

RIDER'S POSITION

The way a dressage rider sits in the saddle is called a vertical seat. The reason for this expression is that when the rider sits correctly it is possible to draw a vertical line through three points: the shoulder, hip and heel. There are many excellent books about the rider's position so I will describe only some of the most important aspects.

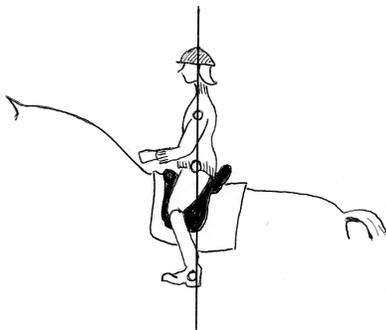
The way the rider sits on the horse is not to look good, or to make all riders look alike, like soldiers in the military. Nor is it to make it easy for dressage judges to make an evaluation, or for the trainers to have something to correct. In fact, the way the rider should sit has been very thoroughly thought out.

It is only when the rider can control his own body that he is able to control that of the horse.

The very manner in which the rider sits sends a lot of signals to the horse. These are the aids that make it possible for the horse to understand what he is supposed to do. It is important to remember that when you sit on the horse you become part of his weight. You almost become part of his body. If your body is positioned correctly the horse will not feel handicapped by your presence. He will feel that he can move freely and naturally, even with a rider on his back. You must have a correct position in order to give correct aids and influence the horse in a positive manner.

When there is something that you want your horse to do, it is a good idea to show him how to do it first by doing it with your own body. ***It can almost be said that it is not possible to get the horse to do something that the rider cannot do himself.*** For example, if you want your horse to move his inside hip and hind leg further forward, or to relax, or to turn his shoulders, you need to do exactly the same with your body.

The most important aspect of the rider's position is that he must be able to relax, follow the horse and not interfere with the horse's ability to move freely.



THE VERTICAL SEAT

THE HEAD

Look up and forward in the direction of movement with your head placed straight over your body. If your head is allowed to tip forward it is no longer possible to influence the horse correctly with your seat.

Primarily, it is your weight that tells the horse which direction to move. If you do not look forward to the next point (a visual target), it is not possible for you to place your weight correctly in the direction you intend to go. By looking forward to the next point and placing your weight in that direction, the horse will follow. The horse will move in the direction in which the rider is placing his weight.

Another reason to avoid looking down at the horse's poll, is because the horse can sense this and may feel that his rider is no longer acting as the leader. In response, he will find it necessary to make his own decisions. As a result, you will tend to react instead of act. But, the horse must pay attention to you, not the opposite. So it's important to be able to feel and visualize that part of the horse's body that you cannot see, including what is behind you and underneath the saddle.

THE SHOULDERS

The shoulders should be lowered and held back slightly, as if you are pinching your shoulder blades together. By pulling your shoulders back in this manner and stretching your body upward, you send a signal to the horse that invites him to reach forward to the bit. This response from the horse gives you a feeling of having more horse in front of you than behind you.

THE UPPER BODY

Probably the most important effect of your position on the horse comes through stretching your body upward and sitting vertically. This is a signal to the horse to place his own body in balance, upright and vertically centered under yours. Inversely, if you were to collapse your upper body and hunch your back you would feel as if the horse was falling away from you, leaning into your hands, becoming too strung out, falling on the forehand and no longer remaining on the aids. A straightening and stretching up of the upper body is an important part of the aids used to rebalance the horse and create equilibrium, resulting in a feeling of riding uphill.

