do it:

- Lift your knee up and away from the saddle
- Rotate your knees, as if you're pedalling a bike
- Start with five rotations and then have a rest
- Repeat this exercise on the other side

UPPER BODY WORKOUT

Tie your reins in a knot and let your arms hang down by your sides. For each of the following exercises, it's not about how quickly you can do them. Think quality — do each exercise slowly and stay in control of the movement. The aim is for your body to remain in the correct position in the saddle as you do them.

Exercise 1 ▶

Arms out to the side and rotate

This is a great way to work on improving your balance and using your seat. As you ride this exercise, make sure your arms remain level with your shoulders as you rotate each way.

How to do it:

- Lift both arms away from your body so that they're parallel to the ground (ie, holding them away from your sides)
- Rotate from your waist to the left, then straighten
- Rotate to the right and straighten
- Repeat this half a dozen times before resting



◀ Exercise 2

Touch his croup

This is another good test of your balance and whether you can move your body independently of your legs. Make sure the movement is slow and smooth: your legs should remain in the correct position throughout the exercise.

How to do it:

- Facing front, keep your pelvis in a neutral position
- Turn to the right from your waist and touch your horse's croup
- Return to a forward-facing position
- Turn to the left and touch his croup
- Repeat this exercise four times each way

Exercise 3 ▶

Touch your toes

A test of your suppleness and balance, this exercise takes a bit of perfecting. Watch you don't draw your leg up to meet your hand. You need to stretch down without altering your lower leg position.

How to do it:

- With arms out to the sides, fold your upper body forwards towards the pommel of your saddle, twisting slightly at the waist to the right
- Reach down and touch your right toe with your left hand
- Sit up straight again
- Repeat on your opposite side; do it three times on each side



◀ Exercise 4

Stretch up

This tests your balance and works your core. It will also help you to correct any wonkiness in your seat. As you ride this, you need to feel you're sitting equally on both seat bones.

How to do it:

- Lift both arms up straight above your head and stretch your fingers towards the sky
- Hold this position for five seconds
- Relax and return to your normal position
- Repeat for another five seconds
- Aim to do the exercise four times in total

MOVING UP TO TROT ➤

If you're managing to maintain a correct position for the previous exercises in walk, you can try them in trot. You may find it easier in trot as the motion is more symmetrical than walk.

To start with, don't stay in trot for too long. Build up gradually.

As you did in walk, begin by focusing on letting your legs hang down loose and relaxed.

Now, repeat the four workout exercises on the previous page in trot. If you need a walk break in between each exercise, that's OK.

Exercise 1

Riding transitions

Without the use of your reins, you'll have to use your body and seat to ask your horse to make the transition.

If you can control your horse with your arms stretched out you're doing a good job of using your body and seat independently, and not being dependent on the reins to keep your balance.



How to do it:

- Have your arms horizontal and level with your shoulders
- Engage your core and ask your horse to walk from your seat
- Walk for a few strides
- Make a transition to trot
- Practice riding trot-walk-trot transitions

Exercise 2

Moving up a level

Link four of the upper body exercises together. This tests your dynamic stability — the ability to move your body while your core remains stable and your pelvis is neutral.



- Lift your knees away from the saddle
- Hold this position for a few seconds
- Relax and repeat

Exercise 3

Close your eyes

This is a real test and should only be tried when you're happy and confident in all the previous exercises.

How to do it:

- Have your arms parallel to the ground
- Close your eyes
- Ride a transition to trot
- After a few steps make a transition forward to canter
- Repeat these canter-trot-canter transitions several times

TRY IT IN CANTER ▲

Cantering on the lunge without reins and stirrups is quite advanced and Russell wouldn't recommend trying it until you're well-established doing his exercises in walk and trot first. If you're happy and confident, try the following:

Exercise 1

Arms out and rotate at the waist

Just as you did in trot, this exercise is great for improving your balance.

How to do it:

- Have your arms parallel to the ground
- Slowly rotate from your waist to the left and then to the right
- Repeat this three times
- Now try the same with your arms folded

Exercise 2

Knees away

Feel your seat bones and that you're sitting equally on both of them.

How to do it:

- Hold the pommel or a neck strap

TO FINISH

Once you've done all or some of the exercises, come back to walk, take your stirrups back and unknot your reins. Notice if your position feels better after doing the exercises.

Ask your handler to give feedback on your position at the end, compared to how you sat at the beginning.

To finish, give your horse a walk on a long rein to cool down off the lunge for a few minutes.

Build up these exercises gradually over a period of time and you'll really feel and see the benefits. 🐾