

The Effective Seat

By Danica Yates

In Dressage there are four main sets of aids, the legs, the hands, seat, and voice. With all aids, applying them intentionally is the key to good communication with the horse. Clear signals are essential for the horse to be able to listen and respond. Unintended or unclear use of any of the aids will sound like white noise to the horse and he will learn to tune you out. Hands that are busy, jerking or snatching, will numb the horse's mouth. Legs that nag and jab (especially with spurs!) numb the horse's sides. Mouths that continually cluck without getting a reaction will numb the horse to the voice. And finally, a seat that constantly drives into the horse's back will render this aid less effective.

The most effective riders are those who consciously keep their aids quiet until they have a message or cue to relay to their horse, then they consciously use their aids to communicate. The seat is an aid that takes experience and skill to keep quiet. When we learn to ride, our seat bounces all over the place. If you remember your first time trotting or have recently tried to teach a friend or relative to trot, it might make you grin under your breath. Only through relaxation, technique and strength in the correct muscles can a rider sit 'tight' and stay with the horse in his gaits.

An effective seat hinges on having a good position. In terms of the rider's position, form follows function- we do not sit a certain way to look pretty, we encourage a correct position to allow for correct, effective use of the aids. When a horse begins to act up, the first thing I do is check my position to reduce the risk of being unseated. The seat is the core of the position. When something is out of alignment in the rider's body, the first thing to check is that the seat is square. Often, if a rider's shoulders are not square, one leg is shorter on the horse than the other, or there is some collapsing of the rib cage, these problems can be traced back to the rider not sitting square with her hips and seat. To change the way that one sits is very difficult at first. If you have been sitting crooked, when you straighten your hips out it will feel crooked in the correct position for awhile until you get used to the new feeling. It is worth going through this effort to develop a straight position.

Achieving alignment in your body is important but this position in movement does not remain rigid. To appear motionless in the saddle, the rider must actually be moving comprehensively with the horse. The main 'shock absorber' in our bodies is our hips. To stay with the horse in his motion, it is important to not lock the hips nor pump with them. Riders must be in tune with following the motion but not creating motion. Relaxation allows the rider to flow with the horse, strength and connection allow them to sit still.

Lunge lessons are a wonderful tool for working on developing a good seat. Try dropping your stirrups and securing your reins in front of you on the horse's neck. To start, you can put your hands on your hips as you have a friend or trainer lunge the horse you are riding. Dropping your stirrups will help you open up your hips and relax your leg by not gripping upward. A long leg and an opened seat allow you to sit deeper into the saddle and connect to the horse's back. Letting go of your reins allows you to

remit the hand aid and focus on your core. Three main points to focus on are a centered seat, relaxation and core strength. Practice breathing to the horse's rhythm. Your muscles must remain soft but must be engaged so that you don't flop. Any sort of tension results in disunity from the horse. If any muscle is going to be taut, encourage your stomach muscles to engage. Allow your hips to open and close but keep your upper body quiet by stretching up and engaging your core strength.



Lunge lessons are a valuable tool to help riders develop a better position and more effective use of their seat aid.

The first step in developing an effective seat aid is learning to manage your seat in the saddle. Often, riders develop the skills to no longer slam up and down in the sitting trot but have yet to learn the importance of developing the seat as an independent aid. The seat in dressage can be fine tuned to communicate with the horse. It is a nearly invisible aid and takes pressure off the horse's mouth for communication. For example, to help collect, the rider sits deeper. To canter on the spot in preparation for a pirouette or walk transition, she sits in even a little deeper. When the rider asks the horse to go forward, she lightens her seat to allow the horse to come up in his back and through in his gait. When riders have gained awareness and control of their seat, it opens a whole new line of communication and opportunity to connect with the horse.

Danica Yates is a sporthorse trainer in the Portland, Oregon area. FEI and European experience, four years private training with Olympian Debbie McDonald. Training, lessons and board are available. Call (503)278-1112 or visit www.danicayates.com for more information.