

# How To Do Your BEST in Dressage Seat Equitation

## Your Seat and Position

When you're balanced:

- Your horse will be comfortable, and
- He will be able to be balanced.

When you are both balanced, you can use your aids easily.

Check out these guidelines to help your balance. Have a friend or coach take pictures and videos of you. Work on these position pointers:

### ***The Basic Picture:***

- An imaginary line from your ear, through your shoulder, hip and heel is vertical or very slightly in front of the vertical. You don't want to be sitting against the movement of your horse.
- You sit straight so you have the same amount of weight on both sides of your horse.
- There is a straight line from your elbow to the bit.

### ***Your Legs:***

- Your legs are centered under you so they support your upper body.
- Your heels are level with or slightly lower than the ball of your foot, which rests evenly on stirrups of equal length.
- Your knees and toes point forward or very slightly out.
- Your legs hang loosely, not gripping. They invisibly **follow** the barrel of the horse and appear quiet. **Following** is important!!
- Your thigh and knee fall close to the saddle without gripping the saddle.
- Your hips, knees and ankles are loose so they can be shock absorbers.

### ***Your Seat and Upper Body***

- You sit centered, straight and supple.
- Your shoulder blades are flat.
- You sit in the deepest part of a well-fitted saddle.
- The "floor of your seat" **follows** the horse quietly. (Three points make up the floor of your seat: two seat bones and crotch bone.) The floor of your seat doesn't move more than the horse moves; it follows. Remember **following** is important!
- Your core muscles stabilize your upper body so you don't get thrown behind the motion, to the left or the right.
- Your head is balanced over your shoulders and hips with your chin level and your eyes looking over your horse's ears.

### ***Your Hands and Arms***

- Your fist is soft and the thumb is on top. Your thumb and forefinger prevent the reins from slipping. Your other fingers are soft and free to give aids.

- Your hands are angled so your thumbs are slightly closer together than your pinkies.
- The width of your hands is so that they would fit on a large dinner plate.
- An imaginary line through the back of your hand over the flat of your forearm is straight.
- Your shoulders are low, and your upper arm hangs so that your elbow is slightly in front of your waist.
- Your shoulders and elbows **follow** the motion of the horse's head and neck so your hands can maintain elastic contact. Again, **following** is important!
- Notice this about following: When your horse is trotting, his head and neck are fairly steady, so your hands should also be steady and quiet so you can keep a nice contact. When your horse is walking and cantering, he uses his neck by reaching forward-downward during part of every stride. You must learn to follow this so your horse can reach on the forward moment. Horses can understand riders who are very good at following because when you give an aid, you STOP following to tell your horse something. **Follow** your horse **unless** you want to **say something to him!**

## **How can you tell your horse what you want? Use Your Aids!**

### **Here's what your aids can do:**

1. Your aids **prepare** your horse for what you are planning to do. They prepare him by **shaping him** and **putting him in front of the leg**.
  - The aids **shape** your horse in bend. At Training Level, you only need a little bend for a 20-meter circle. Get your bend by using a tiny bit of inside rein (so you can see your horse's inside eye) and enough inside leg so your horse goes to your outside rein. Your horse's ability to bend improves when he goes to First Level where he needs to do a 10-meter circle. When your horse is bent, he can be balanced on the outside rein. A well-balanced horse is comfortable and easy to ride.
  - When the aids put the horse "**in front of the leg**," he is ready to go whenever you want.
2. Your aids **listen**. With your seat, leg and rein aids, you can tell if your horse will bend. You can tell if he's ready to go. You can tell if he's ready to stop or turn. He should be easy to stop, go and turn.
3. Your aids **tell the horse what to do**. Here's how:
  - Your **legs** give your horse energy and "go."
  - Your **reins, with the support of your legs and seat**, do **half halts** that regulate your horse's energy.
  - Your **seat** is the director that tells your horse what to do with his energy.

Your horse, at every level, should go forward from your leg, come back from your half halts and turn when you ask him to.

