

Whether you take part in dressage, showjumping, eventing or hacking, your position has a huge influence on your horse



# Posture PERFECT

How aware are you of your position in the saddle? Performance analyst **Russell Guire** reveals common issues with riders' posture and how to correct them

PHOTOS: MATTHEW ROBERTS



## MEET THE EXPERT

**RUSSELL GUIRE** manages Centaur Biomechanics, which specialises in horse and rider performance analysis. Russell works with the BEF, offering performance analysis to horses and riders on both the World Class Programme and Team GB.

**Y**OUR RIDING POSITION has a massive impact on your horse. Whether you take part in dressage, showjumping, eventing or hacking, the way you sit in the saddle has a huge influence on multiple aspects, including your horse's core strength, hoof and back health. It's essential to refine your position in order to improve your horse's carriage and correct asymmetries, and by working on his posture you will also improve his welfare and reduce the risk of injury.

The effort that a horse puts in to carrying a rider is easily forgotten. But your horse can feel a single fly landing on his body, so he's certainly aware of you on his back. Therefore, how straight and

central you sit, your hands, your stirrup position, even the way you tilt your head, will all have an impact on your horse.

### Are you sitting comfortably?

After noticing an imbalance and recognising we need to put it right – it's too easy to just say we're crooked – we need to figure out exactly what crooked means. This is where an assistant proves invaluable. When you're on your horse it can be hard to tell whether or not you're sitting correctly, although using a mirror or filming yourself on your phone/camera are useful methods of checking position.

Be sure to wear tight clothes rather than baggy ones so that faults are easier to spot.

## Checking your position

We're interested in how straight the saddle is, and how straight you are to the saddle with your upper body and pelvis.

- Your ear, shoulder, hip and ankle should all be in line.
- Be aware that different paces will emphasise crookedness and you may ride differently on each rein.
- Address the position of your seat first, and then the saddle before looking at

your upper body.

- The aim is for you to be sitting in the centre of your horse in order to facilitate lateral work.
- If your position is off, your horse will be off too – this has implications for jumping, dressage and so on.
- Make sure that you have your saddle checked regularly by a professional fitter to try to reduce displacement.

### HANDS

- In line, not asymmetrical.
- Thumbs on top, not 'pushing a pram'.
- Hands held forwards.

### ARMS

- Against your sides – no 'chicken wings'.

### SPINE

- Neutral – not too far forward or back.
- Front of pelvis tipped upwards.
- Seat in contact with the saddle.
- Shoulders pulled back.

### KNEES

- Against the side of the saddle, not sticking out.

### FEET

- Heels down, toes up.
- Not too far forward or too far back in the stirrup.
- Not sticking out from your horse's side.
- Stirrups the same length – making one of your stirrups longer is not a cure for asymmetry; it actually increases loading on the limbs and can affect your spine.

### TOP TIP

Don't underestimate the importance of walk in your warm up. I recommend warming up in walk for 15-20 minutes. As part of your warm-up strategy you should also use serpentines to improve suppleness.



Closing your eyes helps you to feel your horse and gets rid of distractions

## Riding without stirrups

If you really want to improve your position, do five minutes each day without stirrups (if you feel safe to do so), or ride without stirrups on the lunge. Taking away the stability points (your reins and stirrups) makes you more aware of your seat.

- 1 The first area to work on is your pelvis. Go large in walk on the left rein.
- 2 Imagine your pelvis as a bowl of water. Where is the water tipping? Think about drawing the front of your pelvis up and tucking your tailbone and seat beneath you. This also helps to straighten your back.
- 3 Another way to visualise it is don't sit like a duck, sit like a Whippet.
- 4 Now ride a 20m circle at either end of the arena, then turn up the centre line, get yourself straight and close your eyes.
- 5 Closing your eyes helps you to feel your horse and removes distractions, so you're more aware of his movement. (Have someone watch you and tell you when to reopen them!)
- 6 Where do you end up? Have you stayed straight or veered off to one side?
- 7 Repeat on the other rein and in trot. Sit deeper in the saddle so you don't bounce.
- 8 Taking away your stirrups will help you to rebalance your position naturally.

## Knees up

Still on a 20m circle and without stirrups, lift up your left leg and open up your hips as you push your knee out to the side and rotate it – as if you're riding a bicycle. Then relax your left leg and repeat the exercise with your right leg.

You may find it easier to do this with one leg than the other. Switch from left knee to right knee a few times, then change the rein and repeat. As well as opening up your hips, this will improve your awareness of your weight in the saddle.

You may find lifting your knee easier on one side than the other



## Taking away your reins

Riding with your reins in one hand is another great exercise to get you focused and riding from your seat and leg rather than the rein.

Neglecting these aids, or just relying on a stick, means that your horse doesn't learn to use his core correctly.

**1** Do this exercise without stirrups if you feel confident doing so. If not, you can also do it with stirrups.

**2** In walk or trot on a 20m circle, put your reins in one hand and lift your 'spare' hand straight up into the air.

**3** Now hold your arm straight out in front of you.

**4** Make sure you keep your head up and your eyes looking straight in front.

**5** Take your reins back while you change the rein, then repeat.

Taking away stability points, such as your reins, makes you more aware of your seat



If you ride with your head tilted, correct it by putting your hand behind your back (the opposite side to the way your head tends to lean)

## Where your head goes, your weight goes

Your eyes are always trying to balance you, so another good exercise to try if you're feeling crooked is moving your head. Take back your stirrups for this one.

**1** On a circle, feel the pressure in your stirrups. Which side has more pressure?

**2** On a 20m circle in trot, visualise how much pressure you put in your stirrups.

**3** Turn your head to the right – what changes? Now look across to your left.

**4** You should notice that moving your head to look one way puts more weight into your opposite stirrup.

**5** Keep pushing forwards with your hands. You don't want your horse getting behind the vertical – it will make him tense.

## How effective is your seat?

The ultimate goal is to control your horse with your seat, not your reins. Practising this in your transitions is key. Try riding on the inside track – trot-walk-trot. This will help you to feel where your horse wants to put his quarters. Does he wobble at all? Is he trying to grab the inside rail?

**1** Try the transitions again, this time really focusing on using your seat.

**2** Keep thinking about your position, pelvis tilted up, eyes looking up and ahead.

**3** Stay sitting on your seat, keeping your horse inside leg to outside rein.

**4** Swing through the seat to increase the hindleg action.

**5** Collect with your body by opening your knees.

## STRETCHING OFF

Just as you warm up your horse, after training it's important to let him stretch off. On a long rein, do a serpentine to warm down. Long rein is not just letting the reins go; it's encouraging your horse to stretch down, so keep a contact as you lengthen them. Use your bodyweight instead of the reins when asking your horse to use his body around the bends of the serpentine. 🐾