

Equitation for Gaited Horses
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Equitation: the art of riding on horseback.

The term equitation often conjures up images of people in fancy dress following some ridged and arcane rules of horsemanship, sitting on their horses like mannequins, teeth gleaming in fixed smiles. We see saddles marketed as "equitation models" and videos sold on "how to win in equitation classes" without much thought for the reasons behind the type of riding they promote. The purpose of certain equitation rules may be obscure, and it is pretty clear that the styles that win in equitation classes are a far cry from the general practice in performance classes. Since this disparity between the "ideal" equitation form and the "real" performance-winning form exists in just about all the gaited breeds, what exactly is the point of equitation, and, more important to the casual or trail rider, what is the most effective way to ride gaited horses?

Different jobs, different equitation styles:

Good equitation is based, not on a set of arbitrary "handed down" rules, but on time- tested effective methods riders have discovered work best to stay in balance with a horse to accomplish whatever job the two of them must do. The balance a rider needs to help his horse work varies along with the balance of his horse in that work. A jockey does not use the same "equitation style" as a bull fighter on horseback because the jockey's horse must balance forward on his shoulders as he runs, while the bull fighting horse must balance strongly over his hindquarters to be able to stop, turn, dodge and run sideways instantly. A jump rider or "hunt seat" equitation type rider does not use the same equitation style as a dressage or manege rider because the horse that jumps changes his balance frequently from his haunches to his shoulders and the rider must adapt instantly to those changes, while the dressage horse, working on the flat, remains balanced mostly toward his haunches as he works. A cross country rider, trying to help her horse by keeping her weight off his back, does not use the same equitation style as a cutting horse rider who must "sit deep" to stay with the motion of her horse.

For gaited horses, most riding is done "on the flat" with little need for a jockey, floating, "two point" or forward "hunt style" seat. In fact, many gaited horses, if ridden in such a position, will lose their easy gait and may start performing a hard trot. For riders new to gaited horses who are accustomed to using a

forward seat, this can be a very unpleasant discovery! On the other hand, some of the "seats" used on gaited horses are a far cry from the balanced, straight position adopted by a good dressage or western rider on the flat. Some gaited-horse riders appear in danger of falling off the rear of their horses! So, what sort of riding style will work for gaited horses and stay within the range of effective horsemanship?

What works for gaited horses:

Although there are equitation rules for most gaited breeds, it is probably a good idea to forget whatever the rulebooks say and instead deal with the fundamental process of effective riding on the flat, a process that has evolved from the time of Xenophon to produce a position and use of the hands that is effective both in keeping the rider on the horse and in helping the horse work at his best.

Seat and body position, staying on:

Over the centuries it has been pretty well established that the best way for a rider to stay on a horse, on the flat, is for her to sit straight in the saddle, a slight forward curve at her lower back, chest lifted, with an imaginary vertical line running from her ear, shoulder, and hip through her heel. In this position, if the horse evaporated out from under her, the rider would still be standing upright. On horseback, this position puts the rider in balance so that any abrupt motion from the horse will not tip her forward or back in the saddle. That means the rider will not have to grab with her legs or hands to stay on if the horse shifts, shies or jumps sideways, or stops short, or tries a crow hop or two. Because she will not have to grip to stay on, a rider in this position can reserve the use of leg pressure to ask for specific responses from the horse rather than deadening his sides by clamping on for dear life.

This is a version of the forward or "Ft Riley" balanced seat .. notice that the rider's shoulders are in front of his hips. A good seat for riding up hills, and for staying in balance on a horse that may jump, but not as effective as the straight seat for riding gaited horses. The rider's hand, however, is in a good line with his horse's mouth, even though he is riding one handed in a western saddle.