### ***The Half Halt***

There are many good ways to explain the half halt. Here's one way:

All horses are inclined to use their front legs too much, and they don't think much about their hind legs. When the front legs go faster than the hind legs, horses get a little bit long in the frame and hard in the hand. Half halts tell the horse to slow down with the front legs and become more active with the hind legs. To half halt, you do three things:

1. **Stop following with the hands** (but don't pull!). This will slow down the front end. (When you're cantering and walking, your hands follow the natural motion of your horse's head and neck, but when you're trotting, the horse's head stays still, so your hands don't need to follow. Therefore, while trotting, you probably need to close your fingers to give the rein aid in your half halt.)
2. **Close your legs** to bring the hind legs forward and under.
3. **Soften the hand.**

Half halts balance your horse. Use them often!

### ***Pay Attention to Rhythm***

The rhythm is your horse's language, and you must learn to "speak" his language. So you move with him (follow him) in the rhythm of walk, trot or canter. Your aids also happen in the rhythm of walk, trot and canter. As your rhythmic skills improve, you and your horse will become more beautiful, more comfortable and happier!

### ***Pay Attention to Straightness***

When you are on straight lines and turns, be sure your horse's legs are all following his nose. Be sure that his tail is following on the same track as his nose.

## Riding in Your Dressage Seat Equitation Class

In your equitation class, you will be judged on your seat, your position and the use of your aids. You are not being judged on the quality of your horse's gaits but rather on how well you ride your horse.

### **You will be asked:**

- to demonstrate walk, trot and canter *in the **balance and frame** appropriate to your level. Check out the description of each level below.*

### **You might be asked:**

- to demonstrate a movement or a figure appropriate to your level.

### **Common problems in equitation classes:**

- Some riders try very hard to show the correct position, but they forget to use the aids to tell the horse what to do.
- Some riders don't use enough half halts to help the horse balance. Even though your half halts may not be perfect, do them anyway. The more you practice them, the better they will get.
- Some riders sign up for a level too high for the horse to do comfortably.

### **The Balance and Frame for each Level**

**Training Level**—The Training Level horse demonstrates correct basics, is **supple** (fairly round in the top line and able to demonstrate slight bend on a 20-meter circle). He moves freely forward in a clear **rhythm** with a steady tempo, and he accepts **contact** with the bit.

**First Level**—The First Level horse demonstrates correct basics, and in addition to the requirements of Training Level, he has developed the **thrust [or impulsion]** to achieve improved balance and throughness and maintains a more consistent contact with the bit. The horse's impulsion is demonstrated throughout the test, but especially in the lengthened stride. The improved balance and thoroughness is demonstrated throughout the test but especially in the leg yield.

**Second Level**—The horse demonstrates correct basics, and having achieved the thrust required in First Level, now accepts more weight on the hindquarters (**collection**); moves with an uphill tendency, especially in the medium gaits; and is reliably on the bit. A greater degree of **straightness**, bending, suppleness, throughness, balance and self-carriage is required than at First Level. The new movements at this level other than the medium gaits are shoulder-in, travers and renvers.

**Third Level**—The Third Level horse demonstrates correct basics, and having begun to develop an uphill balance at Second Level, now demonstrates increased engagement, especially in the extended gaits. Transitions between collected, medium and extended gaits should be well defined and performed with engagement. The horse should be reliably on the bit and show a greater degree of straightness, bending, suppleness, throughness, balance and self carriage than at Second Level. The new movements at this level include half pass and flying changes of lead.

**Fourth Level**—The horse demonstrates correct basics, and has developed sufficient suppleness, impulsion and throughness to perform the Fourth Level tests which have a medium degree of difficulty. The horse remains reliably on the bit, showing a clear uphill balance and lightness as a result of improved engagement and collection. The movements are performed with greater straightness, energy and cadence than at Third Level. The new movements at this level include working canter pirouettes and tempi flying changes.