

5 reasons why the judge and your horse appreciate good equitation. (Part 1)



I learned equitation fundamentals to the repetitive tune of “head up, heels down!” trotting around and around the riding school ring. I acquired the “whats” of riding in those early years, but didn’t get good answers to my “whys!” It’s a shame – if I’d grasped the logic and the science behind the skills, and how I’d use them in the future, I’d have been more motivated in those drills.

The essentials of correct rider position cross all disciplines, and there’s a great reason behind every essential.

1. Your horse will thank you for going easy on his back.

Researchers now have cool technology to read all pressures, bumps and shifts a horse actually feels while being ridden. After studying this, I’m more intentional than ever of the signals I’m conveying as I ride.

Dr. Hilary Clayton, researcher in equine and rider biochanis, says the amount of force we apply to a horse’s back depends on how we ride and what gait we’re riding. For example, peak forces at the trot are twice a rider’s weight, and they increase to 2 ½ or three times the rider’s weight at the canter.

Clayton says. Any weight on an equine back can cause hollowing, but you can reduce these risks by not overloading the horse, riding with a soft, balanced seat, and sitting closer to the front of the saddle.

In addition, Clayton says novice riders are generally less in sync with the horse than advanced riders and more likely to bump against the saddle.

2. The judge will reward a strong, balanced seat.

Aside from a low equitation score, an unbalanced seat leads to “weightier” deductions on the score card as they affecting your horse’s performance – left- behind over jumps, left- behind in reining spins or late- behind flying changes. Needless to say, rider floppiness detracts from “the look” in a rail or flat class.

3. A secure seat keeps a lids on the mixed messages sent to your horse.

A strong, stable foundation from which to be precise with your leg and rein aids.

But there’s a balance between strength and stiffness. Many riders try too hard –confusing posing with poise. A rigid or overarched back can’t follow the horse’s movement and absorb shock. The AQHA rulebook for instance, states that a flat, yet relaxed and supple back is to be rewarded.

Your seat controls the length and tempo of the horse's stride. A seat which flows with the stride is used as an aid to influence the stride, similar to the motion of a playground swing. A locked lower back causes the seat to bounce in the saddle.

4. Your horse will perform better if you ride with a balanced seat

Clayton notes that horses must adapt to the “the unpredictability of the novice rider's weight shifts.” Dr. Katrina Merckies, from U. of Guelph, observed that rider asymmetry worsens as a horse's speed or movement increases (goes from walk to trot, for instance).

A rider with his ear, shoulder, hip and heel in a line perpendicular to the ground is in balance and isn't likely to fall forward or backward. Picture the balance needed to stand in the back of a pickup truck, driven over a bumpy field. It's common to see riders with their legs too far forward. Glance down - you shouldn't be able to see your toe poking out in front of your knee. Stirrup leathers (or western fenders) should be perpendicular to the ground.

5. Seat exercises are easy to work into your riding time.

In lessons, I give my students a variety of short drills targeted to any position problems they may have, working on them in three minute segments, like commercials in between other work we are doing. This avoids muscle fatigue that could lead to sloppy practice, developing another bad habit en route to correcting an existing one. An example:

Try switching up posting rhythms. For example, riding five strides in two point, five strides of posting, then five strides of sitting trot. Or instead of conventional posting, try rising up for two beats, touching down in the saddle for only one beat. This takes a lot of concentration and upper body control. Core strength will help you to influence and regulate the rhythm of your horses stride with your hips.

Why the judge and your horse will appreciate your “good hands.” (Part 2)

I can still hear my early instructors barking at me. Like any novice, while I focused on keeping my horse going or identifying the right diagonal, my hands would elevate and bounce around. But the more I tried to force them down, the stiffer and more jarring they became. As a coach, I make it a goal to describe the importance of and specifically how to develop elastic arms



1. Good hands deliver a clear “code” to your horse. Are you speaking so your horse is listening?

Riding effectively can be boiled down to a signal/response/ pressure or release system. Your hands send the signal, communicating messages such as slow, turn and flex to your horse. Each signal is precise and distinct. When your horse responds to your request, you respond with a reward, releasing the pressure. By trial and error the horse learns that a certain response always yields consistent release.

2. Good hands prevent a dull horse. Blah, Blah, Blah...

Do you ever tune out a voice on the TV or car radio to focus on something else? A rider's unsteady hands can be just that – background noise that drowns out other signals you're trying to send to your horse. At best, the horse can ignore the noise, becoming desensitized to it. Equine behaviourists call this habituation. Unsteady hands interfere with the code, like static interfering with a radio station. The real message is hard to discern.

3. Good hands prevent an overly sensitive horse.

At worst, erratic hands will not only confuse or dull your horse, but scare him. He'll learn to preserve himself by avoiding the bit in some way. Gapping mouths, elevated heads, hollow backs and choppy gaits are common evasions. Instead of having a conversation of “no” and “yes” to your horse, abrupt hands yell - putting your horse on edge.

4. Good hands are rewarded by the judge.

Judges look for elastic hands. Subtle communication enhances the show ring presentation. Research shows tension in a horse's mouth and tongue trigger tension through the neck and spine – the result? Shorter, rigid strides – yuck

Rule books use words such as *relaxed* and *supple* to describe the arm position for equitation and horsemanship. Loss of contact between rider's hand and the horse's mouth is a major penalty in some scoring systems. For western riders, AQHA includes *excessive pumping of the free arm as well as excessive stiffness will be penalized*. Hunter and equitation judges learn *the rider's wrist is to be kept straight and relaxed, with the hand held at about 30 to 45 degrees inside the vertical*. On the equitation over fences scorecard, judges have symbols for straight arms, stiff wrists and reins too short or long.

5. Good hands minimize the use of artificial aids.

The solution to bit evasion is usually not in the tack box. And most training aids are not permitted in the show ring anyway. Instead of making the mistake of solving those problems with band aid solutions such as nosebands and artificial aids, as riders, let's go first to the root of the problem – developing elastic, independent hands. Unlocking the movement in your shoulder, elbow and wrist joints is the first step to soft, following hands. I ask my students to picture holding a cup of coffee as they drive over a speed bump. Shock absorbing elasticity will keep you from spilling the coffee. Soft hands will lead to a soft mouth, soft ears and soft expression in your horse.