



Riding a Sitting Trot Effectively...

WORDS: NANCY WESOLEK STERRETT - PHOTO: © MENDIP FARM PHOTOGRAPHY

Most riders quickly learn how to sit equally on their seat bones and follow the motion of their horse's hips with their own hips at the walk. Successfully following your horse's motion at the walk, however, does not mean that you will automatically be able to follow the motion at the trot.

The walk is a four-beat gait with no moment of suspension. It is relatively easy to feel the left/right forward swinging motion of the horse's hips at the walk while staying balanced over your seat bones with all muscles relaxed yet firm.

The trot has a moment of suspension when none of the horse's hooves are on the ground. Riders who are unable to follow the horse's hips at the trot often grip with their thighs or tip forward when this 'bounce' occurs. Also, the swing of the horse's hips at the trot is generally quicker than it is at the walk. This feels different to the rider. The bigger the horse's trot, the more likely a rider grips with the thigh and bounces. The bigger the horse's trot, the more it feels as though both hips are swinging forward at the same time, rather than swinging left/right. If your horse has a slower, flatter trot (a typical pleasure horse trot, for example), you may still feel a slight left/right movement in the swing of the hips.

Following the swing of the horse's hips at the trot is basically the same as it is at the walk. Push your horse forward

at the walk by moving your hips faster; exaggerate the motion even more until the horse transitions to a trot. Keep swinging your hips to get the feel of this motion. Later you will ask the horse to trot with leg aids, and then follow the motion with your hips instead of pushing with the hips. In the beginning, however, using your hips to push your horse from a walk into a trot helps the rider understand that the swing of the hips at the trot is the same tipping motion as it is at the walk with a different rhythm.

I describe the motion of the hips at trot to students in different ways:

- Think of lifting with your pelvis.
- Imagine swinging the horse's back into your hands with your hip.
- Think of crunching your abdominal muscles to lift the pelvis up and forward toward your hand (be careful not to let the upper body drop forward when thinking of this abs crunch - just lift the lower abs up to the upper abs).
- Think of doing a pelvic tilt every stride.
- Think of lifting the horse's back with your hips with each stride.

Bouncing your legs in rhythm to your horse's trot (at the sitting trot) is an exercise that can help you swing your hips correctly. If you bounce your legs in a gentle upward/downward motion, your hips will start to swing in the same upward/downward movement simply because your hipbones are connected to your thighbones (sing the tune, if you like!). This exercise also helps riders with a tendency to pitch forward because it helps to position them deep in the saddle with a straight back. When you tip forward, it is impossible to swing your hips to follow the horse. This exercise also helps riders loosen any grip with their thighs. When you grip with your thighs, your hips lock and are unable to swing.

Another exercise that can help you find the feel of the hip swing at the trot is to hold onto a grab strap placed on the front of your saddle (or, even better, hold onto your crossed stirrup leathers while working without stirrups on a lunge line).

As you hold on, focus on the horse's bounce. Try to bounce your elbow, hip, knee and ankle in rhythm with your horse. You want to move with your horse's body as it is moving. You do not want to hold your body steady by tensing your muscles.

Ironically, the more you relax your muscles and move your joints as your horse moves his, the steadier you will be without tension or gripping. The horse is in constant motion, therefore you must be in constant motion in order to achieve steadiness.

As you ride:

- Pull your seat into the deepest part of the saddle.
- Straighten your spine.
- Open the shoulders and upper body area without arching your lower back or collapsing your upper body.
- Loosen your thighs so you are not gripping.
- Bounce your legs in rhythm with the horse at the sitting trot.

Now try to swing your hips. Even though holding onto the grab strap or crossed stirrups may introduce tension in your arms, the exercise should help you loosen your shoulders, thighs, knees, ankles, etc. in order to swing your hips.

If these essential joints are tight, your hips will be locked, too, and unable to swing. When your hips are locked, you bounce more, which makes you grip more, which makes you bounce more and a vicious cycle begins.

Muscle tension in any joint will make the rider bounce and this hurts the horse's back. A lazy horse copes by slowing down. A tense horse is more likely to speed up or even start running to get away from the discomfort.

Bouncing at the trot does not influence the horse in positive ways. When you get it right, the swing of your hips at the trot will maintain the gait, slow the gait, or increase the gait.

You do this by using your core muscles to set the rhythm and pace. If the rider deliberately (or accidentally) introduces a right/left swing to the hips at the trot, it slows the horse down.

By holding the swing of the hips for just a nanosecond, the rider's core muscles can direct the horse's forward energy upward, helping the horse spring off the ground. Following the horse's motion at the trot might seem impossible at first. However, it will all become clear in the end. Keep moving from walk to trot and back again to remind yourself that you can follow the horse's motion. When you finally 'get it' at the trot, communication between you and your horse will move to new, more exciting and more productive levels.

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