Seat and body position, staying in balance:

Despite what may be common in the show ring or the winner's circle of performance classes, this erect, balanced position is ideal for riding a gaited horse as well as a non-gaited one. In fact, it was described by Xenophon as the ideal seat, at a time when most ridden horses were gaited. (!) While staying on is a "good thing," staying in balance with your horse, with your weight over the strongest part of his back is

an even better one. This position, if used in a well-designed saddle that is placed correctly on the horse's back, puts the rider's weight just behind the withers at the strongest part of the horse's back, the place where he is most able to carry weight without effort, and it also aligns the rider's center of gravity with that of the horse, so that the two can work together as one unit. With your weight and body carried in this "equitation sweet spot" you can stay with your horse, and influence the way he carries himself and uses his back, critical aspects of helping him work at his best in gait.

Hands and arms:

In addition to the balanced, straight seat, good equitation also includes the effective use of the rider's hands. Again, over the centuries, a standard position, dictated by the need to communicate clearly with the horse, while avoiding undue stress and strain on the rider, has evolved. Very simply, in whatever you are trying to accomplish with a horse, the reins should always be part of a straight line between the horse's mouth, through your wrist, to your elbow. This position allows your arm to hang relaxed from the shoulder, puts no excess pressure on your wrist and allows instant, clear signals to pass from the horse's mouth to your fingers and from your fingers to his mouth.

What we see instead:

So, when was the last time you saw a rider on a gaited horse sitting in the balanced position, with her hands held so that there was a straight line from the horse's mouth to her elbow? Probably not recently, rarely in a performance class, and not necessarily in an "equitation" class.

This rider is sitting a very slight chair seat on her Saddlebred, in a rack. Her hand and arm position are correct for his head and neck carriage. Over all, an almost ideal position for riding a horse in the rack in saddle seat classes ..



Here, the rider's high hands and braced chair seat look absolutely ridiculous with the carriage of the horse. She is out of balance, and her hands, while they would be appropriate for a higher head and neck carriage, appear to be trying to lift this very low headed horse into a different frame. A definite "how not to do it" picture!



The dreaded "chair seat": While there are probably not many people riding an approximation of the forward or hunt seat on their gaited horses, what you will often see is a version of the chair seat. This unbalanced seat can happen for several reasons - the rider does not have enough elasticity in her hip sockets to reach down and back with her upper leg, her saddle throws her into that position, her stirrups are a tad short, she is trying to force her heels down, or she is sitting that way on purpose in the mistaken belief that she must do so to get her horse to work in gait.

The dreaded chair seat ... the rider's hands and arm position here are good, nice quiet line between mouth and elbow, but she has pushed her feet forward in the stirrups, due to tight hip and thigh muscles, and this places her rear well behind her feet. She would fall on her derriere if the horse disappeared out from under her.



- What is it? The chair seat is exactly what the name implies, the sort of seat you have when you are

sitting on a chair, knees bent, feet well in front of your hips. If the chair vanished, you would fall on your behind on the floor!

- What is wrong about it? This seat puts the rider's weight behind the balance point of the horse/rider combination, making the rider unstable in the saddle. A person riding in this seat can easily lose balance with the horse and fall off, or end up gripping with the upper legs to stay on. It puts the rider's weight closer to the weakest part of the horse's back (the loin) than the straight balanced seat does, and encourages the horse's back to sag downward under that weight (ventroflex) often resulting in a more lateral gait. Ventroflexion obtained this way can cause the vertebrae of the spine to impinge on one another, leading to neurological problems.
- Why do people use it? The chair seat is easy. A person with poor body condition, tight leg muscles, and stiff hips will find it much easier to sit in a chair seat than to stretch his legs down around his horse's back. - It makes it easy to put your heels down, a precept that is often pounded into rider's heads with explanation other than it is just "done that way". - Many saddles are built to encourage this seat and are often bought because they are comfortable for the rider. Lane Fox cut back saddles, western saddles with build up pommels, some plantation style saddles, some "all purpose" English saddles are designed to put the rider's legs in front of his hips, feet on the "dashboard" and practically guarantee a chair seat. - It throws the rider's weight toward the loin of the horse's back, encouraging ventroflexion and making a horse more likely to work in one of the ventroflexed gaits, such as the rack, saddle rack or stepping pace, or incline him to high action in the front legs in other gaits, a desirable trait in some trotting horses.
- What alternative is there? The balanced, straight, classical seat is a very good alternative to the chair seat, provides superior balance, puts less stress on the horse's back, and is safer for a rider to use. On those horses that require a slight amount of ventroflexion to perform their gait, it is possible, using this seat, to slightly tip the pelvis, brace the lower back, maintain the same shoulder, hip and heel alignment, encourage some ventroflexion, and still stay in balance with the horse.