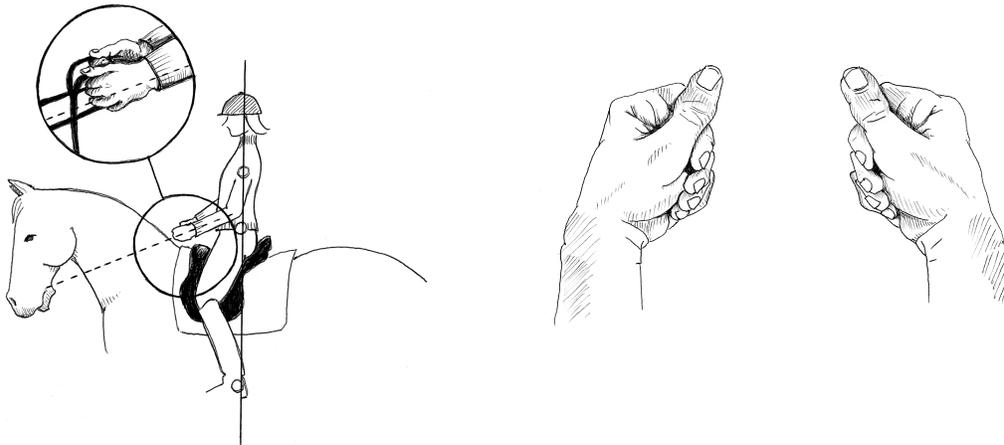
THE SEAT

Sit in the middle of the saddle, in its deepest point, with your weight distributed evenly over both

seat bones. It is very important to have a relaxed but driving seat—one that stays with the rhythm of the horse.

THE LEGS

The legs should fall from relaxed hips down along the sides of the horse, with the thighs and knees remaining relaxed. Tensing your thighs will push your seat up out of the saddle as well as make it impossible for you to keep your lower leg steady. Your heels should be the lowest point. Your knees should also be placed as low as possible. Simply lowering your heels and knees enables you to sit correctly in the saddle and use the aids effectively. Your toes should point more or less straight forward. If your feet turn outward too much it becomes difficult to keep your knees close to the saddle. If your feet turn inward it makes it hard to keep your lower leg effectively on the horse. The stirrup should be placed under the ball of your foot. When you can keep your lower legs in the correct position you will be able to create better gaits in the horse.



THE ARMS

Your upper arms should hang straight down from a relaxed shoulder. Your elbows should be in front of your hips. Normally there should be a straight line to the bit from your elbow through your lower arm and the rein. Your hands should be vertical, with one hand on each side of the withers and your thumbs up. If you look down at your hands you should see all ten fingernails. Your hands should be placed about a hand's width in front of the saddle as well as above the withers. There should also be about a hand's width between your hands.

A correct position requires a lot of self-discipline. It is not enough for the trainer to constantly remind the rider to sit correctly. Often you see a trainer correcting a student's position non-stop, and the student does his best to comply, but two minutes later the problem resumes.

As I mentioned earlier, the rider's position itself sends many different signals to the horse. Once a rider experiences and understands the feeling of a horse answering these signals correctly, it

will feel completely wrong to him when his position is incorrect. He will feel as if something has been lost or is missing.

We all feel that it is important to have the horse under control, primarily to feel safe in the saddle, but also to be able to execute a given movement in a specific place. This feeling of control is created primarily by the way we sit, by using a correct position. If a rider is unable to create this feeling of control through his seat, he will try instead to achieve it by holding the horse in place with his reins and legs.

MOST COMMON PROBLEMS

- a lack of understanding of the importance of sitting correctly
- not following the movement of the horse
- not sitting straight over the horse, or collapsing in the hip
- an incorrect hand position and, as a consequence, an insensitive connection
- knees or heels pulled up
- reins too long or too short
- tipping forward on your pelvis rather than resting your weight equally over both seat bones
- looking down
- a position that is not vertical—through shoulder, hip and heel

It is a good idea to take some lessons on the longe line, where the focus is the rider's position. This kind of training is especially effective. Through the use of many kinds of exercises that can be practiced on the longe line, the rider's position and balance can be improved without the need for the rider to have contact with the horse's mouth. Of course, this requires a horse that is quiet and calm and used to being longed with a rider on his back.

If this kind of training is not available, then take a few minutes when you are riding to concentrate on your seat rather than on the horse. Start with your head and work down to your heels. Practice various movements without your position deteriorating. If available, use the mirrors, or ask a friend to watch you ride.

The main thing to keep in mind as you work toward achieving a correct position is to understand the importance it has and how it influences the horse. You can read more about this in the chapters in this section (The Basics) called Harmony and The Aids.