

Raise your game

LIKE MOST RIDERS, does your heart sink at the prospect of riding without your stirrups? But there are so many reasons why you should give it a go.

By improving your balance and position, you'll become a more effective rider – and a rider who stands a better chance of staying in the saddle when the unexpected happens.

"Riding without stirrups is the most underused exercise in rider training," explains Russell, "yet it should be part of your daily riding routine."

Daily life has an impact on the way you sit on your horse. All day spent sitting at a desk working at a computer, for example, results in poor posture that transfers to your position in the saddle.

Deskwork results in tight hip flexor muscles, among other areas, which means your legs will have a tendency to draw up. This is where riding without stirrups will really help you, as it'll loosen up your hips and encourage a better leg position.

Other benefits of riding without stirrups are that it:

- Highlights areas of weakness
- Improves your seat
- Enhances your feel
- Aids awareness of your position
- Lengthens your thigh
- Loosens and relaxes your knees
- Helps your balance

No pain – no gain

It may sound simple to ride without stirrups, but it's trickier than you might think. You'll discover muscles you've not used in a while, so be prepared to ache a little to begin with.

But don't let that put you off. Get into the habit of working without stirrups each time you ride and you'll soon see a positive effect on your position, feel and balance.

"Remember to build up gradually and to constantly check that your position is correct, so you're maintaining the ear, shoulder, hip and heel line with your pelvis in a neutral position," advises Russell.

Use a neck strap to begin with. If you feel yourself losing balance, slip your fingers into it so that you're not relying on your reins to balance.

Cross your stirrups over the withers in front of your saddle so they're safely out of the way.

Take away your stirrups when you're training and you'll revolutionise the way you ride. **Russell Guire** from Centaur Biomechanics shows you how to achieve great results



MEET THE EXPERT



RUSSELL GUIRE is Team GBR's World Class Programme performance analyst. He also runs Centaur Biomechanics, which specialises in horse and rider performance analysis. For more information, visit www.centaurbiomechanics.co.uk.

HOW'S HE FEELING?

Before riding without stirrups, check what frame of mind your horse is in. If he feels a little fresh, wait until he settles

Getting started

"Spend the first five to 10 minutes of your walk warm up without stirrups," says Russell. "While you're doing this, make sure your horse is walking forwards positively."

At the same time, focus on maintaining a correct position and note how balanced you feel and whether you are sitting equally on both seat bones.

After five minutes or so in walk on each rein, take back your stirrups so you can continue with your warm up in trot.

"It's crucial to give your horse's back muscles time to warm up and loosen before you do any trot work without stirrups," says Russell. "Doing sitting trot before your horse is warmed up will only cause him to tighten through his back, which is uncomfortable for both him and for you."

Once you're both warmed up in rising trot, come back to walk and take away your stirrups again.

"You'll discover muscles you've not used in a while, so be prepared to ache a little to begin with"

Tackling trot

"Trotting without stirrups is hard work," stresses Russell. "If you're lacking balance, or have a weak core, only do small bursts of trot and build up gradually over a period of six weeks."

It's important that you work on maintaining a correct position in trot. If you feel you're struggling, walk for a few minutes before trotting again.

Note how you feel when you're

trotting. If you're unbalanced, you'll tend to grip with your knees and your legs will draw upwards. This will result in you bouncing around, which has no benefit to you or your horse.

If you start to lose your balance, come back to walk and re-establish your position before trotting again.

Once you've done 10 minutes or so of trot work without stirrups, take back your stirrups and continue your schooling session.

Conquering canter

Your long-term goal is to canter without stirrups, but it may take weeks for you to be ready. Once you're confident and can maintain your position and balance in trot, try canter. You'll more than likely find the movement of canter more comfortable than trot, but remember that your focus is still to maintain your balance and a secure position.

Just as before, gradually increase the amount of work you do in canter over a number of schooling sessions.

After working without stirrups in walk, take them back to warm up in trot before trying this gait without



Why you should take up the challenge

Your Horse associate editor **Allison Lowther** took Russell's advice and rode daily without stirrups. Here are five things she learned...

1 "It has been challenging and, to begin with, a little uncomfortable as I was stretching muscles that hadn't been worked for a while. But I stuck with it and eight weeks on I'm really feeling the benefits in my riding.

2 "I've rediscovered my left seat bone, and feel much more relaxed and freer in my hips.

3 "My improved position has had a positive effect on my horse, too.

4 "I'm now riding with equal weight in my seat bones, and achieving left bend and flexion is so much easier.

5 "The benefits of riding without stirrups for you and your horse are huge, so I challenge you to give it a go and feel the positive results." 📷

Regularly riding without stirrups has had a positive effect on Allison and Wish