High hands, high head?

For some reason, the classical principle of the straight line between elbow, wrist and horse's mouth is often misunderstood to mean that any rider in a certain style of saddle (the so-called "saddle seat" rider) should carry his arms bent at a 90 degree angle at the elbow. If a horse has a high, arched neck and head carriage, as do most Saddlebreds and other horses ridden in this style, this angle of the arm will indeed form a straight line from elbow to mouth. However, if the horse does not have such a high head and neck carriage, this arm position "breaks" the straight line and interferes with effective communication between rider and horse.

There is absolutely nothing correct about this rider! However, the horse is definitely ventroflexed and traveling in a rack, which was probably her goal. Chair seat, hunched back, hands even higher than the carriage of the horse's head (at least the reins are slack!) If the horse stumbled, she would probably fall off over his rear and drag his head and neck with her. How NOT to do it.



- What is it? You can sometimes see people riding in "equitation" classes, on horses with relatively low head carriage, madly "equitating" with their hands held high, well above belt level. You will also often see this high hand position in performance classes, for all breeds, not just those shown in saddle seat style. Sometimes you see the "begging puppy" look, where the hands are dropped down from a high held wrist, further interfering with the straight line from elbow to mouth.
- What is wrong with it? It breaks the straight line of communication between the horse's mouth and the rider's hand, puts stress on the rider's elbow and wrist, and can encourage the horse to lug on the rein or become heavy in hand. In addition, frankly, it looks ridiculous, and is not much use in asking the horse to raise his head (if that is the goal) or in presenting a finished appearance for the rider on a low headed horse.
- Why do you see it? "Equitation" riders adopt this high hand position because a rule book says they should carry them there, no matter where the horse carries his head. This is an example of "equitation" by the rule book having little to do with actual riding! Others carry their hands high because they think they can support the horse's head and neck, keep them high, and encourage him to stay in gait in this position. This position of the hands also works to keep a horse in ventroflexion if he has the tendency to fall out of that body frame, useful for some horses that are expected to perform in ventroflexed gaits.
- What is the alternative? A hand and forearm, held in a straight line between the elbow and the horse's mouth, offers the best alternative. Again, this position provides a direct, simple, and less fatiguing means of communication with the horse's mouth. If the horse's head and neck need to be held higher to enhance his gait, the better method for achieving that position is not by trying to lift them somehow with exaggeratedly high hands, but through light upward vibrations of the fingers on the reins, while pushing the horse's entire body into a position that favors a higher head carriage. The head and neck will rise as the hindquarters lower and the front legs become lighter.

English, Western, specialized "gaited" tack?

This rider is sitting correctly, in a straight seat, in her western saddle, with a good straight line between elbow and horse's mouth. compare this with the rider in the next picture ...



The rider here is in the same balanced position as the previous picture. This is the ideal position for riding a gaited horse of any kind on the flat.



For a horse that needs some ventroflexion to stay in gait, especially those that rack or do some variation of that gait, this position works well. Notice that the rider has changed the position of her lower back from the previous picture, tilting her pelvis slightly and putting more weight in the back of the saddle, without losing over all balance.



This is the correct, balanced seat, with appropriate hand and arm position for this horse's body carriage. Compare it with the picture of the "pelvic tilt"



For any horse, no matter what the saddle and other tack he is wearing, the basic erect "ear over heel" position is the safest, most effective for influencing gait, and least wearing on the rider. For any horse, no matter what headgear he is using, the basic, straight line between elbow and mouth hand and arm position is the most effective for communication through a bit (or non-bit) and the least stressful on the rider. Sit straight and hold your hands in this position and you will be using effective basic equitation on your gaited horse ... and it shouldn't change no matter what saddle you are using or how you dress to show him off!

We intend to get similar articles online for all the various gaits, so feedback at this stage is very important!

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