

Position power

Perfect your position and you'll be more effective as a rider, says Minette Rice Edwards. See how a few subtle tweaks can transform you and your horse

Use your body correctly and your horse will follow suit



Our models

Henna rides Jelle, her six-year-old Friesian gelding. Henna has only been riding for one year, but she and Jelle have already formed a great partnership together.

About Minette

Minette Rice Edwards trains horses and riders up to Grand Prix level for dressage and jumping at Ham House Stables, Richmond. She uses her wealth of experience to help riders gain a clearer understanding of how to make optimum use of their bodies and the effect this has on the horse. "The more advanced this process becomes, the less effort is involved, and the greater the freedom of movement for both horse and rider," says Minette.

Riding with a good posture and a correct position is not just about looking pretty on a horse. Even the slightest change in the way you sit in the saddle can have a huge effect on the rest of your body and, therefore, your horse's way of going. My job is to teach the rider what effect their body has on their horse and what to expect from the horse when he is working correctly. If there is a problem, it is immaterial whether it is the horse's or the rider's difficulty – the solution is to correct the rider.

In the first in my new series on developing good, consistent, balanced and precise riding, I will explain the basics of a correct position and outline some exercises you can use to help you maintain this every time you ride.



Safety first

All of the exercises in this feature are demonstrated on the lunge, so for the exercises requiring you to let go of the

reins or take away your stirrups, make sure you have someone take control of your horse while you try them out, especially if you're inexperienced.

However, the principles of all of these exercises can be applied whenever you're riding, whether it's out hacking or schooling on your own.

Words: Mel Rutherford, Minette Rice Edwards. Photos: Bob Atkins

First things first

I begin by assessing Henna in her natural position with no stirrups. She generally looks good, but needs to avoid hollowing her back and hanging her legs too forward (below, top). I ask her to think 'shoulder-hip-heel' and let her leg fall comfortably underneath her. Once she is sitting well, I ask Henna to bring her foot back into the stirrup; now she's in a position to give aids without moving (below, bottom).



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Checkpoint 1 Three-point seat

The basis of a good position lies in a 'three-point seat' – the three points being made up of your two seatbones and your coccyx (tailbone). Think of your seatbones as the two rockers of a rocking chair and your coccyx as the base of your spine. Although your spine won't physically touch the saddle, thinking of it like this gives you a mental 'balancing point' – a bit like a three-legged barstool. To feel the three points, try this:

- 1 In halt, bring your legs forward in front of the saddle so your calves are resting over the front of the knee rolls (pictured left). Can you feel the three points?
- 1 Bring your legs back into riding position, continuing to balance yourself over these three points in your seat. Try to maintain this every time you ride.

Training tip

Most horses have some kind of crookedness in their body, which can make the rider crooked if not corrected.

Checkpoint 2 Body and alignment

Think of your body as a series of blocks, stacked on top of each other in perfect alignment...

Head Lightening the head gives the rest of your body the freedom to move, so you won't sit 'heavily' on your horse. To position this uppermost block correctly, imagine one of these...

- 1 that your head is a helium balloon
- 1 that you're a puppet on a string and your head is being pulled up
- 1 you have rabbit ears



1 or an upward spiral from the base of your spine to the top of your head. Henna likes the idea of rabbit ears, so I ask her to imagine long ears reaching up toward the sky.

Body Whether you're riding on the flat, in a forward seat or over jumps, your body needs to be over your legs with your seat positioned to counter the weight of the head – whether they are aligned vertically or otherwise. This alignment should not change through turns or circles. It needs to be on an axis – as it would if you were walking around on your feet – with your eyes, shoulders, hips and feet all pointing in the direction you're turning. Your shoulders and chest should always be parallel to your horse's chest. Be precise in aligning your hips and shoulders with the centre of the turn or circle – a bit like the spoke of a wheel – without any twisting or distorting, in order to give your horse the best possible chance of staying on the circle.



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Checkpoint 3 Harmony

Think of every movement as three-dimensional...

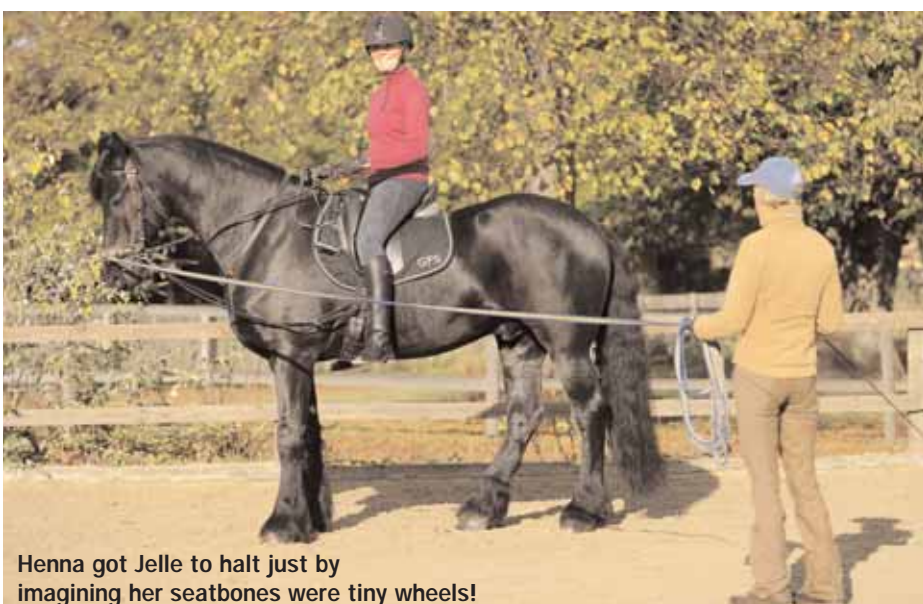
- 1 Up and down
- 1 Side to side
- 1 Forward and back.

