

The Circle of Aids: The Seat

By: Donna Snyder Smith

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When instructors talk about your "seat" they are speaking of the part of your body which is in contact with your saddle. These include your buttocks muscles, the muscles of your upper, inner thigh and of course, your "seat bones" or the bottom most bony points of your pelvis. In reality, your pelvis can not be separated from the muscles which control it; your lower back and core abdomen muscles, and also reflect (in pressure on the horse's back), the entire weight of your torso above the pelvis as well. A rider educated in classical riding "body language" (equitation), uses their seat to:

- a) Influence and control the horse's gait choice
- b) Influence and control both the horse's longitudinal and lateral balance,
- c) Increase or decrease the horse's stride length (at any gait) and
- d) Turn the horse.

All of these things are done from "control central;" your pelvis. It is important than, that the muscles which are responsible for moving and balancing your pelvis, act only in a cooperative manner and never in opposition to the desired result and/or each other.

The focal points of a correct seat are the seat bones, or the lowest two points of the pelvis. When the rider sits on the horse's back with relaxed gluteus maximus muscles, (butt cheeks) and relaxed inner thigh muscles, (no gripping or pinching), the rider's seat bones are felt by the horse in the large muscles which run along each side of the spine on the horse's back. The influence of a good seat is considered by accomplished horsemen, to be their primary control system. Being able to control

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your pelvis is also the secret to secure riding, i.e., safety. Learning how to made and keep your seat bones comfortably in contact with the horse's back takes years of patience and practice. It also takes a clear understanding of how the human body works. Many riders, whose understanding of how their own anatomy works is not clear, turn out to be their own worst enemy when it comes to finding and maintaining a "good" seat. Their lack of mental clarity causes them to send messages from their brains to *opposing* muscles groups simultaneously. This means that groups of muscles are fighting with each other. Eventually, the strongest group will win, but the rider who may seem to be positioned correctly will be so locked up with tension, they will be unable to allow the energy of the horse to move their bodies and move *through* their bodies. If your seat bones are in the "right" place, you can freely both allow and follow your horse's movement with your pelvis, spine and torso. To move your seat bones in harmony with motion signals the horse, your approval of his gait choice, direction, speed (tempo) and "frame" (the way in which he is balancing himself). You can also block the horse's motion and energy by what you do or allow with your seat. If you do this on purpose, it becomes a direction to your horse. If you do it accidentally, unintentionally, it becomes a bother and a distraction. Sensitive as well as emotional horses often have negative reactions to having a rider block their energy. It is uncomfortable for a horse to try to express his energy upward when a rider's rather sharp seat bones are digging into one or both of the long, flat muscles of the horse's back they move. The simple act of tensing your back, if executed with too many opposing muscle groups, can stop the alternate sided following or the "allowing" motion of your pelvis. Used deliberately, with diplomacy and precision, this action communicates your desires to your horse; to change his balance (frame),

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slow, collect or even halt. This same physical muscular action used unknowingly, “blocks” the horse’s movement in a negative way. It can easily cause the horse to stiffen its back muscles or “drop” them completely, “hollowing out” and producing a corresponding inverting (lifting) of the head and neck, a posture commonly associated with a horse being “above the bit.” Finally, your lower back muscles combined with an active leg aid are the key to your horse’s thrusting power and the reach of his stride.

Remember, a good seat is important for the following reasons:

- a) security
- b) control of the horse
- c) balancing the horse

In order to acquire a good seat, the rider must stack the upper body correctly, allowing the pelvis to sit in an upright position. An arched lower back which causes the seat bones to point toward the horse's tail does not position the seat bones in a way which allows the rider to use them to communicate to the horse. A collapsed or rounded back will also prevent the rider's seat from communicating a rider’s desires efficiently and clearly to the horse.

Once your upper body is stacked correctly, your hip joints must remain loose in the area of the groin, so your leg movements can be independent, and not distort your seat or “garble” its message to the horse. This relaxed, open seat, also gives riders a wider space between the thighs so they “fit” around the horse’s back better. The more common way of expressing that concept is to say the rider has a “deeper seat.”

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Finally, a rider's seat must remain level, or laterally balanced on their horse's back. Deliberate shifts in a rider's lateral balance or weight can be used to signal a turn to the horse. Uncontrolled or unconscious shifts of "one sided riding" can cause a loss of lateral balance in the horse and/or cause the horse to travel in a crooked manner. Traveling for a long time in a crooked way is hard on a horse, physically. As his muscles respond to compensate for his rider's imbalance, he gradually gets stronger and stronger in the muscles on one side of his body and weaker on the other side. Think about what would happen if you drove your car for very long with two small tires on one side and two large tires on the other side. You'd be paying your mechanic a visit before too long and if your horse travels in an unbalanced manner for too long, lameness and/or leg issues are sure to develop sooner or later.