The majority of your horse's movement should be absorbed through your joints and lower back. You need to feel this movement, so don't block it! Try this...

- 1 In walk and without stirrups, close your eyes and feel each hindleg stepping underneath you: left, right, left, right, left, right and so on.
- 1 Think of the movement either as a spring in each buttock or two wheels rotating backwards. Connect your

chosen image with each seatbone and think of this as you feel 'left, right, left, right' – then do the same with your eyes open.

1 Now use this technique to lengthen your horse's stride. Henna chose the rotating wheels image, so I ask her to make the wheels in her seat really big. Jelle starts to take slightly longer, quicker steps in response (above). 1 I then ask Henna to imagine tiny wheels, like a scooter, to shorten his stride. As soon as she does so, Jelle comes to a halt! Remember, being too tight in your movement is like driving with the handbrake on. But it does illustrate how important your seat and back are as aids, and how effective they can be in extending and collecting your horse's stride.



Henna got Jelle to halt just by imagining her seatbones were tiny wheels!

Common mistakes

1 Unlevel seat Your seat is your main communication with your horse. If you let your right seatbone down, your horse will drift to the left and vice versa.



2 Collapsing forward Leaning forward and rounding the shoulders is a common problem. A horse only carries one third of his weight over the hindquarters so you don't want to further load his shoulder – remember, your head weighs between 10 and 15lb!



3 Hollowing Putting your shoulders behind your seatbones and stiffening to stay upright, will cause your horse to lift his head and stiffen through his back.



4 Excess movement Although there shouldn't be any tension in your body, avoid being too 'wibbly wobbly' at the waist. There should be enough substance in your body to hold your own position.



5 Twisting Twisting your right shoulder forward through a left bend makes it very difficult for your horse to turn, and vice versa.

"There should be enough substance in your body that you can hold your own position"

In the saddle

Position power



Checkpoint 4 Awareness

It is all too easy to fall into habitual patterns without noticing, so it's important to recognise and intercept poor use of your body. Try to be aware of any stiffening in your body when giving directions to the horse. By developing your awareness with honesty and precision, correct aids and use of your body will soon become automatic.

Try the following exercises in walk with stirrups, with someone controlling your horse, to develop awareness of your movement. Aim to maintain balance, poise and alignment throughout – you should still be able to keep the direction and go with your horse.



1 Drop your hands down to your sides

2 Place your hands on your hips, press down and keep your shoulders parallel with your horse's shoulders



3 Cross your arms behind your back, open your shoulders – and breathe!



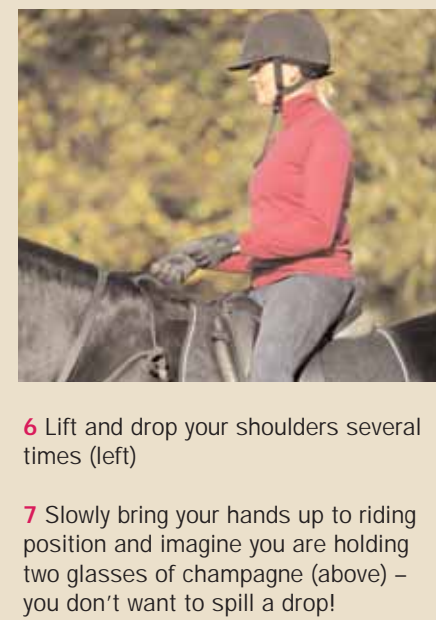
4 Next, open your arms out to the sides, like an aeroplane. Stretch, breathe and try not to stiffen. Return to normal riding position, then...



5 Reach your arms up past your ears. Stretch and breathe! Again, return to riding position before...



6 Lift and drop your shoulders several times (left)



7 Slowly bring your hands up to riding position and imagine you are holding two glasses of champagne (above) – you don't want to spill a drop!

Training tip...
Think of your head floating up to the sky, with your body as the connecting link between the sky and the earth.

In a nutshell...

Keep this position checklist in the back of your mind and you'll become more effective as a rider:

1 Three-point seat Balance on your rocking-chair rockers (seatbones) and the base of your spine (coccyx) – imagine your seat as a three-legged barstool!

1 Shoulder, hip, heel Keep these blocks stacked one on top of the other, in perfect alignment

1 Free hips Move with your horse to absorb his movement, but make sure your body still has enough 'substance' so that you maintain your own position

1 Awareness Try to always be aware of the way you use your body when you ride, in order to identify and eliminate any bad habits you may have developed. Do this, and riding correctly will soon become second nature.

Next month...

Are you sitting comfortably? Minette explains the art of sitting trot!

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